Biz of Acq: Negative Decisions

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NEGATIVE DECISIONS
by Sandra A. Beehler
(Acquisitions Librarian, Cornell
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Ithaca, NY)

Among all the mail that comes into the
library each week is a fair number of unsolici-
ted books, serials and other miscellaneities
that have to be sent to selectors for a deci-
sion about adding them to the collection.
Once a decision has been made to add some-
thing to the collection, it goes the normal
route of acquisitions, cataloging and pro-
cessing on its journey to the shelf. For both
acquisitions and collection development,
knowing what is not added to the collection
can be just as important as what turns up in
the public catalog.

In the normal course of a week, I look at
hundreds of pieces of advertising mail. Since
these materials are searched before being
sent to the selector, valuable time can be
saved when a negative decision has already
been made and recorded. These items can
be weeded out by a searcher, so that the
selector’s time is not wasted handling the
same materials over and over again.

Libraries receive many unsolicited serial
and monograph titles each year. Once a
negative decision has been made regarding
a specific title, the record of that decision
instructs receipts/serials personnel what to
do with the title should another copy ap-
pear. The negative decision record is par-
ticularly helpful with government documents
in cases where more than one publication is
attached to the same item number and the
library does not wish to add all those titles to
their collection. The record of a negative
decision can prove useful when the main
series has been added but not a particular
sub-series.

The first step in recording negative deci-
sions is to develop criteria for which types
of negative decisions should be recorded.
Obviously, out of the thousands of titles that
are published and advertised every year, it
would be next to impossible to record every
one that wasn’t ordered. The library needs
to consider carefully what information will
be pertinent to future collection develop-
ment decisions. Some libraries record only
serial titles — peri-
odicals and mono-
graphic series.
Other libraries
record all negative
decisions for titles
received on their
approval plans.
Others record nega-
tive decisions on
slips sent by ven-
dors such as Ballen,
Blackwell or
Rothman. Selection
may be limited by
subject area — for
instance, since I am in a law library I record
only law-related titles. For monographs,
minor sets only would be chosen for inclu-
sion in a negative decision file. Price might
be another criterion or decisions can be made on
a case-by-case basis following a broad
set of guidelines.

Another factor to consider when creat-
ing a negative decision file would be the
amount of staff time that can be devoted to
creating these records. The library must also
consider the physical capacity of the online
or paper system in which you record the
information. At Cornell, the decision regar-
ding which negative decisions are to be
recorded online is the responsibility of the
collection development team or the acquisi-
tions librarian. The criteria are designed to
limit the number of titles added to the online
catalog. Decisions are expected to conform
to the library’s general collection policies
and budget considerations.

The next determination required in this
process concerns the format of the negative
decision record and who will actually do the
work of creating the record. At Cornell it
became obvious to us to involve in the
planning process that we did not want to
spend a great amount of time creating these
records. It may be most convenient for li-
brary staff to simply use a record already
existing in one of the bibliographic utilities.
However for other collection development
librarians, a minimal bibliographic level
record would be satisfactory. At Cornell,
we decided to use Library of Congress
records or member records from the RLIN
database, but drop subject headings so as
not to clutter our local indexes. Libraries
may also want to drop some, if not all,
added entries. If a library is considering
adding negative decision records to its online
catalog the project planners should exper-
iment to determine the effects on indexing
and the interface with other online utilities.
For instance, we found out that a link be-
tween periodical indexes available to the
public and the library’s periodical holdings
was retrieving negative decision records.
This glitch occurred because our system
was still searching by the ISSN, which we
had not deleted from our negative decision
records.

Other elements of information that might
be considered for inclusion in a negative
decision record would be the name or ini-
tials of the person responsible for the nega-
tive decision, the reason for the decision,
and the date of the decision. If the decision
concerns a title that was requested by a
patron, that information should be added.
It’s a good idea to state briefly the reason for
a negative decision, so that it can be justi-
fied or explained if questioned at a later
date.

Usually the receipts division takes re-
ponsibility for putting the negative deci-
sion records into the system — though that
may depend on who is responsible for add-
ing records to an online catalog. Here at
Cornell, a cataloger adds negative decisions
when the only information available is taken
from an advertisement. However, if the piece
is physically present, the acquisitions sec-
ton is responsible for adding the record.

Whether to add these decisions to the
online catalog depends on a number of fac-
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tors. The most important factor is whether such records can be suppressed from public view. There may be excellent reasons for the public to know about what the library is not adding — after all, we have public notes informing them that titles have been canceled. At our institution, however, the majority view seems to be that showing negative decisions would frustrate the average library user. For most libraries, adding negative decision records to the catalog remains the most convenient way to provide a central record that is accessible only to the library staff. If the library can’t include these records in the local bibliographic database, they may want to create a separate computer file that could be accessed by the appropriate staff. Keeping the file in a computerized form makes it easier to use and maintain, particularly if the file can be accessed through a network. The file could even be kept on 3X5 cards, as we did at Cornell for many years. What form the negative decision file finally takes depends as we stated earlier, on an individual library’s needs, time, and resources available. The maintenance of the negative decision file should be the final step considered during the planning process. One important consideration will be whether or not it is possible to mark negative decisions in your system so that they can be deleted at a later time. If it is possible, such encoding represents an ideal situation. The important question to consider is how long this information will remain useful to your collection development decisions. It may be desirable to keep negative decisions on serials indefinitely, while deleting the monographic records after a specified period of years. For unsolicited serial titles, some libraries delete their negative decision records after a year or two when no additional issues have been received.

In conclusion, the savings in staff time and online search costs, recording negative decisions can be very beneficial. Such information is useful to both collection development and receipts and acquisitions staff. With the high volume of titles passing over everyone’s desk these days, it makes sense to have the “memory” of what gets discarded or refused, in an institutional database rather than relying on individuals’ recall. The possibility of overloading the catalog can be minimized through careful planning, both for what information regarding negative decisions is recorded and the establishment of a regular schedule for maintenance. All these factors combine so that a negative decision file provides the institution with a valuable resource that supports an intelligent, cost-efficient, and intellectually defensible collection development program.

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The Planning Committee for the 1995 Conference includes Barbara Dean (Fairfax County Public Library) bdean@Leo.vsla.edu, Heather Miller (SUNY-Albany) hm766@csvax.albany.edu, Cerise Oberman (SUNY-Plattsburgh), Katina Strauch (College of Charleston) and Judy Webster (University of Tennessee Library). The Preconference Coordinator is Julie Nilson (Indiana University) 812-855-1666, nilson@indiana.edu.

Send ideas by June 30, 1995 to Judy Webster, Head, Acquisitions and Processing Team; University of Tennessee Library; 1015 Volunteer Blvd.; Knoxville, TN 37996-1000. Phone (615) 974-4431; FAX (615) 974-2708; Internet: Webster@UTKLIB.LIB.UTK.EDU.

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**Profiles Encouraged:**

**Celia Scher Wagner**

Early on: I was born in Seattle and raised on Mercer Island, a suburb where the local newspaper ran an article on stolen pet rabbits. (The headline was “Parents Stolen” and the article was written from the point of view of the orphaned baby bunnies.)

And then: I graduated from Yale in 1977 with a B.A. in English and a teaching certificate, taught briefly in the wilds of Washington state, fled to Portland, stuffed envelopes for the State of Oregon, and then joined Blackwell in 1978.

Family: Husband Rick and nine-year-old daughter Anne Marie, plus a wonderful extended family.

Favorite accomplishment: I once got to play the title role in a production of The Diary of Anne Frank.

Other life: I choreograph high school musicals.

Pastimes: Cooking, dancing, reading, writing letters, having friends over.

Pet peeve: I dislike bullies. Also, in the way some people can’t stand a crooked picture, I am undone by cute misspellings: the “Kleen ‘N’ Kormer” laudromat bugs me, but not as much as the local establishment named “Clancy’s Country Citchen.” Aaak! I’m sorry I brought it up!

Biggest surprise: Labor and delivery.

Lifestyle shared by only 3% of the population: We don’t have a TV.

Notable social liability: We don’t have a TV.

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