Biz of Acq -- Quick Tips for Media Selection and Acquisitions

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2712

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Biz of Acq — Quick Tips for Media Selection and Acquisitions

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Column Editor’s Note: Specialty media collections, such as video collections, can be a challenge for collection management and acquisitions librarians who often have to work without a media librarian in-house and guess their way through genres and industries that they know little about. Even those working with a media librarian in-house, such as myself, will find new ideas in Matt Bailey’s excellent article. I’m pleased to have a couple of new video vendors to try. — MF

My job title, Media Resources Coordinator, means I am responsible for acting as the liaison to all faculty, staff, and students for our media collection (currently about 7,400 titles on DVD and VHS). Faculty at Carleton have always taken an active role in collection development, and this holds true for media as well: faculty select about 70% of our media purchases. This makes my job somewhat easier, since I don’t have to guess at what titles to buy to support the curriculum, but it can also make building a well-rounded collection a little tougher.

Any primarily faculty-selected collection will be, by nature, idiosyncratic and eclectic, so it’s up to me to select titles to round out and balance the media collection. This — let’s not kid ourselves — is the fun part of my job. But I don’t approach this selection without some careful thought. In selecting titles to complement those chosen by faculty, I try not to compete with our local video stores that stock all the newest and biggest releases or with the public library — located one block from campus — that provides access to popular movies and television series on DVD. The reasons for this are many. Firstly, our collection, despite its breadth, is meant primarily to support the curriculum of the college. Secondly, I feel it is essential to provide access to material continued on page 63

http://www.against-the-grain.com>
If you’re looking to shore up your collection in a hurry, you could do worse than to buy everything that appears on the American or British Film Institutes’ lists of the “best” 100 films ever made. A bit of online detective work will turn up dozens of similar lists. Over the long term, you can keep up with a handful of online sources: Dave Kehr’s weekly column in the New York Times highlights new DVDs of classic films, DVD Beaver provides reviews of new DVD releases and comparisons with older or foreign editions, and DVD Times and The Digital Bits each provide news of upcoming DVD releases. Depending on your tolerance for Internet drama, you may also want to keep up with one or two online discussion forums: Home Theater Forum, DVD Talk, and criterionforum.org have some very knowledgeable and helpful members. You may also want to skim new issues of your library’s film magazines (Film Comment, Sight & Sound, Filmmaker, Cinema Scope) to keep current with names and trends in film.

Once you’ve figured out what to buy, you need to figure out from where to buy. Depending on your staffing situation and your use of purchasing cards, it may not be feasible to order your media titles from multiple vendors. In that case, vendors who specialize in libraries such as Baker & Taylor or Midwest Tape may be a better option for you. However, while these specialized vendors may offer excellent service and may better suit some purchasing policies, they cannot compete with the selection and prices offered by most consumer-oriented online retailers. In our case, we have made a conscious decision to purchase commercially-available media from online vendors from whom we can get low prices and fast, often free, shipping. We regularly use Amazon, DVD Planet, DVD Pacific, and Deep Discount, with the occasional purchase from Overstock.com and Barnes and Noble. The savings created by using these retailers allows for more titles to be purchased with limited funds. Depending on your location and purchasing needs, some online vendors, including some not listed above, may work better for you than others. To get the absolute best price (including shipping), you can compare prices from several online vendors at DVD Price Search (dvdpricesearch.com). This site also provides information about sales and coupons that will further stretch your budget.

When it comes to educational media, we often order directly from the primary distributor. If you order multiple titles from one particular distributor, don’t be shy about asking for a discount. If you don’t ask, you won’t get it; if you do ask, they are often happy to oblige. No matter what your annual acquisitions budget for media, getting 10% off a $400 DVD is always welcome. Another way to get the best price is to make sure you are ordering from the primary distributor. I won’t name names, but there are companies who pass themselves off as primary distributors who are in fact resellers collecting a healthy markup on material available elsewhere. When in doubt, check WorldCat for the name of the publisher and distributor and then Google it to see if you can order directly from them.

If you absolutely cannot locate a vendor for a particular title, a Hail Mary pass may be in order. This can be in the form of a call to a colleague at a library that already owns the item (found via a search in WorldCat), a message to the Video-lib listserv, or an email directly to the filmmaker. You would not believe the number of times this has actually worked for me.

I don’t presume to think that everything that works for me and my library will work for you and your library, but these selection and acquisitions procedures have worked well for us and they may work well for you. I hope to have provided some practical advice for those seeking to develop their library video collections.

Further reading:


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**Biz of Acq**

*from page 62*

otherwise difficult to find and obtain: foreign films, Hollywood classics beyond *Citizen Kane* and *Gone With the Wind*, silent films, experimental and avant-garde films, and independent documentary. Thirdly, our campus resides in a fairly small town. Getting students down to the public library or a few blocks further to one of the two video stores in town gets them out of the “Carleton bubble” for a little while.

The nature of media formats also has an impact on the kind of materials I select for our collection. Video materials are, when compared with print materials, fragile and ephemeral. VHS is all but a dead format, and DVD is threatened with obsolescence by high-definition disc formats, themselves threatened with obsolescence by video-on-demand. Unless you are collecting archival materials or want to maintain a museum of playback equipment, you can’t really consider a video collection a permanent collection. Because I don’t expect permanence when selecting materials for our media collection, I concentrate on building a broad collection of less expensive materials (i.e., things I can buy from Amazon) instead of a smaller collection of expensive materials of specific interest (i.e., things I can buy from educational distributors). More bang for my buck, as it were. The key to knowing what to buy for any media collection in any library is to know your users. What’s being taught? Is there a regular class on film noir? If so, buy more films in the genre. Is your copy of *Casablanca* always checked out? Buy more Humphrey Bogart films. Does your student newspaper run film reviews? Ask the reviewers what they would like to see in your library.

You can’t always rely on others to help you with selection, though, which is why you need to know your stuff or fake it convincingly. I have a graduate degree in film studies, but it doesn’t help much when someone asks, “What good recent documentaries are there on health care in developing African countries?” I feel comfortable selecting some types of films, but will readily admit (to you, at least) that I’m at sea when it comes to selecting others. Therefore allow me to add my voice to the chorus of praise for Video Librarian, in print and online. The reviews are extraordinarily helpful and cover a wide range of titles.

If you’ve been buying media even for a little while, you’ll wonder just who you ticked off enough to be put on the mailing list of every educational film distributor on the planet. But don’t recycle those postcards, brochures, and catalogs without giving them a quick once-over. If you know of a faculty member teaching in the area of the material advertised, pass that catalog or brochure on with a note asking if they might be interested in previewing one or two of the titles. At best, you might get a recommendation for a purchase and have made a connection with one of those often elusive professors. At worst, you’ve only made your junk mail someone else’s problem.

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**Rumors**

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was with grandson Trifon Raymond Walser who was barely two weeks old — I read him five books! And, he listened intently and didn’t squirm! Even my daughter-in-law noticed and commented that he seemed riveted! A librarian in the making?!

And do you know the Japanese custom for the child’s first birthday? They put out all sorts of items that signify certain professions. They predict that the first item that the baby picks up forecasts his or her future profession. Well, I am doing that with Trifon on his first birthday, next December. And I think that all I will have for him to choose from is books! Stay tuned.

And speaking of the above, one of my classics professor friends, now retired, told me that this (laying out items for the child to choose from) is what is done when picking the Dalai Lama. The infant who goes to the correct set of holy beads is considered a serious contender. Who said that superstition was unscientific?

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