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## Bordering on Disaster?

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## Little Red Herrings — Bordering on Disaster?

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <[herringm@winthrop.edu](mailto:herringm@winthrop.edu)>

I believe it was **Dostoyevsky** who once said that the more left you are in your youth, the more right you go in your old age. **Churchill** had a much more colorful way of putting it: if you're not a liberal by the time you're 20, you have no heart. If you're still one after you turn 30, you have no brain. While both are political in nature, I think they speak to our trying times, not because our times are more politically challenging than they have been in past, but because they are perhaps more supercharged than in recent memory.

The times, you see, they are a-changin'. They are not just changing politically with many recently elected bringing with them a different view of government. They are changing with respect to the financially austere times. Some look upon this as if the trumpet has sounded for Armageddon. Others smile, if ruefully, thinking that our past approaches were simply not fiscally sustainable. In many ways, we're all fiscal conservatives now, if not by philosophy, then by demand.

If nothing else, these very different times will make us think more creatively about libraries. We'll all have to do more with less, and we'll all have to figure out what things can be done, and which ones no longer can be. No one likes to have to give up a good idea. But

some ideas are simply no longer affordable. For libraries, given that they have always been fiscal black holes, it means giving up quite a bit we thought was "right."

**Borders**, the bookstore, provides us with an instructive case study regarding our collective futures. While **Amazon** and **Barnes & Noble** made changes that both streamlined and changed their services, **Borders** followed the "business as usual" model. That led to Chapter 11, the closing of nearly a third of their stores, and a complete restructuring of all that's left. Not many industry analysts think even this will be enough to keep the company afloat.

Can the rest of us in the book business learn something from this? Either we make adaptations and changes that make us all very uncomfortable and ill-at-ease, professionally speaking, or we continue with business as usual. While the former will lead to mistakes and slip-ups to be sure, the latter is almost certain to lead to catastrophic failure.

Libraries that survive these current and coming challenges are going to have to rethink what it means to provide service. Business call this a "value proposition." In the age of eBooks, handheld devices, Smartphones and all the rest, what is the library's "value proposition" for the future? We can't afford to do things as usual,

or the way we've always done them. We have to look to new ways of doing new things in an effort to define what our new value proposition is. The good news is that they are many more arrows in the quiver of access that allow us to do that.

So, what are some of these? I think you know them. I mentioned open access in the last column. Demand-driven acquisitions, shelf-ready acquisitions, tag reader technology, and UX or user-experience are a few that come to mind as possibilities. Librarians will have to get out of the building more, too, and go where students do their work: classrooms, writing labs, even dormitories. Libraries will have to become more integral to the delivery of academic programs in order to make certain they remain integral to the colleges and universities they serve.

Some will cluck their tongues and say this can't be done without hiring more staff, something that will be impossible during the current fiscal crisis. What it will require is the reallocation of staff from some tried and true roles to new and different ones. In order to do that, we'll have to give up on some other roles that have been as commonplace in libraries as the card catalog once was. And how many of us thought we'd ever get along without that? 🐔