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 This report has been used to identify sections of the collection that were out of date.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 an invaluable 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.

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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 send the order. But the process for many of the USMAI members is much different: a specific order form, a specific vendor, a specific Web site, a specific database, a specific format, a specific password, and a specific contact. Despite these differences, and perhaps because of these differences, my selection universe is greatly expanded.
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 responsible for 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; “v” for the author only; “v/v” 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 easy 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 description above leaves out the complication 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 Pavill 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 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, 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 YPB’s system and often send snippets of the Amazon records to acquisitions in place of selecting the bibliographic record myself from the YPB 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 long out of print 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.