

Being a Buyer

By Peggy Hayes, CPPB

Being a buyer is the most rewarding career I've experienced thus far in my life. It is a career that brings a great deal of challenge, but an equal amount of satisfaction. In my case it is something that seems to be in my blood. There have been buyers in many of the generations of my ancestors, though I would be willing to wager that things are just a bit different now than the way they were done back then. Of course that may just depend on where you work, and your employers commitment to progress, or not.

Back in 1985 I got my first taste of being a buyer (of sorts). I worked for a small retail chain that carried a variety of products, including surplus. I was placed in charge of reorder for all of the departments. It was quite an experience to have to learn how to track the movement on the various items, ranging from automotive parts to underclothing and everything imaginable in between. Prior to that, I had done ordering at my job at J C Penney, but always from sheets sent to us by the actual Buyers in New York. The selections were already there, we just told them how much of what size and color to send us. Having to learn the "stock to sales" ratios of the various items was challenging, but addicting. I thrived on the joy of getting it right. It didn't always happen, but with time and a great deal of patience on the part of my Manager, I did get the hang of it, and actually enjoyed it.

The result of that experience was a passion for the purchasing profession. (My husband claims it's just because I enjoy spending money so much!) Each time I decided it was time to move on in my career, I only looked at purchasing jobs. I found work with a lumber and "Do-it-Yourself" store where I learned not only how to create a purchase order, but how to place the orders, negotiate F.O.B. and payment terms, and even how to receive the goods and match the invoices. (It was a pretty small operation, and I even learned how to operate a forklift and paint mixer!)

That experience proved to be invaluable and helped me land a position with the MWR (Morale Welfare and Recreation) retail division as a Retail Buyer at a Marine Base. (Later MWR was changed to MCCA, which stands for Marine Corps Community Services). When I interviewed for the position, I was asked, "What is F.O.B. Destination?" I responded with the appropriate answer, and they looked stunned. Apparently no one else had known. (Well, we were a rather small town at the time. There wasn't much of a hiring pool back then, at least with any great amount of knowledge in the field). This was my first experience with Federal guidelines as they applied to purchasing in appropriated and non-appropriated funds environments, and it was a whole new world for me.

I thought I had retail buying challenges pretty well sorted out by this time, but this was a new way of doing things. Armed Services Exchange Regulations (ASER) mandated what the Exchanges could or could not carry. We could not carry furniture other than the "knock-down" kind, and we couldn't sell "big-screen" televisions. The jewelry department could not sell a solitaire diamond that exceeded one carat. These restrictions were originally imposed to level the playing field for retailers to compete with Military Exchanges since the Exchanges tend to sell at a much lower mark-up than the normal retail market. This was due to the Exchange being one of the Quality of Life benefits of the military. The military retail market was always changing and evolving. It was a constant struggle to stay on top of it all, and I reveled in the challenges it presented on a daily basis. Not only did I have to track stock to sales ratios, now I also had to learn how to project my annual sales based on past performance and the current market trends. Once projected, I then had to meet those goals. (And no, you couldn't just under-project since the figures were all thoroughly checked out by the Warrant Officer or Head of Retail for accuracy)

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It was during my second year working at the base that I had my first experience with cooperative buying. I was tasked with researching a cooperative agreement for our Exchange to purchase goods from a Navy (NEXCOM) warehouse in California. It took the better part of a year, many phone calls, and even more letters and e-mails to finally be able to put together a comprehensive report on the benefits of such a cooperative. The results proved to be very beneficial, both for the Exchange and for the patrons. The Exchange was able to achieve a greater gross margin on the goods while still offering them at a lower price to the military personnel and their dependants. The Navy benefited from the increase in the volume of goods it was able to move through the warehouse, thus attaining a better standing with the suppliers. We did bi-weekly ordering which alleviated the need for warehousing large quantities of goods. It was a great experience, and a priceless training opportunity.

Time moved on, and we went through a variety of software programs that handled the inventory tracking and reports. (The military loves change too). Each one came with its own unique set of challenges, and each time, it was with a great amount of trepidation that I set out to master the new system. I frequently questioned my ability to do so, but the continuous progression of technology made it easier to accept change with each new experience. I soon found myself looking forward to change just for the challenge that I knew it would bring.

During the first decade of my time with the Marine Corps, I traveled frequently going to buying events put on by suppliers. My favorite was always the ASD shows in Las Vegas. We fondly referred to it as the potpourri show, since there was such a hodge-podge of goods to be found. I would always buy truckloads of closeout merchandise there and then put it all out for a weekend tent sale in the Exchange parking lot. The profits from these events were always well worth the effort involved. After all, we did still have to make a profit to support all the other quality of life programs that were offered on the base, such as the theater, bowling alley, swimming pool, youth center and gym. Not to mention the multitude of recreational activities. As time went on, and budgetary cuts took their toll, these trips were eliminated. If you couldn't buy it out of a catalog or vendor visit, you just did without.

Eventually, the Marine Corps Community Services transitioned into Centralized Buying, and my position was phased out. It wasn't unexpected, and had actually begun with my cooperative project with the Navy. Of course, that didn't make it any easier to deal with when it finally happened. I was called into the office by the Head of Retail and told my job was eliminated. I was offered a lower position at a considerable pay reduction, which I accepted with the understanding that I would move on as soon as I had found a new position. There were Centralized Buyer positions available to apply for if I was willing to relocate to Quantico, Virginia; which I wasn't. My family was firmly rooted here.

The experience left me feeling like the purchasing profession had betrayed me. So, I looked elsewhere for a new career. I eventually accepted a position as an Office Manager/Care Coordinator for an elderly home care service. I enjoyed the new lessons and the interaction between the clients and myself. I especially enjoyed matching my caregivers with the clients. It was beautiful to see that kind of special relationship develop. This was all a very new experience for me. I learned a multitude of things I had not been exposed to before. I became a certified First Aid/CPR trainer and a Notary Public. I learned how to keep books, do payroll, and answer calls from confused elderly clients at 2:00AM asking me, "Who is calling?" It took less than a year for me to decide I'd made a mistake and was really missing the challenges of being a buyer.

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I had applied to the City on a number of occasions for a position in the Purchasing Department without success. The purchasing experience I had was not in the Municipal field. It was while working in the elder care position that I received a call from the Purchase and Contracts Manager. She wanted to know if I was still interested in a position with the City. Having been interviewed and rejected by the city purchasing department a number of times, I told her I didn't see the purpose in wasting any more of my time or hers in another pointless interview. There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment, and then she said, "I was actually calling to offer you the position, not another interview". Well, I did a quick about face, apologized and accepted the offer. I turned in my resignation and notice to my employer and two weeks later went to work at the City as a Purchasing Specialist. I did my best to be a model employee, and learn as much and as quickly as I could. A few weeks later, one of the buyers decided to accept a buying position elsewhere. I interviewed for and got the position when she left. Words could not describe how ecstatic I was (and still am) about this turn of events.

It did not take long for me to realize that this was a whole new ball game with a whole new set of rules. I set about studying the material made available to me through the National Institute of Government Purchasing (NIGP). I was fortunate enough to have a wonderful study partner in the form of another city buyer who was seeking her CPPB as well. Many weeks of studying passed, and we took the test for Certified Professional Public Buyer (CPPB) certification. We were both very pleased to pass the first time. We did have some doubts of course. Even when you feel you did well, you may be afraid to believe it because of the let down if you are wrong. We both looked frightful after taking the test. My partner had been running her hand up through her bangs while she concentrated for most of the four-hour test, and it was standing straight up on end like a troll doll! I had rubbed my forehead so often (as I wracked my brain for the answers) that it looked like I had a rug burn. We were so pretty! But in the end, it was all worth it. We had our CPPB's and a much greater understanding of the Public Buyer profession.

I am fortunate in that my employer encourages employees to continue their education, to be as it were, life-long learners. I have taken every opportunity offered by the City to attend the classes they host. I have achieved certification in the De Bono Master Thinker program, attended many hours of computer training, and have nearly completed the city's Supervisor Academy. I hope to attain my Certified Public Manager (C.P.M.) accreditation in a couple of years, and am studying to take the Certified Public Purchasing Officer (CPPO) test.

The opportunities available in the purchasing profession are endless. There are so many different fields of purchasing. You can find the one that appeals to you and specialize in it, or like me, try out many different ones till you find your niche. Whatever you decide to do for a living, make sure you have a passion for it. If you can see it as a career and not just a job, you are that much closer to achieving your dream. I did!