



How to Start a Publisher's Library Advisory Committee

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LIBRARY ADVISORY COMMITTEE: AN INTRODUCTION

A library advisory committee (LAC) is an independent body of librarians, numbering from seven to ten, meeting on a regular basis, with the purpose of advising a publisher on relationships with libraries, marketing to libraries, and other mutual topics of interest to librarians and publishers. The library community is an important customer base, and publishers should be talking and listening to librarians in a consistent and structured manner. Publishers with a significant amount of sales to libraries should contemplate starting a LAC to institutionalize this process.

A LAC acts as a permanent focus group for a very important journal customer constituency, namely, librarians. The journal business is evolving toward a bundled market (online and print) and librarians have a special interest in online journals. (Other experts suggest that the journal business is evolving to an electronic-only format with print as an option.) More and more journals will be published for online access. Librarians are key drivers in the decision to subscribe to journals, and publishers ignore them at their own peril.

If you decide to start a LAC, you will find that few rigid standards or guidelines exist to provide direction. Therefore, be flexible as you plan your LAC. The following is a consensus of what seems to work for other organizations. My intent is to provide you with practical guidelines if you decide to start a LAC.

WHO SHOULD START A LIBRARY ADVISORY COMMITTEE?

Generally, publishers who sell journal subscriptions and electronic databases to the library market should start a LAC. As noted above, journal publishing in all disciplines, particularly scientific, technical, and medical (STM), is changing rapidly to an online delivery mode.

Online delivery raises many questions and thorny issues in the library community, which I will address later.

HOW TO INVOLVE LIBRARIANS

As someone who is consummate at networking and conducting market research via the telephone, I am used to phone calls not being returned. After all, people are busy and they may not have any interest in what I have to say. However, this is not the case with librarians.

Librarians return phone calls 100% of the time when they understand that the purpose is to research their needs. Librarians are like the rest of us, namely they ask, "What's in it for me?" Once they understand how the publisher's pursuit of market information will benefit them, they will respond positively by investing some of their limited time to help you.

Librarians are articulate professionals most willing to share information that will help publishers to serve them better. They are technologically and marketplace savvy. Librarians respond well when someone takes the time to show them respect and listen. Librarians are passionate about their profession and have many strong opinions. Just ask them!

In order to determine what information you would like from librarians, you must first determine the mission and scope of your LAC.

LAC MISSION/SCOPE

The mission of the LAC is to promote understanding between all stakeholders in your publishing program. The LAC's emphasis should be on objective, unbiased listening to your library customers. By listening to librarians, you will be able to improve your service to an important customer segment, and, ultimately, to the sales and profitability of your publications.

The LAC should advise publishers in the following areas:

- Business Terms/Discounts/New Policies
- Pricing
- Bundling Questions
- Promotion/Marketing
- Technology: e.g., Linking, Open URL, and SFX
- Marketplace Trends/Unfulfilled Needs
- Licensing Terms
- Archival Matters

All of the products published by your organization should be within the scope of the LAC. In your LAC mission statement, include books, magazines, journals, databases, standards, conference proceedings, and anything else you sell to the library market.

LAC MEMBERSHIP

Strive for balance in LAC membership. Some LAC's may have prestigious members but they rarely contribute. Rather, you should recruit members according to specialty and geographical balance. Categories of membership may include:

- Academic Librarians
- Corporate Librarians
- Government Librarians

Select librarians from both large and small institutions. If you have sales figures available by library market segment, select categories of librarians in proportion to their representative market share to your organization.

The LAC term of membership should be for two to three years. Consider staggering the appointments by

making the initial term for two to three years, as this will ensure a rotating membership and overlapping membership each year. The overlapping appointments will provide a LAC historical memory and continuity of LAC initiatives.

You will also find that the first few meetings will have housekeeping issues to address. All of the members will be new at that point, and it will take a meeting or two for everyone to get a handle on what they can contribute.

NUMBER OF MEMBERS

Here you have some latitude. In my survey on the subject, I found that the number of members on a LAC ranged from five to 15. My recommendation is to start with seven to nine members. That number will give you a diverse population and ensure a sufficient number of participants, as some members will not be able to attend every meeting.

FREQUENCY AND LENGTH OF MEETING

I suggest meeting twice a year initially, once in person and once on a virtual (conference call) basis. I would maintain this frequency for the first two years. Then you should consider whether you need your LAC to meet in person semiannually. Consider either a day or day and a half. Some publishers run their LAC meeting concurrently with the annual Special Library Association (SLA) conference. This helps ensure full attendance and saves on covering member travel costs.

YOUR LAC LIAISON

The LAC liaison from your organization could be the top publishing or marketing executive. However, your choice of liaison will vary with the organization's product mix, whether it's a nonprofit or commercial, the size and the staff organization, and the extent of its library business.

Some respondents suggested that an outside facilitator could add value by establishing an unbiased forum and could bring an independent perspective to the LAC meeting.

HOW TO PUT TOGETHER A LAC

One person should be accountable for assembling the LAC, but your staff colleagues should participate in its design. Assembling your LAC will require some time and effort. Consider retaining an outside consultant to launch and organize your LAC.

Here are the suggested steps to get started:

- Survey your staff in order to identify information needs with respect to the library community.
- Prepare a list of publishing staff questions to be answered by the LAC.
- Prepare a list of potential LAC members including affiliation and background information. This list should contain 20 to 25 candidates.
- Develop a LAC position description to discuss, review, and approve.
- Develop a letter of appointment to the LAC.
- Prioritize LAC candidates based on criteria listed below.
- Recruit and sign letter of agreement with LAC members.
- Schedule and organize your first LAC meeting and develop an agenda for it.
- Facilitate your first LAC meeting.
- Document your first LAC meeting.
- Provide a post LAC meeting assessment.

Plan to talk to at least three candidates for every one who meets your criteria and plan to invest at least three to four hours for each LAC member recruited. Plan to pay all travel expenses of LAC members. You will not need to pay a stipend or honorarium. Dates to meet are arbitrary. Fall seems to be a good time for the in-person meeting.

CRITERIA FOR LAC APPOINTMENT

The first and most obvious criteria are that you are looking for well-informed individuals with strong opinions. Look for market-savvy individuals. Listen carefully for this type of individual. Secondly, look for librarians who head up special libraries, individuals with an organizational perspective of their library. Thirdly, select a mix of librarians representing different market niches: small, large, geographic, type of library (academic, corporate, government). Look for someone active in the library associations such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (www.ala.org/acrl), Association of Research Libraries (www.arl.org), and the Special Libraries Association (www.sla.org).

LAC BENEFITS

Putting together a LAC as an advisory panel to your publications program is time and money well spent. Far too many of those in marketing and product development assume they know what customers want. This is a dangerous assumption. The LAC assures you of an established methodology to listen to the library marketplace and make informed decisions based on the input of an important customer constituency for your publications. One of my editorial advisors, who manages a major technical journal program, summarized the benefits of a LAC in the next three paragraphs.

“You do touch on this next area, but it's been important for us and may warrant expansion—we've gotten very good advice from our LAC regarding the most effective ways of promoting publications to the library market.

That is, direct mail vs. email, important features vs. not-so-important features, emphasis, frequency, etc.”

“It's also been useful to get information on quality of the entire publications process, from our customer service and fulfillment (not mentioned) to things that you do mention, such as features, technology, etc.”

“We've also learned more about the library/subscription agent relationship through our LAC, and seen the other side of that relationship, which has proven to be helpful in our dealings with agents. This also ties in with promotions—we've gotten advice as to which of the agent promotional vehicles are worth the investment. We've learned the most with respect to book agents.”

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