

## Buyer Be Wary!

In the September 1974 issue of *JOLA*, the "Highlights of ISAD Board Meeting" reflects the library automation community's growing concern with misrepresentation of products and misleading or fraudulent claims. A proposal was made that ISAD create a mechanism to monitor relevant advertising in order to inform and protect its constituency and, indeed, the entire profession.

It is paradoxical that this concern is being voiced at a time when the relationship between the public and private sectors seems closer than at any other time in the recent past. In general, librarians and vendors are good friends. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect, and we no longer raise eyebrows upon learning that a librarian-colleague has gone "commercial." Indeed, librarians and libraries are learning from the business world to create products and market them in order to support desired internal services. The growing entrepreneurial efforts of libraries are linking the two groups with a yet firmer bond.

Unfortunately, but inevitably, there are a few flies in the ointment. With regularity, we pick up professional literature to find advertising which sounds too good to be true. An investigation will usually indicate that, in fact, it is *not* true. We are often visited by salesmen describing incredible advances in their particular areas. The pressure applied by these people can be distasteful and even intolerable. Or we may receive a one-page brochure from an unknown company, touting its latest, very competitive system, and listing the familiar names of well-respected librarians as advisors. Almost always, we are lucky and are able to discover for ourselves the true nature of the products being advertised. Our misfortune may begin when an ambitious salesman finds his or her way into the office of an administrator or politician who does not have adequate preparation for the onslaught of facts, figures, and fallacies.

What are the best ways of misrepresenting a product? Most approaches fall into one of the following categories: (1) misleading advertising, with unclear statements and imprecise use of vocabulary; (2) claims that one, or several, or many other libraries are using the product with satisfaction (when this indeed is not the case); (3) specific statements that a large and prestigious library is about to sign a contract for services or products (although investigation will reveal no such intention); (4) lists of experts in the field who are presumed to be associated with the company in an advisory or consultant role (but who are unaware of this use of their names); and (5) approaches to federal, state, or local agencies to appeal

the procedures used by libraries in requesting bids or awarding contracts.

At this point, a note of caution must be inserted. Strategies of advertising and marketing usually involve one or more of the above techniques to a certain extent. We all practice minor exaggerations and simplifications in our professional lives in order to accomplish certain goals. It would be unwise and unfair to accuse an advertiser of misleading his market on the basis of one of these "small exaggerations." In resolving this issue, our concern must be with those individuals or organizations who are constantly found with a large discrepancy between the word and the deed.

What methods can be used as protection against these tactics? There are several reliable paths: (1) be aware of and alert to the possibilities of misleading claims and misrepresentation; (2) follow up a sales pitch with a few phone calls to those institutions that are described to be using the product or about to sign the contract; (3) maintain a reasonable amount of resistance to the sales talk; (4) use the library profession's invisible college to determine the validity of the claims and the experiences that others have had with the firm; and (5) support the attempts of our professional societies, such as ALA and ASIS, to require organizations to maintain certain advertising standards.

The library market is expanding and maturing; therefore, these growing pains associated with increased marketing efforts are not unexpected. With adequate education and awareness on the part of the buyer, with some pressures placed on advertisers by the professional community, and with a tolerance for the normal tendencies of advertising and marketing, we will be able to resolve a difficult situation with grace and without hard feelings.

SUSAN K. MARTIN