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Do Libraries Still Need Book Vendors and Subscription Agents?

By Stephen Bosch, Cory Tucker, Christopher L. Sugnet, and Lauren E. Corbett

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Digital content blurs the lines of traditional library acquisition workflows and organization. For example: link resolvers and the loading of order confirmation record files may be handled by systems staff in one organization and by technical services staff in another. Lines are being crossed between acquisitions and interlibrary loan functions, notably with electronic versions of theses and dissertations. Regardless of this blurring of lines, library staff use vendors still in acquiring content for the library collection. The reasons for using vendors have stood for decades, but are changes in the information industry having an impact? In the current environment, what interactions with vendors are most useful to a library?

For this publication, vendor is a general term used to refer to a third party, other than a publisher, that sells content and supporting services specifically to libraries. Most of these vendors still have a focus on either books or serials (aside from some specialty vendors such as for audiovisual materials), but the digital environment is decreasing the distinctions in acquisition transactions between books and serials. For example, serial subscription agents now sell electronic books (e-books). Book vendors (also called booksellers, dealers, or jobbers) now sell book collections to libraries that a few years ago might have been bought direct from the publisher. Several large publishers make book and serial digital content equally available on the same platform (e.g., Springer, Elsevier) and some publishers have experimented with eliminating the use of the subscription agent, so it is possible that for digital content, the publisher may yet absorb the role of the vendor. Additionally, the number of major longtime print book vendors has decreased during the past decade, with those remaining now offering e-books, while a newer type of vendor, the electronic book (e-book) aggregator such as EBL and ebrary, has come into prominence.

Basic Content Services

The traditional basic operation of book and serials vendors has been to sell publications to the library. Historically, the advantages in using a library vendor have been the consolidation of ordering, claiming of outstanding items, and paying consolidated invoices. Book vendors also offer savings through price discounts and consolidated shipments. The approval plan was initially a vendor service to ship print books according to a library's custom guidelines (or profile) to decrease title-by-title selection and ordering. Approval plans later expanded to include music, video, and more recently, e-books. Standing orders and blanket orders meant that the vendors ensured acquisition of each title in a series or each title from a particular publisher rather than library staff tracking forthcoming titles and ordering them individually. For the library, managing book and periodical orders on a title-by-title basis is an overwhelming prospect, and too expensive in terms of the internal labor that would be needed to interact with all of the different publishers. The consolidation by vendors has long freed up valuable time of library

workers for other responsibilities. Saving time in purchasing traditional content has become even more important as increasingly time is spent both in finding out-of-print materials more readily on the Internet and in handling the complex work of acquiring digital content.

Specialized Content and Vendors

Some book vendors can supply audiovisual materials, maps, government documents and out-of-print items. For example, Ambassador has both book and media specialists. There are also a few specialty vendors to facilitate the more difficult acquisition of these materials. Without the vendors, these may have to be ordered directly from various suppliers and distributors, which are sometimes hard to identify and contact, thus highly time-consuming and frustrating for library staff. This is particularly true for niches which might require expert understanding of the topic, for both library and vendor staff to be certain of obtaining the exact item needed by the library user. For example, a music professor may require a part for a specific instrument or a particular performance and variations available for the same piece can easily lead to errors. If expertise is lacking in the library, using an expert vendor can be an effective solution in terms of both cost and quality of service to the library patron.

Music

Music is acquired by libraries in multiple formats, including monographs, dictionaries and other reference materials (both print and electronic), scores, DVD and VHS for music video, and for audio, compact discs (CDs), and less frequently now, phonograph records. While monographs about music can be acquired through general book vendors, scores are most often purchased through vendors who specialize in this format, such as Theodore Front Music Literature and J. W. Pepper. However, some major general book vendors, especially outside of the United States, supply music materials as well, and can be very helpful in locating scores from European publishers. Approval plans for scores are offered by most of these vendors, as well as MARC records for a small fee, which is helpful to those libraries whose staff lack music cataloging expertise. Some music vendors deal in both scores and recordings, but most often they are separate. Large web retailers which are primarily consumer-oriented, such as Amazon, carry a wide variety of commercial audio products but do not always offer the same support services (invoices, preprocessing, etc.). Specialty vendors such as eJazzlines.com and Music Library Service Company offer services such as new CD releases each month and core collections because they cater to libraries. Some are beginning to offer MARC records for CDs.

Audiovisual

Video content has gone from tape to primarily DVD and streaming video. Streaming video can be served from prerecorded files, or it can be distributed as part of a live broadcast in which the video is converted into a compressed digital signal and distributed using a Web server, sending it to multiple users at the same time. DVDs go out-of-print quickly for all but the popular films, so purchasing at the point of release is important. Specialty vendors such as Action! Library Media Service offer new releases and core collections just as specialty music vendors do. The vendor can ensure that the materials are acquired upon “street” release. Expensive pricing continues to be as much of an obstacle as the acquisition process for audiovisual materials, so vendor

discounts are not as great as with books. Quality improvements in delivery of streaming video make this a more viable option than in the past for libraries, particularly with new services emerging, such as Digital Campus from Swank. Utilizing the few vendors specializing in audiovisual sales to libraries often is the best way for libraries without their own expertise to make such difficult purchases.

Electronic Books

An e-book may be either the electronic counterpart of a printed book or an original work that was “born” digital, and may be viewed either on a computer or on a hand held device (cell phone, tablet, or e-book reader such as a Kindle or Nook). E-books are undergoing a rapid phase of development and there are multiple business models: transactional payments for portions of books, traditional one-time purchase, standing orders for books in series, and subscriptions to collections. Also, there are several e-book formats competing in the marketplace, including Adobe PDF, ePub, Microsoft Reader, eReader, Open eBook and OpenReader. Both publishers and vendors are marketing e-books to libraries and the services offered will vary greatly depending on the source. Recently, some of the largest e-book vendors have begun partnerships with print book suppliers where e-books are available for ordering in the traditional book vendor’s ordering system.

Electronic Journals

The complications for electronic versions of serials of all types (periodicals, newspapers, annuals, yearbooks, proceedings, transactions; or numbered monographic series), require additional library staff time on support for access, licensing, registration, linking to owned content, maintenance of accurate holdings, and access to archival issues. All of this may have to be updated if a journal is sold or transferred to a new publisher, another management function that did not exist for the library in the era of print, with bound volumes sitting static on the shelves. Subscription agents and other vendors, such as Serials Solutions and Ex Libris, offer newer time-saving services to assist library staff with many of these administrative tracking and updating operations.

Many e-resource management vendors now offer a suite of tools for e-journals that include link resolution, searchable alphabetical title lists (called A–Z lists), collection analysis tools, and MARC record services. The combination allows centralized library management for the plethora of full-text resource subscriptions and more-efficient decision-making regarding electronic full-text collections than when library staff tried to manage updates from each separate publisher and compiled their own usage reports. The availability of updated information gathered by the vendor provides an economy of scale to libraries.

In addition to the consolidation services described above, support from vendors now commonly required by libraries includes:

- Increased customer service and communication tailored to the specific library’s needs

- A customer-friendly interface to a web-accessible catalog of the publications available, with the ability for the library to effect transactions in the vendor's database (plus training in the use of the database)
- Bibliographic services (order confirmation records and catalog records)
- Reporting capabilities to support collection development decision-making, whether purchasing data or usage statistics
- An ability to work with consortia (licensing, business processes, resource sharing, training, management of trials and introduction of new products)

Customer Service and Vendor Database

Communication, as in most situations, is the key ingredient to the relationship between a library and a vendor. In an increasingly global business environment, it is important for vendors to have customer service departments that are available during peak times and to cover various time zones with toll-free telephone numbers, email, and online chat options. Vendors need personnel who are knowledgeable not only with the vendor's database, but also with any customization implemented by each library client and compatibility of resulting batch files with other systems the library uses, to compete for today's library business. How quickly and efficiently vendors handle technical issues and communicate information on updates or new features also plays a vital role in their effectiveness. In-person and online training tools are necessary for libraries now, since instead of a few expert users in an acquisitions department, decentralized use of the database has become common, enabling librarians who primarily teach and consult with patrons, to be the initiators of purchase transactions. Again the vendor aggregates this work onto a single platform, a key to success with decentralized use, since those who teach have a number of platforms to learn in helping library users and will not willingly take on the additional work in learning multiple selection platforms. A vital role of the vendor is having the means to help the library staff avoid duplicative purchasing, whether the case is the same title chosen by more than one person or if it is between print and electronic versions. The vendor provides the opportunity to see when a choice between formats is possible as well.

Bibliographic and Shelf-Ready Services

Bibliographic services consist of electronic delivery of a file of MARC catalog records, which may cost a small per record fee that is less expensive than local cataloging. With books, each file creates multiple records (administrative, financial, and public description) simultaneously for a batch of items as it is loaded into an integrated library system. In some cases, this may be a two step process with an abbreviated, preliminary descriptive public catalog record embedded with the order details and financial data, which is later overwritten with a complete catalog record containing all desired access points for discovery by library patrons. Both the preliminary order confirmation records and the complete catalog records can be loaded using local automated electronic processes on a standing frequency—(typically daily for orders, while for cataloging it will be in correlation with timing of shipments. This can be done for both print and e-books. Specifically for print books, it is common for a library to pay the vendor for materials processing (e.g., spine label with call number, security strip, ownership stamp, RFID tag or barcode) to make the materials ready to circulate, or “shelf-ready.” These file loads along with the advance processing shorten the amount of time between arrival of an item to the library and its

availability for use by the patron, with very little added time prior to shipment from the vendor to the library.

With digital content, the record delivery is the equivalent to the physical shipment of print. Vendors are struggling in providing efficient bibliographic services for e-books because of the limited availability of quality cataloging records. Unlike print books, catalog records for e-books can lag significantly behind the availability of the e-book itself, whereas cataloging records for print books have long been available before the books themselves because of the time lag with physical distribution. Bibliographic service for e-books is a less-effective area of vendor and library interactions currently. Nevertheless, for some libraries, an internal cataloging process may be slower than the multiday lag in vendor record delivery, with the result that the vendor service still may make the item available to the patron more speedily.

In the case of serials, again the content may be ready for use with the flick of a switch upon purchase, but patron discovery is dependent typically upon updates from an electronic management service (through A–Z title list updates or catalog records, or both), offered by vendors such as Serials Solutions or EBSCO. Libraries have benefited from the collective sources of data in the electronic management services, and the actual speed of updating records is greater than when each individual library created its own records, but the time that passes before obtaining catalog links to the content may seem longer because of the rise in expectations of immediacy.

Vendor Interactions with Consortia

Consortia have utilized vendor-managed coordinated book purchasing plans to avoid overlap in members' collections. A vendor can provide a neutral platform for initiating collaboration and assessing results for joint collection development projects. This has been the case in the past with print materials, but has become even more prevalent with digital content.

Conclusion

The continued benefits of vendor intermediation to libraries include streamlined workflows, the reduction of paper processes, and the ability to capitalize on the aggregated and updated information vendors can make readily available, whether for ordering new materials or for managing electronic content links in library catalogs. Initially, freeing staff time in this manner enabled better service to patrons, sometimes in unexpected ways. For example, finding out-of-print titles became easier with the Internet (such as through Amazon MarketPlace), but required more time than purchasing through traditional library vendors. While those time-saving benefits and economies of scale from vendors remain, more recently the strictures of a severe economic recession put pressure on library staff to leverage additional efficiencies for their institutions. Newer vendor services such as making public domain e-books visible through library search tools and catalogs, or automating appropriate purchasing through demand-driven acquisition of e-books, are more critical than ever in order to provide the most-needed library resources to stakeholders in the most fiscally responsible manner. The impact of change has served to strengthen the need for the remaining library vendors, particularly in facilitating new methods of electronic resource acquisition and management.

Contributors

Stephen Bosch, Materials Budget, Procurement and Licensing Librarian from the University of Arizona, has been involved with various aspects of acquisitions, collection development, and library administrative services during his thirty-year tenure at the University of Arizona. He has held positions as Acquisitions Librarian and Coordinator for Collection Development, Information Access Librarian, Financial and Administrative Services Librarian as well as his current position. He has been chair of many committees, teams, councils, and projects focusing on information resource development and management, user needs assessments, licensing issues, and serials/monographs acquisitions both at the University of Arizona and nationally. Of his many publications, the most recent is his book, *Guide to Licensing and Acquiring Electronic Information* published by the American Library Association and Scarecrow Press. He is the 2006 recipient of the American Library Association ALCTS Leadership in Acquisitions Award and was recently elected Chair of the American Library Association ALCTS Acquisitions Section.

Chris Sugnet is the Assistant Dean of the division at the Colorado State University (CSU) Libraries that selects and licenses commercial information resources for the CSU community and includes the college liaisons and the collections and contracts units. College liaisons handle instruction, in-depth research consultation, and collection development for their assigned colleges. He also manages over \$6 million in annual expenditures for access to information products in all formats, including electronic books and journals purchased directly and through various state, regional, and national academic library alliances. He has worked in similar capacities at private and state-sponsored university libraries in the U.S. and UAE since 1974 and holds a BA in English and MA in Library Sciences from SUNY Geneseo and a MA in Anthropology from the University of Arizona. He is currently an editor of an open access electronic journal, *Collaborative Librarianship*, and a consultant on international scholarly publishing.

Cory Tucker is Head of Collection Management at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Libraries. Cory is responsible for administration and coordination of collection development activities for the University Libraries and leads the identification, evaluation, selection, and initial licensing of print and electronic information resources for the UNLV Libraries. In addition, Cory coordinates and implements the collection assessment activities for the Libraries. Cory is an active member of ALCTS and is currently the Chair-Elect of the Collection Management Section. Cory received his undergraduate degree in finance from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and received his MLS from the University of South Florida.

Lauren E. Corbett, Director of Resource Services for the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University, oversees collection management and technical services. Lauren has more than sixteen years of experience in library acquisitions and is past-chair of ALCTS Acquisitions Section. She also received the First Step Award from the Continuing Resources Section. Past scholarship includes "Serials: Review of the Literature 2000–2003," published in *Library Resources & Technical Services*. She has a MLIS from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a BA in French from Davidson College in North Carolina.