Licensed Content in a New World

One of the many consequences of the pandemic has been raising awareness of the importance of digital content, particularly when many employees are still working remotely. Users have different expectations of what is possible, and libraries have to plan around ongoing uncertainty about in-person and virtual workspaces. On top of that, the licensed content landscape has changed. Rather than the usual practice of niche players acquired by larger vendors, we are now seeing industry consolidation on a much larger scale, such as the proposed acquisition of ProQuest by Clarivate and Axel Springer buying Politico for more than $1 billion. In addition, we are moving beyond a need for metadata and structured datasets. Unstructured data. to which internal groups can apply their own ontologies to make the content consistent with their existing information sets, is becoming the norm.

As always, information centers are expected to demonstrate a tangible ROI for digital content. In the past, we could demonstrate time saved or expenditures avoided by correlating search activity to a monetary value. In today's context, where retrieval of individual records is the least of the value we receive, we have to take the long view when determining the ROI of content. There is value in having the information center managing the organization's digital content spend, starting with the benefit of an info pro's perspective during contract negotiations. We know how the content will be incorporated into users' workflows, and we can anticipate which users will need to be able to share the content externally. We can recognize when an enterprise-wide license is not needed and can identify appropriate, cost-effective alternatives. We can anticipate when users will be tempted to skirt intellectual property protections and can make it easy for them to comply with copyright restrictions.

Knowing how to talk about ROI is particularly important when licensing content for text and data mining (TDM) projects or other AI initiatives in which the output is not full-text articles but the discernment of a pattern or the development of a hypothesis. The user may never see the underlying data, so info pros need to have a cogent explanation of TDM licensing principles, risk reduction, and the importance of using licensed content appropriately. Info pros can watch for the hidden assumptions users have regarding what they can do with licensed content. When referencing a dataset, we need to make it clear that the enterprise doesn't own the content but only licenses the use of the content by particular users for a specific length of time. In a world where "it's all free on the web," we have to keep reminding users to be aware of intellectual property protection.

As information centers continue to face budget challenges and have to justify their space, staff, and resources, engagement with stakeholders is even more critical than usual, including the perspective of both senior-level executives and more junior-level people. We need advocates—and their unique perspectives—both to ensure the library's budget and initiatives are championed and that we are addressing the most important information needs of our key user groups. The more we can embed high-value information into our users' workflow, the higher ROI we achieve and the more advocates we gain for a continued strong financial commitment to enterprise-critical information resources.

I have worked with information center managers and the digital content providers, and have heard both groups discuss the challenges of contract negotiations. While entire books have been written on the art of the deal, what I have noticed is the importance of each party coming to the table with an attitude of possibilities rather than scarcity. While the conversation may at times feel adversarial, with a little creativity, it is possible for both sides to get most of what they need. Would a multi-year agreement shield a library from unexpected price hikes, or is it more important to be able to re-evaluate content priorities every year? How could the vendor support the library's training and professional development needs to ensure the highest-value use of the resource? What kind of technical support would build usage and better embed the content in users' workflows?

By seeing these negotiations as part of an ongoing relationship and maintaining a respectful rapport with the other party, information managers and vendors can ensure they understand the other side's concerns and priorities. It is also helpful to remember that people change jobs; the account manager at a vendor you find challenging may be working for another content provider next year. A good working relationship enables you to get the best content value for your organization so that your account manager will advocate on your behalf when you have a special need or favor to request.

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