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Random Ramblings: Book Selection Then and Now

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When a book is considered for purchase, the catalog can be checked for other campus owners of the book. Some libraries will not purchase books held by three or more libraries on titles that may be useful, but are not core, to the individual library's needs. Looking at the catalog, circulation charges from other campuses are shown. If the book is charged or missing at several campuses this information suggests the book is in demand and probably would be a good purchase at another campus library.

Intercampus borrowing data can also be used to make acquisitions more effective. The monthly intercampus borrowing report shows books that local libraries should have purchased to support user interests, new editions of important books with good circulation histories and new areas of interest. Each month a title report is generated of home campus borrowers' requests for books from other campuses in the consortium. This report has been used to identify sections of the collection that were out of date. For example, **University of Baltimore** saw several requests for trademark and patent books. A campus law library has extensive resources on these topics but does not collect books written for the informed layman or business person that are needed to support a business program. Based on the intercampus borrowing request, the University found its holdings on the subject were ten years old and ordered new books on this topic. Subsequent tracking of circulation showed these books were used by other users.

Limited Autonomy

The limits of autonomy for library deans and directors in the consortial environment may be difficult to define, particularly for those administrators who are new to the system. Specific guidelines may be unwritten and are often learned by the process of trial and error. In the case of one of the smaller **USMAI** libraries, under the leadership of a new dean, the seemingly simple purchase of a set of MARC records yielded a lesson directly from the school of hard knocks.

The basic premise at the heart of a shared catalog is that bibliographic records may be openly used. That is, while there is a single administrative record in the catalog for a given entity, any **USMAI** library holding materials described by that record is free to add holdings or items to that record. While this may seem to be an easy concept to understand for those whose daily work involves the technical end of the process, it is far from clear to administrators, vendors, subscription agents, etc. what "shared catalog" actually means.

In this particular instance, the provider of the bibliographic records agreed to the records being viewed in the shared catalog. The use of the records, however, by **USMAI** institutions other than the purchasing institution, was an unanticipated consequence that proved unacceptable to this provider. The loading of non-sharable records into the **USMAI** catalog

was unacceptable to a wide spectrum of groups within the consortium. The situation was resolved by the largest library's willingness to pay a small fee to the provider in order to be able to attach their holdings to the records. If this compromise had not been achieved, it is quite likely that the records would not have been purchased, thereby depriving faculty and students at the initiating library of a valuable resource. The lesson learned here was that all bibliographic records should be purchased with the consortium in mind.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

The consortium offers the most benefit to general academic libraries. The shared records in the catalog, the group purchases, and the shared user information work best for those libraries that share a similar purpose and have similar patrons. The three special libraries in **USMAI** — two law libraries and one academic health sciences library —often have needs that the consortial purchasing club and shared catalog can meet in only a limited way. The majority of the databases and journal packages offered for consortial purchase--and particularly those purchased with consortial funds for all members of **USMAI** — have little utility for the special libraries. For example, the academic health sciences library chose not to add most of the databases in a recent package acquisition to its Webpage because they were of limited or no use to its patrons. And because the special nature of its collection, the academic health sciences library sees a limited benefit from the information sharing that is inherent in the shared catalog.

This is not to say, however, that **USMAI** membership is not helpful to the special libraries. The size of the consortium and the diversity of its members mean that the resource sharing features it offers — particularly a patron-placed hold service that allows the free sharing of monographs between institutions and no cost ILL of journal articles — means that the special libraries' patrons need for marginal and out-of-scope materials are often met at little or no cost. Because the members of the **USMAI** consortium are willing to adapt their policies and procedures to meet the needs of the special libraries, cataloging records — even shared cataloging records — display MeSH in the health sciences implementation of the OPAC, while only LC subject headings are displayed for other institutions.

Conclusions

The **USMAI** Libraries' consortial acquisitions practice requires substantial compromise to insure maximum benefit and minimal detriment to each individual library. We are keenly aware that we must consider the balance between cost savings to all libraries measured alongside the cost of human resources needed to implement or support our practice. Substantial time and effort is invested in researching, communicating, developing alternative courses of action, and compromising, with the ultimate goal being that all member libraries benefit from direct cost savings on systems, services, and collections as well as the resources and knowledge shared. 🌳

Random Ramblings — Book Selection Then and Now

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I got to thinking how different the process for book selection is today than when I started out as a librarian in the 1970s as I sent in my orders a few weeks ago before the final deadline for this fiscal year. I had saved much of my allocation until now for faculty requests but the threat of losing my positive balances prodded me to decide on what materials to buy with my remaining funds. To give some context, I select for the three Romance languages — French, Italian, and Spanish — that are taught at **Wayne State University**. I have both an easier and more difficult time than most selectors. Since the acquisitions unit has one preferred vendor for each of the languages, I can check the vendor databases for availability and choice of editions. On the negative side, I must deal with currency fluctuations and limited availability for some countries within my selection universe.

I did everything except check shelf availability with my office computer, either at work

or from one of my home computers connected remotely to my work computer. With the new generation of browsers, I normally had a minimum of three or four tabs open: the vendor database, the library online catalog, **Amazon.com** for product descriptions and occasionally reviews, and **WorldCat** for bibliographic and holdings information. I happily cut and pasted among the various open windows and used a clipboard utility to retain earlier actions that I might need to repeat. Through trial and error, I have learned where backtracking is the most effective strategy to keep the correct windows open for my next action.

The ordering process varied a bit from vendor to vendor. I particularly liked ordering Italian materials from **Casalini Libri**. My acquisitions contact has trusted me with the database password as long as I am very careful not to place any orders. I would search the database, choose the exact items that I wanted,

and select them. When finished, I would put them in the wish list and email my contact to complete the process by adding fund codes and postage costs as well as enter the encumbrances into our local system. She appreciated the fact that I had already selected exactly what I wanted when choices existed such as multiple editions. I also knew that the items were available from searching the vendor database. For *Puvill Libros* (Spanish) and *Aux Amateurs de Livres International* (French), I had slightly different options. Sometimes, I would cut and paste the ordering information into a Word document or an email to send to the acquisitions department. With **WorldCat**, I could use its batch email function to group my orders.

For English language materials, **Wayne State University** switched to **YPB** not too long ago as its primary vendor. I went through a year's worth of electronic notification slips in a few days. Not having attended the formal training, I needed some written instructions and a bit of help but sending the orders to the processing queue was quite simple with only a few keystrokes. Acquisitions checks this queue regularly and completes the transactions as above. I also looked at what I ordered and changed the blanket order to reflect my preferences so that I won't have to pay much attention the notifications during the upcoming year. I confess that I haven't yet learned to make the most efficient use of **YBP's** system and often send snippets of the **Amazon** records to acquisitions in place of selecting the bibliographic record myself from the **YBP** database.

To complete my ordering of French and Italian materials, I returned to my old system of selecting from printed sources. I used *Livres du mois* for French and *Casalini's* list of recommended items for Italian. (I didn't have any Spanish money left to spend.) I marked up the pages, tore them out of the booklets, checked them in the catalog for duplicates or additional information, and mailed them off to acquisitions. And then disaster struck for the first time ever in twenty years. The final batch of orders got lost in campus mail without my having made copies since nothing had ever been lost before. I've been given an extension for ordering and am still sorting out what to do next.

I have two final comments. First, I keep a running total of my orders in each area on a reasonably simple spreadsheet that does the currency calculations for me. I periodically update the overall expenditures to reflect the official figures that include discounts and postage. Second, for faculty requests, I often check the out-of-print book market and have occasionally snared some real finds including perhaps the only copy for sale in the world of a linguistics title for a Spanish professor. Just last month I finally identified an available copy of an elusive 1991 *Classique Garnier* title that a French faculty member has wanted for over four years. I have also authorized acquisitions to use the out-of-print market if for some reasons my choices are no longer in print.

Selection in the past wasn't nearly so simple. I didn't have selection responsibility in the antediluvian period before the arrival of the first online catalogs, but I worked nearby in the Catalog Department at the **Sterling Memorial Library**, **Yale University**. (Sterling was the main library on campus.). During this period in the 1970s, the bibliographers, who were required to have doctorates in their selection fields, poured over printed catalogs and bibliographies, evaluated requests from faculty and perhaps a few students, and kept in contact by mail or phone with their colleagues. They gave their selections on marked up catalogs, photocopies of bibliographies, and little slips of paper to a support unit of library assistants. The unit was called pre-ordering searching to distinguish it from the post-order searching unit in the Catalog Department that did much the same thing when the items arrived for cataloging.

The pre-order searchers would scurry around the library to check various tools. The first stop was the Official Catalog, a card catalog, of course, in the technical services area that mirrored the public catalog but without subject headings. The notations system was: "0" for nothing; "√" for the author only; "√√" for a different edition, and "√√√" for an exact match. Except for an exact match, the quest was far from over because the **Yale Library** had an In Process List (IPL) for over 100,000, I believe, additional items. The IPL was a main-entry list on microfilm where the searcher could get queasy scrolling through the documents on a mechanized reader. While the IPL worked well enough for items with obvious main entries, materials with complexities such as corporate authorship required multiple searches. The description above leaves out the complication that arose when the available citation or the user request included bibliographic inaccuracies. (My research on the out-of-print book market from buy and sell advertisements in *AB Bookmans Weekly* discovered serious citation errors in 16.1% of the buy advertisements and 6.1% of the sell advertisements.)

The pre-order searches went to great lengths to check all possibilities because the greatest "sin" in their unit was ordering an unintentional duplicate and thereby wasting the library's money. The searcher then returned the results to the bibliographer who sometimes would double check the sources, especially in the case of a variant edition, before authorizing an order.

By the time that I became a selector at the **Marriott Library**, **University of Utah**, the most important simplification for selection had already arrived. The online catalog, especially if it included materials on order or in backlogs, greatly simplified the process. I always verified whether the library owned the book before sending on the order. I often would search by author to determine if the library already held other works by the same person. The online catalog was especially important for voluminous authors since the precise searching available in many command driven online catalogs made it simple to identify if the library held a particular edition. Finally, keyword searching was a great time saver as it allowed for searching on many different terms. Acquisitions

records were most often still brief, but the multiple searching options were usually good enough to discover if the item was on order or in process with a few searches.

The widespread adoption of the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) also helped identify unique items. While available as the Standard Book Number since 1966 and then as the ISBN since 1970, not all materials include this number though major publishers, however, assigned ISBNs to their books. Theoretically, orders could be sent identified only by the ISBN; but enough mistakes in assigning and transcribing the ISBN occur that such a procedure would be dangerous.

Most of the other changes that I chronicled at the beginning of this column depend upon the Internet. Book vendors/jobbers have realized that their customers require powerful but simple ordering systems and that the amount of discount is not the only consideration in an era of staff reduction. **Amazon.com** doesn't intend its records to be used as a resource by people who don't intend to order their books from them, but selectors can profit from the enhancements that the company has provided for their customers including photos of the book, product descriptions, and, increasingly, professional reviews. I will say very little about patron reviews, but they can be better than nothing. While not normally useful for my selection, the Internet provides many resources including blogs, wikis, and informal review sites to help librarians learn more about materials that don't receive official reviews.

The new selection environment has some negatives. In the last few years, I've noticed that my email box includes many more advertisements to buy materials. I'm to blame for many of them from having entered contests on the exhibit floor at **ALA**. I get some, however, from publishers and even authors who are hawking their wares. Print publications were easier to overlook though I've started to set my spam filter to send mailings from publishers of little interest to the junk folder. At least, emails are better than phone calls.

I'll conclude by saying that my school media spouse has benefited even more than I have. In her much smaller library, collection development and acquisitions are seamlessly combined. As she sits at her computer, she can log on to her preferred vendor, examine the item's record that most often for her materials includes the published reviews that the vendor has licensed, make her decision, and send the order off immediately. If the discount is better, she could do the same at **Amazon.com** though each order then becomes a separate credit card purchase since she doesn't have a corporate account to combine her purchases into one monthly bill.

I'm not nostalgic at all about returning to past selection ways, except perhaps to eliminate the unwanted emails. With the Internet and vendor support, I'm making much better decisions in much less time. Now if I only had enough money to purchase the same number of books as I did in 1980. 🦃