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Back Talk: Books with Feet

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Back Talk — Books with Feet

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I've approached eBook vendors at the last several ALA meetings with what I think would be a surefire idea to sell a new type of eBook package — “books with feet.” According to the OCLC glossary, “books with feet” “refers to library books that are commonly lost, stolen, vandalized or misshelved. They are typically popular titles and cover a wide range of subjects and contemporary issues.” (<http://www.oclc.org/support/documentation/glossary/oclc/default.htm>) These titles pose collection development problems to all types of libraries because, no matter how many times the library reorders these titles, the books disappear soon after reaching the shelf. Putting the title behind the desk helps a bit but does not guarantee that the book won't be stolen and hinders access by users who are too shy to ask the librarian for what are often controversial items. As a concrete example, my librarian spouse has stopped ordering titles on witchcraft and tells students that it's not an issue of censorship but rather of economics since her budget is too small to keep ordering replacements.

An obvious solution would be to buy these titles as eBooks. eBooks can't be stolen, vandalized, or not returned. Many library patrons could access them at home over the Internet in addition to reading them within the library. An even better solution would be for vendors to develop packages of eBooks for subject areas where books most frequently walk away. If

such eBook collections already exist, I don't know about them so that a bit more advertising would be in order. (Since I enter all the contests that I can at the ALA exhibits, I get email advertisements from a broad range of publishers and vendors for all types of libraries. I briefly look at most since I teach collection development to future librarians in all types of libraries.)

I could see vendors using several strategies to identify such collections. The first step would be to identify the areas where materials walk away by searching library literature, talking with individual librarians, sponsoring focus groups, searching library wikis and blogs, or simply making educated guesses. I'd immediately include witchcraft, the occult, and sex. Some potential high theft areas such as materials on pop and sports stars might not remain popular long enough to be worth the effort. To find less obvious areas, the vendor could ask for lists of lost items from a representative sample of various types of libraries. At **Wayne State University**, the library has difficulty keeping materials on race relations on the shelf; but other libraries may not have problems with this subject.

Vendors could use the same lists to identify individual titles. Other resources could be bibliographies of all sorts including pathfinders and reading lists, searches by subject headings (*Library of Congress Subject Headings* and

Sears) and classification (Dewey and Library of Congress), and suggestions from librarians and other experts in the chosen subject areas. I don't know how difficult it is for publishers to acquire eBook rights; perhaps this would be the stumbling block for my proposal. I would like to see collections of various sizes/prices and for different types of libraries — academic, public, and school. As another option, an inventive jobber might identify clusters of such titles among existing eBooks and sell them as a package to customers. Finally, librarians needing a publication or two for tenure might compile such lists, preferably in a digital format suitable for online ordering.

This idea makes a lot of sense to me. The library can finally buy “books with feet” and know that the titles can't walk away. I think some libraries would pay a premium for this assurance. The idea also has positive service aspects. Shy users can more easily consult titles on controversial subjects such as sex without having to ask the librarian for the titles behind the desk.

If any publisher, vendor, or librarian implements this idea from reading my column and makes money or gets published, I'd appreciate being taken out for dinner at the next ALA. A relatively cheap ethnic restaurant would do. 🍴