The New England Buying Consortium’s (NEBC’s) Annual Bid Review and Business Meeting takes place Feb. 11–13 at the Highlander Inn in Manchester, N.H.

Mary Ellen Martin, CCR, NEBC president and director of The University Store at the University of Maine at Farmington, said that registration for next month’s meeting has gone well, with directors/buyers from more than 30 member stores expected to attend, including a number of first-time attendees.

“The meeting has proven itself to be very informative,” she said. “You very often will get a preview of what’s coming up from vendors for their spring/back-to-school line. It’s just beneficial to participate in the whole process and be part of the consortium. You have a voice in what happens and how your association is operating.”

NEBC pays expenses for the hotel and meals for the first 40 members to attend. As an added incentive, their $75 yearly membership dues are waived for 2011 for attending the meeting.

**Bid Review Format**

NEBC sends out between 150-200 bid requests to vendors each year, and vendors who want to submit proposals are encouraged to do so in a timely fashion.

Martin explained that vendors must submit their proposals to her by 4 p.m. ET on Jan. 28, for a price of $275. Vendors who submit their proposals by the early-bird deadline of 4 p.m. on Jan. 14 will only pay $175 for the bid, a savings of $100. She expects an estimated 70 proposals to be submitted by the end of this month.

Although it is not required, any vendors who would like to make presentations before the committee are invited to do so on Saturday, Feb. 12, for attending NEBC members. Martin expects approximately 20 vendor presentations to take place at the meeting.

For the second straight year, buyers will attend an eight-minute presentation from every vendor responding to the request for proposals (RFPs). “We strongly encourage all vendors to talk about their proposal, not so much about their product,” Martin noted. “We really need to know about the proposal.

“It’s wonderful that vendors come and do a presentation; however, it’s not mandatory and we give equal weight to vendors who don’t participate in the presentations. We take their presentations on face value. If it isn’t written down, it doesn’t count. They can tell us anything they want in the presentation; but we need to have it in writing, and use that as a basis to consider anybody when we choose our vendor partners for the year.”

Following lunch, which the vendors are invited to attend, tabletop displays are set up in the conference center at the Highlander Inn. Martin said that this is the forum during which vendors can talk about their products.

Last year’s tabletop display presentations took place in a 90-minute window but this year’s presentations will be shortened a bit with even more vendors expected.

Once the tabletop display session concludes, the catalog review process gets underway and runs from Saturday evening through Sunday morning, Feb. 13.

NEBC members are broken down into committees, based on what their interests are, and they review every RFP submitted. “What we do is take groups of members and break them up into committees,” Martin explained. “There might be one group looking at clothing vendors, and another group looking at imprinted gifts, and another committee looking at school supplies and paper products, another group looking at operational supplies and another committee looking at miscellaneous items.”

Each committee looks at the proposals submitted. “Basically, they’re looking at how this proposal is going to benefit NEBC members, over and above people who are not NEBC members, whether it’s price concessions, freight concessions or any number of different things,” she said. “It has to have a benefit to our members that is not available to non-members, whatever that benefit may be.

“It’s not so much about the product itself, as much as ‘What are they going to do for us?’ It’s whatever they have done to be attractive to our members. We’re looking at what concessions are being made, whether it’s in price, quantity, lower minimums, freight or any number of different advantages.”

At the conclusion of bid reviews, each group presents its findings, or its recommendations, to the entire membership in attendance to accept or reject a vendor. Finally, a vote takes
place that Sunday morning on whether or not to accept the company as a vendor partner.

**ONLINE CATALOG**

When the attendee list of NEBC members is finalized, they receive a special passcode to review the vendors’ proposals on NEBC’s website, www.nebc1.org, prior to arriving at the meeting, “so that they are familiar with them when they get there,” Martin explained. “There’s just too much to absorb in that one afternoon, so we ask that they do some homework ahead of time, read through the proposals and have some familiarity with them.”

Martin noted that 55 vendor partners were signed up for the 2010-2011 catalog, which covers the period from March 1, 2010, through Feb. 28, 2011. Once vendor partners are selected, their information is posted on NEBC’s website in a password-protected area, so only paid-up store members have access to it.

“Vendors could put up their whole catalog if they’d like to,” she said. “However much they want to have on our website, we’ll be happy to put it up there for them.”

**BOOTH AT CAMEX**

Last year, NEBC did not have a booth at the Campus Market Expo (CAMEX), and instead hosted a reception during the meeting for all of its members and vendor partners to thank them for their support through the years.

This year, NEBC will have a booth at CAMEX 2011 at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, Texas. NEBC is located at Booth No. 1905 during the CAMEX trade show, which runs from Sunday, Feb. 27, through Tuesday, March 1.

Martin explained that it was a geographical reason why NEBC is returning to the CAMEX show floor after having a booth from 2007-09. “Pretty much the East Coast knows about us, but we thought that getting into that different area of the country, that it would be beneficial to have a booth again,” she said.

**BOARD ELECTIONS**

Martin will be vacating her position on the NEBC Board of Directors during the board meeting that takes place on Friday afternoon, Feb. 11, having served on the board as president the last three years. She served the NEBC president’s term of two one-year terms, and was asked to stay on for one more year.

She has been nominated to become president-elect of the National Association of College Stores (NACS) board of trustees. Danny Key, CCR, will be installed as NACS president next month in Houston.

Ed Burda, NEBC vice president/president-elect, and director of campus services, Alderson Broaddus College in Philippi, W.Va., will succeed Martin as NEBC president during a presentation at next month’s meeting in Manchester.

Dianne Holmes, merchandise manager, The University of Maine Bookstore in Orono, will become NEBC president-elect.

Key, director of bookstore services at Wingate University in North Carolina, had to resign his position on the NEBC board once he was nominated as NACS president-elect. Brian Hicks, director of auxiliary services, Forsyth Tech Community College Bookstore in Winston-Salem, N.C., will fill Key’s position on the NEBC board.

Tom King, director, Campus Store, State University of New York at Morrisville, N.Y., will fill Holmes’ position on the board.

**VENDOR INTEREST**

Martin noted that vendor interest in NEBC continues to grow. “I think that, particularly with the economic conditions the way they are, the vendors have a lot of interest in it. We already have some of the proposals in, so I think they were anxious to make sure they got their proposals in to be considered. The interest is certainly as much, if not more, than we had last year.”

**WEBSITE MAKEOVER**

The NEBC website has undergone a complete makeover. “It looks super,” Martin raved. “We've certainly updated the way that it looks and the way that you navigate through it. It has a much more modern look, and it's so much easier to use.

“When people log on, they can get some decent information, and it’s easy to find answers.”

Specifically, Martin pointed out the pictures from last year’s meeting, as well as the testimonials posted from members, as some of the website’s highlights. “It provides easy access for vendors. Once they become a vendor partner, they have a passcode to get in to access all store members and their contact information.

“It’s just an updated look. It looked old fashioned and staid, and it’s really quite nice now.”

—CSE
The University of Dayton (UD) Bookstore in Ohio makes sure it connects with students, in more ways than one.

Connected to three wings of dorms, the bookstore provides a one-stop shopping destination for students, not only for textbooks, supplies and apparel, but also health and beauty care (HBC) products. In fact, some students do not even get dressed when walking into the bookstore; they jump right out of bed in their bedtime apparel when shopping in the store.

“One thing that makes our bookstore unique is that we have a number of customers who shop in their slippers and PJs,” said Julie Banks, university retail operations manager. “Since we are connected to three wings of dorms, we sell a lot of health and beauty items.”

Of course, HBC items are just part of the stock assortment in the two-floor, 14,000-square-foot institutionally owned store, a member of the Independent College Bookstore Association (ICBA). The general merchandise and checkout areas are located on the first floor, and textbooks are found on the second floor.

Bookstore sales in fall 2010 were $2.8 million, with projected sales of $1.9 million in spring 2011. Banks noted that all store profits support student programs and services.

STOCK ASSORTMENT
The store carries a number of merchandise categories, including performance gear; apparel (tees, sweats, pants, shorts, etc.); gifts; hats; business wear; kids’ wear; women’s; men’s; outerwear; general books; school supplies; dorm supplies; greeting cards; balloons; and art supplies.

“We have a large assortment of products utilizing color, style and various UD logos,” Banks noted.

In addition, the store carries an array of technology products, including Hewlett-Packard (HP) computers and computer supplies, as well as Apple iPod and iPhone accessories. Banks said that the bookstore fills special orders for e-readers and iPods, but does not currently carry any stock for these items in the store.

Banks noted that she and her staff are currently working on offering digital content through the store’s website. “Students want convenience and easy access for downloads,” she explained. “By moving this business to
our website, we hope to put content into the students’ hands within seconds of beginning a transaction.”

The website, http://bookstore.udayton.edu, has e-commerce capability. “We sell both general merchandise and textbooks,” Banks said. “We also sell computers and printers. We have a textbook cost comparison tool through Verba, and an online rental program through BookRenter.com. Our Web sales are approximately $1.7 million a year.

“We promote our textbook reservation program through the site and offer pickup as an option year-round. We offer pickup service at all four of our locations for customer convenience. We have strong alumni support and ship online orders to alums all over the world. We process approximately 2,000 textbook reservations each semester.”

The bookstore also features seasonal items, including holiday assortments of trade books, clothing, accessories and gifts. “Our most popular seasonal items are ornaments, breast cancer awareness merchandise and candy,” Banks said. “We offer delivery service across campus for Valentine’s Day with flowers, candy, balloons and plush items.”

LOGISTICS

Banks noted that the store employs 12 full-time staff members and between 80-120 students a semester, with local students manning the store during the summer and breaks. “We have students that work in all areas of our operations,” she said.

Hours of operation are 8 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m.-4 p.m. two Sundays a month.

The bookstore is located in a facility that was built in 2004, having moved from the basement of an academic building to a dormitory housing first-year and second-year students. In addition to the bookstore, the facility features a bank, post office, classrooms and a dining facility.

Banks said that the store utilizes a number of marketing tools to attract students. “We utilize direct marketing e-mails, large posters and flyers across campus, campus emails, Facebook, in-store signage and radio advertisements during basketball and holiday seasons.”

The store’s collocation with the dorms makes the UD Bookstore a unique shopping destination for students, no matter how they present themselves. “You can always count on selling a few tubes of toothpaste and deodorant every morning,” Banks said.

—CSE