April 1998

The Art of Collection Development: Reference Style

John P. Scmitt
Regis University

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2827

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
The Art of Collection Development: Reference Style

by John P. Schmitt (Reference Librarian, Dayton Memorial Library. Regis University, Denver CO; Phone: (303)458-4597; Fax: (303) 964-5497 <jschmitt@regis.edu>

It's been said that reference librarians have a dilettante's familiarity with everything and a scholarly grasp of nothing. While not completely true on either score, this is one of the hazards of being a reference librarian. It is also one of the joys. The most rewarding thing about reference librarianship, hands down, is the fact that you become a partner in the research interests of so many people. The sheer scope of intellectual interests that present themselves at a reference desk in any one week can baffle, amuse, provoke, or encourage the most hardened of librarians: the gestation period of kangaroos; federal subsidies to advertise cigarettes overseas; pagan elements warring with Christian in Beowulf; pet food sales in Sacramento; anti-Semitism in democratic Poland.

There are some, perhaps many, librarians who are scared off by the prospect of such questions. There are others, however, who find them endlessly engaging and profoundly affirming. These topics matter to these patrons, and they have the confidence in librarians to bring them to our attention. But a reference librarian is only as good as the resources at his or her disposal and the lack of a good reference collection will undermine the best talent and motivation behind the reference desk.

Decisions, Decisions...

How do you go about deciding which titles to add to your reference collection? Just following the recommendations in Choice would outstrip the reference budgets of some libraries by the time the fiscal year was half over. Broader review sources such as American Reference Books Annual cover a staggering 1,500 new titles and editions each year. It's been suggested that ABA could only be employed to fill in gaps where some subjects were under-represented. Some librarians base their judgments on "prestige" titles and publishers; others employ a strict rule of utility.

Some librarians use an intuitive hunch and buy only those works which, in their judgment, would be "useful." How would I, as a reference selector, know which these were? The answer seemed elusive, but I used to hold the opinion that the right works would be those which I would be most inclined to use: dictionaries, thesauri, statistical works, directories of corporations, and the old standards. If the work were spoken of in a bibliographic shorthand such as "Fowler," "Wing," "Barlett's," "Roget's," "S&P" "DNIV" or "CRC," it also would become a top priority. There were two elements my simple outlook was not prepared for: the scope of the reference questions asked and casual use of the collection by library patrons, not reference librarians. You can already see from the questions above that anticipating the next reference question is like betting on the Mexican stock market. But many librarians underestimate the use of their reference collections by "go-around" users.

In many respects we are in a Golden Age of reference publishing ...

Coping Strategies

Consultation

So how do you account for the unanticipated questions and unannounced users when making reference purchase decisions? An authoritative, standard reference work is just another volume on the shelf to most users. Selection, after all, means that you choose some and bypass other publications. One strategy which helps ensure well-rounded coverage is to have input from other librarians. Many of them will be subject specialists who will be looking out for the departments and programs they represent. Routing publisher's blurbs, approval forms, and reviews from Choice to appropriate selectors helps this process along. In many reference departments, a little information sharing like this can demonstrate just how limited your budget is.

Creative Budgeting

For all but the best endowed reference collections, it is important to be able to state which types of purchases will come out of the reference budget and which should come out of a budget allocated to a teaching department. In the most general terms, a reference book with broad applications or of interest to students and researchers in more than one discipline, should ordinarily come out of the reference budget. This could include dictionaries, handbooks, general encyclopedias, almanacs, and current events sources, for example. Recommendations for books which are quite narrow or specialized are good candidates for purchase out of the funds allocated to teaching departments. Some examples might be specialized directories, bibliographies, or marketing surveys. Sometimes the difference needs to be negotiated. A department with emerging subdisciplines may feel that it has no extra cash to spare for "staid" reference books.

Cutting a Deal

Occasionally a reference title will appear which is both specialized and completely unaffordable by a single department, a title like the recent Grove Dictionary of Art. Here some reference funds will have to be tapped — and probably some other discretionary funds as well — and joined with departmental monies to make the purchase happen. An institution can help with this sort of arrangement by administering an interdisciplinary fund specifically to assist with shared purchases. An arrangement might be struck whereby the selector will find at least 40% funding for a given title and the interdisciplinary fund will cover the remainder. Such a fund might be under the authority of the Head of Collection Development or a committee of subject specialists.

My personal record is securing money from ten different funds to purchase Elsevier's Encyclopaedia of Linguistics, a title which reflected the interests of numerous departments but exceeded the ability of any one of them to fund. My university did not offer a degree in linguistics, but disciplines ranging from anthropology to philosophy had a keen interest in the area and were willing to commit small sums to make it happen.

But Collection Awareness is the Real Key

An understanding of your collection's strengths and how they relate to the needs expressed by your clientele is essential, of course. In some areas it seems that libraries cannot purchase enough reference books dealing with some subjects. In my experience, corporate directories, guides to scholarships and financial aid, resumed books, and directories of higher education would be high on the list. Libraries serving unique programs will have their own short list. But an affordable balance in reference collection development is important, too.

At a certain point, a reference buyer needs to decide how many look-alike titles are needed. If you have the companions to English literature

continued on page 30

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
published by Oxford and Cambridge, do you need one from St. James Press and Longman also? Reference book purchasing decisions can suffer from a halo effect: if one companion works well in literature, two more will make your collection that much more valuable. A buyer has to be aware that a decision to duplicate a resource is also a decision not to purchase something new. This seems obvious, but frequently needs to be articulated. I have watched reference librarians debate duplicating microfiche phone directories by purchasing the identical print editions because “a lot of people are interested in these cities.”

More problematic is purchasing in areas where you may not have clear evidence of demand. For instance, the various Jane’s book details models and technical specifications of warships, civilian and military aircraft, and the size of foreign military forces, but they may not fit into any curricular need or match up with recent reference questions. But Jane’s data is frequently cited in the press, particularly when there is a military conflict, and is used to evaluate regional balances of power.

For the reference buyer, a $355 layout for a single annual which deals just with naval warships may seem like an extravagant expense when you have curricular needs which must be met as well. You might decide this is out of scope, that you will rely on a nearby institution’s holdings, or that you will buy an edition every five or ten years just to have something on hand. (In a case like Jane’s, older volumes may even show up on sale.) (In remainder catalogs.) In making decisions like these, a reference librarian needs to weigh the relevance of the title to the curriculum, the utility of the volume as best you can predict it, and other means of getting the same kind of information, such as news reports, an association, or directly from a government agency. One should not feel as though there is only one acceptable method of accessing this information.

Similar judgment calls are made on numerous other expensive items such as directories of advertisers, advertising agencies, consultants, corporate affiliations, and congressional staffs. Some of these may seem like mainstream selections — no brainers — but frequently the information is incomplete or obsolete shortly after being published. If you doubt it, just take a look at the mergers and acquisitions information reported daily in the Wall Street Journal. Some publishers, such as Dun’s Marketing, recognize the danger of outdated information and will only lease their printed corporate directories.

At the University of Wyoming, the reference department canceled a $980 subscription to a directory and chose to rely on a corresponding Dialog file to answer questions. The online searching was done at no cost to the user and the estimated savings in the first year was over $900. Previously the title had been a standing order — an invisible cost. Since reference librarians rarely ever see an invoice, new editions on standing order arrive like jelly beans at Easter — through the charity of someone else. Addressing this specific source heads-on underlined the cost of these standing orders and vividly demonstrated why reference budgets aren’t larger.

The Role of Reviews

I’ve worked in three libraries with more than one million volumes, but I’ve never had a budget which allowed me to buy every reference book in which I was interested. In 1998 it has become that much more complex because we now have attractive electronic reference products competing for the same dollars as attractive printed reference products. Much of the angst over reference collection development stems from the sheer cost involved. A single reference book costs $86 on average in 1996. A typical 4-volume subject encyclopedia will set you back $425. If you go beyond “prestige buying” (ordering on the basis of the title alone or the publisher), you don’t make these purchase decisions lightly.

Because of their expense, reference books are more likely to be purchased on the basis of good reviews than would the traditional trade book. As with most books, however, the reviews seriously lag the publication and the temptation is to accept the publisher’s blurb at face value for lack of anything definitive and buy the work while it is still available in hardcover. Is there a way to work around both the delay and word count limits of print reviews?

A Modest Proposal: R-Net

Recently we have seen the appearance of academic listservs and affiliated Web sites which post timely reviews of new books and even invite reader response. In the academic realm, H-Net, aka Humanities and Social Sciences Online, (http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/) has been providing scholarly reviews in American and World History, diplomacy, and popular culture since 1992. They have demonstrated that it is possible to have a low-cost rapid turnaround for online book reviews and to accommodate reader response. What could librarians do for reference that might approach what H-Net has accomplished in the humanities and social sciences? What follows is a modest proposal to speed up the reviewing of reference books and to involve more voices.

The “R-Net,” as I might call it, would involve numerous reviewers from diverse areas and institutions. Librarians with subject strengths would be designated for certain in-depth reviews, but any librarian with an interest might choose to submit a review of a newly-acquired title. Significant reference works might merit multiple reviews. Reference librarians could post their responses to these reviews like so many letters to the editor, based on their own real world experience. Graphics could be employed to indicate the strength of the review and for which types of libraries a title is appropriate. With broad enough participation, R-Net would take Jim Rettig’s online review column one interactive step further (http://www.gale.com/), add multiple views, and create an ongoing dialog.

Publishers might use such a forum as a sounding board to float ideas for new reference products or to conduct market surveys. Reference librarians who respond to a marketing questionnaire through R-Net could be rewarded with virtual credits from the publisher, bibliographic frequent flyer miles if you will, for participation in such focus groups.

Should ordering on the Web ever be secure for large transactions, R-Net might feature buttons for authorized direct ordering from Gale, Reed/Bowker/Oryx and other reference publishers who would pay for a little advertising on the page. The secured ordering module would feature a linked pass-through for the earned “credits.” Does this sound far-fetched? Have you ever bought a book through Amazon Books (www.amazon.com) or posted a reader response with Book Stacks (www.books.com)?

Complicating Matters: Print vs. Electronic

A larger question looming for reference publishing is the future of print vs. electronic reference products. Several factors would seem to weigh in for the electronic format. Reference books are costly to produce and ship, or worse, to stock what’s not shipped. Many need to be updated about as often as textbooks. Users tend to need just small entries or excerpts from the larger work, making cut and paste an effective process. Three great strengths for electronic formats are a built-in capacity for indexing, the ability to link to other websites, and the cumulation of several years’ data in one file. Every reference librarian knows how hard it is to convince an undergraduate to use more than one year of a print index before surrendering and changing term paper topics. And reference librarians everywhere recognize that an interactive medium carries far greater appeal than a printed book with the same information.

On the other hand, users shouldn’t require a $2,000 workstation and a network to look up a standard industrial classification or browse an entry in Who’s Who in America. When a PC is a prerequisite for consult-
When a PC is a prerequisite for consulting common reference sources, libraries will be pressing the margins of comfort our users expect.

3.5 billion years of evolution. Squeezed into 4.8 inches.

Now you can instantly enter the fascinating world of Charles Darwin. Without lugging around half of London's Natural History Library. Just order the 1 oz. DARWIN Multimedia CD-ROM, containing over 4,000 pages of Darwin's original works, and over 800 illustrations never before integrated into the ultimate reference collection.

The rare text, illustrations, Galapagos finches, maps and drawings are faithfully captured from the original manuscripts, with commentary by noted scholar Dr. Michael Ghiselin and a video tour of Darwin's home narrated by Sir David Attenborough. Suitable for ALL AGES, Windows, Macintosh, and UNIX compatible. $49.95 (ex. S&H and sales tax) • 800 432-3766 (USA orders only) • 415 621-5746 (all orders) • 415 621-5896 (fax orders) • http://libin.com (web orders) • darwin@libin.com (email orders) • ISBN 1-889175-01-3

Lightbinders, Inc.