

Sailing into the Wind: What It Means for Libraries and Vendors

The phrase “Sailing into the Wind” describes a nautical concept in which sailors navigate a sailboat against the prevailing wind. Maneuvering under such circumstances requires skill, resilience, and innovation. The sailboat must sail in a zigzag pattern known as “tacking” to transition the boat from one wind direction to the other. This concept captures the spirit in which the crew of libraries and vendors should adapt to and shape the headwinds by aligning values and innovating services, in an all-hands-on-deck effort to navigate the current unprecedented and unpredictable future.

Libraries are sailing into strong winds of change. From declining budgets and shifting user expectations to the explosion of digital information and AI-generated content, institutions face unprecedented challenges. Academic libraries must support increasingly interdisciplinary research while managing subscription costs and advocating for open access. Public libraries are balancing their traditional roles with emerging responsibilities as community hubs for digital inclusion, social services, and civic engagement. Vendors are also navigating headwinds. Business models are being disrupted by open-source alternatives, institutional pushback against price increases, and a growing demand for transparency and equity in access to knowledge. The expectations from library clients are evolving: vendors are no longer just content providers or service platforms—they’re partners in a mission-driven ecosystem. These challenges are compounded by a rapidly changing technological landscape. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, and data analytics are transforming how information is discovered, curated, and used. Privacy concerns, algorithmic bias, and ethical questions about digital surveillance and commodification of data loom large. Libraries and vendors must respond to these challenges in ways that uphold core values of equity, access, and intellectual freedom

To sail into the wind is not to fight against it blindly but to use it strategically. Libraries and vendors are rethinking their traditional roles, engaging in new forms of collaboration, and experimenting with technologies and business models to make headway. For libraries, this means a shift from being passive consumers of vendor products to being active co-creators and evaluators. Libraries are increasingly participating in collaborative negotiations to gain better pricing and terms, building open educational resource (OER) platforms, and developing institutional repositories that challenge commercial publishing models. They are demanding interoperable systems, improved accessibility, and ethical data practices in the tools they adopt.

Vendors, in turn, are responding with new product offerings that emphasize customization, user-centered design, and community engagement. Some vendors are investing in open infrastructure, offering flexible pricing models, or integrating AI features to streamline workflows. Others are engaging in library advisory boards, collaborative development efforts, and open data initiatives to foster transparency and trust. One key example of strategic adaptation is the rise of transformative agreements in scholarly publishing. These contracts—designed to shift payment from reading access to publishing access—reflect the library and vendor communities' shared need to reconfigure value in a changing ecosystem. While not without controversy, such agreements illustrate how both parties can tack toward mutual progress rather than stall in opposition.

Libraries and vendors must align their values to serve the public good. “Sailing into the wind” requires more than just operational agility—it requires moral clarity. Libraries are guardians of access, privacy, and intellectual freedom. Vendors must acknowledge and integrate these values into their corporate strategies if they wish to be credible partners. More vendors are making intentional efforts in this regard. Whether through accessibility compliance, support for open standards, or inclusive metadata practices, some are working to ensure their products do not compromise the values libraries espouse. Yet, there is still much room for growth, particularly in areas like pricing transparency, user data ethics, and support for underserved communities.

The ideal library-vendor relationship is not adversarial but symbiotic. Both serve learners, researchers, and the public. When vendors view libraries not just as customers but as collaborators and community leaders, and when libraries recognize vendors as potential allies in technological and content innovation, progress becomes possible—even against the wind. In an environment of constant change, resilience and trust become key navigational tools. Libraries and vendors must develop adaptive strategies that account for long-term sustainability, not just short-term gains.

For libraries, this means investing in staff development, infrastructure, and digital literacy initiatives to ensure they can use vendor tools effectively and ethically. For vendors, it means committing to ongoing dialogue with the library community, incorporating user feedback, and prioritizing equity and inclusivity in design and deployment. Trust is built over time through transparency, accountability, and responsiveness.

It is undermined by opaque pricing, restrictive licenses, and one-size-fits-all solutions. To sail into the wind together, libraries and vendors must engage in open, honest communication—even when it’s difficult. They must be willing to co-navigate challenges, share risks, and celebrate successes.

Ultimately, “Sailing into the Wind” is a call for courage and collaboration. Libraries and vendors cannot afford to wait for the winds to change. They must make deliberate choices to confront uncomfortable realities, adapt strategically, and co-create an ecosystem that serves diverse and evolving needs. As climate change, global inequality, digital polarization, and political uncertainty continue to shape the world, the role of information institutions becomes more crucial—and more complex. Libraries and vendors, each with their unique strengths, must sail forward together, balancing innovation with ethics, market demands with social responsibility, and short-term needs with long-term vision. This joint effort demonstrates that even against the wind, forward motion is possible—not by resisting change, but by embracing it with skill, purpose, and shared commitment.

LaShonda Campbell
Collections Development Librarian
University of Arkansas at Monticello
Monticello, Arkansas
First Time Attendee

