

**American Association of Law Libraries
Committee on Relations with Information Vendors**

**REPORT: Aspen's Reverse Site Visit
April 23, 2002**

The Vendor Asks the Questions

A reverse site visit between Aspen and LLAGNY was sponsored by the CRIV on April 23, 2002. The event was the result of the interest in the site visit concept expressed a year ago to the CRIV by Aspen President and CEO Jane Butler, as an opportunity to conduct a dialogue with customers in their law library environments. In a reverse site visit, the vendor executives who participate are the guests of the librarians, and the vendor may query the hosts to learn more about how its products are received, processed and utilized.

Before the reverse site visit to two New York City area law libraries (Sullivan & Cromwell and New York Law School), Aspen's library liaison J. Craig Garrett worked with others at Aspen to create a list of questions (based on issues that continually arise with law library customers) to circulate to their librarian hosts. Garrett (himself a former librarian) explained that many of the questions might seem to cover basic library processes, but since most of the Aspen visitors do not have library backgrounds, these questions would be highly important to them.

Though time did not allow for an exhaustive exploration of all of these questions during the visit, the list may be helpful to AALL librarians in identifying issues they may wish to discuss further with their Aspen representatives or other vendors.

The list was provided only as a guide and was not intended to limit the discussion in any way to those topics. Aspen invited questions from librarians, offering to address any specific issues relating to Sullivan and Cromwell and New York Law School during their visits at those institutions, and asking that general vendor questions be reserved for the open forum luncheon.

Aspen's questions are reproduced as follows:

1. ORDERING: We would like to see the difference in the two sites in their ordering process. In dealing with many duplicate accounts, we find that individuals may place an order instead of going through central purchasing. How does this differ in the marketplace?
2. RECEIVING: We would like to view the process when a title is received. Some of the issues that were raised regarding this were what happens to the boxes that the materials were packed in? Who opens the material, the person it is addressed to or mail room? How does our packaging compare to other vendors, easier to open, harder, too big, etc.? What happens to the invoices once the material is received? Is there any suggestion to make this process more convenient for librarians?
3. RETURNS: What is the process in deciding to return a product? How are returns handled? Do copies of the original invoice remain with the product in case of return? Are there suggestions that may make returns easier for librarians?

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4. **DUPLICATES:** When a duplicate copy of a title is received, how is it handled? Is there a method for matching the invoices? Is there a method for ensuring that the duplicate is not a separate order by the library? To help us understand what librarians' concerns are in this matter, what do they consider a duplicate account? Is it multiple accounts to the same address/firm, or is it an account that is exactly the same (orders, etc.)? Is it the same for duplicate copies?
5. **ACCOUNTS:** Is there a method or suggestion that librarians would favor in dealing with multiple accounts for one location? Is there a preference for more detail on invoices and/or statements?
6. **CUSTOMER SERVICE:** Are the librarians familiar with the specialized 1-877 line developed specifically for law librarians? When there is a problem that arises, with whom would librarians prefer to deal, their individual sales representative, the library customer care line, or the library liaison office? When a problem arises and is posted to the LAW-LIB listserv, what would librarians and CRIV prefer—broadcast answers to the issues, individualized responses to the problem library, or something else, such as CRIV grams?
7. **ONLINE ISSUES:** If online customer service were fully accessible, what would librarians like to see available to them—accounting issues, service issues, back order issues? How effective do librarians feel online customer service is to them?
8. Do you purchase books or subscriptions using the Internet or an online subscription service? If so how do you find that it works? Would you prefer an online subscription offering? What would enhance this service for you?
9. When doing online legal research, which website do you utilize? Which is your predominate online research source?
10. How would you prefer to be informed about new product offerings—via email, direct mail, Aspen rep?
11. Can you describe the decision-making process for purchasing a print publication? What is the decision-making process for purchasing an online service or product? If you are faced with a choice of either a print or online source, what are the major factors that you weigh in your decision?
12. Do you receive requests from others in your firm/institution for material that they have found on the Internet? If so, how is this handled?
13. Do you currently receive the Aspen E-newsletter for librarians? Do you find it informative? What issues would you like to see addressed in the E-newsletter? Do you prefer the E-newsletter to one that is printed and mailed?
14. Is the library responsible or involved in the development of a company/institution's INTRANET? If so, is it important for your Intranet to have searchable primary and secondary source legal content material available on that Intranet? Are there any other materials/products that would be helpful on your Intranet?

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In addition to Garrett, other Aspen representatives in attendance were Gerry Centrowitz, vice president of marketing and sales; Rick Kravitz, executive vice president; Judy McRee, director of customer care; Stuart Mowat, chief information officer; Annemarie Cocchia, director of marketing; and Pete Rozakis, manager of shipping and distribution operations.

Garrett's overall assessment of the reverse site visit was that it was "a great experience" and one that he would like to see repeated in different locations.

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Aspen's Reverse Site Visit to Sullivan & Cromwell, New York, NY

On Tuesday, April 23rd, a group of Aspen executives arrived at Sullivan & Cromwell ("S&C") in New York for a reverse site visit. My staff and I had prepared a document in advance enumerating six issues and problems that we wanted to address. I began by noting that our library could serve as an example for Aspen of how other firm libraries operate and that we could highlight problems and areas of concern that many other libraries have had with Aspen Publishing over the last few years. The document we created was used as a starting point and outline for the discussion that took place with Aspen. The six points we included were supplement updates, renewals, customer service, returns, payments, and account numbers.

The discussion began with a description of the problems that we have experienced over the last two years in receiving correct updating for current subscriptions. I described to our visitors how large law firms, with multiple domestic and international offices, process material for all of their offices. Aspen asked if it would be easier for us to receive one box of supplements for all of our offices rather than separate boxes. I responded in the affirmative since for S&C, one box with one invoice would save considerable processing time.

The discussion segued to acquisitions and the problems that we have had actually getting material that has been ordered. For large sets, such as the Corporation Service, Aspen uses an outside vendor to produce sets on demand. The turnaround time, according to their contract, is seven days. Ideally, once the product is shipped, Aspen is alerted and the update order is placed. For unknown reasons, we have had problems with receipt of the original order. Supplementation was received subsequent to the order, but the set we were claiming never arrived. The Aspen executives appreciated hearing about this issue, and noted the particulars, promising to go back and trace the order to determine where the system broke down.

The payment process is an area that we have found particularly problematic with Aspen. We have had the "misapplied payment" experience on many occasions even when we are careful to include the invoice number on the check and the remittance stub. The Aspen executives took a specific example with them to find out why our payment was misapplied.

The payment discussion quite naturally led us to a discussion about account numbers and the unwanted creation of new ones. Prior to the billing system change in 2001, our acquisitions clerk worked closely with Aspen to consolidate all S&C accounts into one primary account number. However, since then, whenever a new order is placed, a new account number has been created rather than include a new subscription under the firm's primary account number. Standing order items sometimes arrive with different account numbers as well. Aspen had a list of our various account numbers with them and agreed to work on consolidating them when they return to the office.

Returns were the next topic that we discussed. We noted that it sometimes takes well over two months for a return to be posted to our statement. We wanted to know what causes such a delay. Aspen responded by saying that once the return is received, assuming that all of the appropriate paperwork is enclosed, it should take only two to three weeks for the return to appear as a credit on the statement. If there is a problem or if all the paperwork is not included and they have to

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investigate, then it could take two months for the return to appear on the statement, but absolutely no longer.

After Aspen had addressed our questions, I asked them if they had any questions for us. They wanted to know how we select between paper and electronic formats and what happen to a release after it is delivered. I gave them a tour of the library and showed them the check-in and return processes. I explained the paper/electronic selection process at S&C. When we subscribe to an electronic product it does not necessarily mean that we cancel the paper copy. I indicated that I suspected this was also the case in a number of large law firms servicing lawyers in multiple countries and offices.

Throughout our visit, I was left feeling that the Aspen executives were interested in the problems and issues that were brought to the table and that they went away with suggestions and information that will help to develop solutions to some of their customers' concerns.

**Alison Alifano
Sullivan & Cromwell, New York, NY**

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Aspen's Reverse Site Visit to New York Law School

New York Law School Library hosted the luncheon and afternoon sessions of the CRIV-sponsored reverse site visit with Aspen Publishing. The event was organized by LLAGNY. Seven Aspen representatives fielded questions and comments from the twenty-one LLAGNY members who attended the luncheon session.

In introducing us to his business colleagues, Aspen's library liaison and law school manager, J. Craig Garrett, emphasized the importance of our effort to orient the Aspen executives to librarians' perspectives on vendor issues. He reminded us that none of the Aspen representatives present, other than himself, has a library degree or comes from a library background. He expressed the hope that the patterns set in this first reverse site visit by Aspen would constitute a positive example to be followed in future site visits by other vendors.

Most of the discussion at the luncheon session focused on processes involving ordering, receiving, invoicing, and returns of Aspen products, as well as products and product development. The questions reflected a lot of concern on the part of the librarians with the company's accounting and credit practices and with the Vista business system. The Aspen representatives tried to answer each question, or promised to follow up with measures to correct the problems that were brought to light.

In summarizing their comments and questions about customer service issues, the librarians in attendance noted that many of the problems that had been cited in the CRIV site visit to Aspen in March 2000 were still apparent. The new Vista computer system deployed in the intervening time has not yielded all the improvements that were promised, and many problems appear to have worsened. They requested that Aspen review the training program it gives its customer service staff, and they insisted that Aspen recommit itself to the tasks involved in resolving some of the service issues that had been noted.

A welcome new policy on the computation of shipping charges was announced at the forum. As of February 2002 Aspen has adopted a policy of capping charges at 8.75% per order or \$50 per "shipping event," whichever is less. An event is defined as the shipment of a supplement, no matter how many copies of the supplement might be shipped. Aspen allowed that certain "custom" shipments could elicit charges that are higher or lower than this, but they emphasized that under Aspen's policy, shipping charges are always calculated to recover the company's actual costs and never to realize profits. The new policy is a direct response to complaints from librarians in late 2001 about how the shipping charges were being calculated.

The group then raised questions about the future of Aspen's product offerings, particularly with regard to its computer-based services. Aspen's representatives replied that the company was planning to enhance the on-line presence of its secondary sources, primarily by developing hyperlinks from primary legal sources on its Loislaw on-line service. They acknowledged the possibility that Aspen might pursue joint Web site ventures with CCH, a sister company within the Kluwer conglomerate. At the same time, the Aspen representatives maintained that the company remains committed to print products. They estimated that the company plans to produce between 30 and 40 new print titles in the coming year.

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Librarians offered their feedback about product development. They generally agreed that Aspen should not waste its efforts to develop CD-ROM products, as this medium is becoming outmoded. Rather, librarians felt that the company could best promote an on-line presence by offering customers reasonable site licenses for Internet-based products. One librarian recommended that Aspen cultivate its relationship with Lexis, making Aspen secondary sources available through that system's search engines. Another suggested that Aspen offer customers trial subscriptions to its Internet-based products and that such trials should not be linked to billed accounts. The Aspen representatives were generally receptive to these suggestions.

The luncheon question-and-answer session was followed by a tour for the Aspen representatives of New York Law School's Mendik Library. The tour focused on the technical services area, including the acquisitions, serials, and cataloging departments. Paul Mastrangelo, the technical services librarian, guided the representatives through the offices where Aspen's print products are received, sorted and processed for the shelves. He described the receiving process, and detailed his methods for dealing with materials that are unordered or unwanted. Peggy Perrin, the chief cataloger, unlocked the mysteries of the cataloging process for the Aspen visitors. Their tour ended with visits to the library's computer labs and rare book room.

Aspen's executives displayed a keen interest in the library's procedures for selecting new acquisitions and the details of how the choice is made between print and computer-based sources. The technical services librarians outlined this process and answered questions.

The Aspen representatives asked whether the librarians would be receptive to e-mail or Web-based media for notifications of new Aspen offerings. At present, the library relies almost entirely on paper-based selection sources, but librarians agreed that this will inevitably change as the popularity of electronic sources in general continues to grow. With regard to Aspen's continuations, the librarians affirmed their preference for standing orders over periodic "invitations" to purchase update supplements or new editions. The representatives seemed receptive to this preference, especially after viewing firsthand the volume and complexity of acquisitions in a large academic law library setting.

**Bill Mills
New York Law School**