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Biz of Acq — How to Select a Vendor for an Approval Plan: Through Friendship, Personality or an RFP?

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The selection of a vendor when starting a comprehensive approval plan can appear to be a daunting task for many librarians unfamiliar with the process. Some choose a vendor whom they know and trust based mostly on familiarity and personal likes. Others have chosen the more objective and less familiar path of writing an RFP, which is more time consuming and demanding for both the librarians and the vendors that choose to respond. Both paths have their pros and cons and are not mutually exclusive. However, in this post-Enron world, librarians would do well to be more objective in the selection of a vendor who will play a critical role in the overall management and evaluation of their library collections, as well as partake in a substantial portion of our budget.

The benefits of an approval plan are well known. For example, it can significantly reduce the costs of acquiring books through discounted prices. The timely arrival of new imprints as well as bibliographic notification slips enables selectors and other librarians to keep abreast of the latest publications. Approval plans automatically bring in a good selection of publications based on the subject areas you have pre-selected, allowing library selectors and acquisitions staff more time to spend on hard-to-find titles. Approval plans are also known to reduce labor costs: in an article published almost twenty years ago, R. Charles Wittenberg wrote, “Studies have demonstrated that the cost savings achieved simply by receiving books without incurring the expense of an order are at a minimum several dollars per volume.” This holds true even more today when librarians are asked to do more with less, and good library staff is not always easy to find. Additionally, many enlightened librarians are also taking advantage of book processing services offered by the larger vendors, such as “ready-to-shelve” books, which increases the cost savings of an approval plan.

The advantages of selecting a vendor through an RFP vary, though perhaps not as well known by librarians. An RFP or Request for Proposal is essentially a competitive procurement process, or bidding process, meant to ensure a fair and objective selection of a vendor. It is also a contract between parties, in this case between the library and the vendor. The writing of this document gives the library the ability to determine what services it requires. “It allows for a fair and objective selection of vendors and their offerings. However, the library can make the commitment to service that only serious, well-trained personnel can guarantee. It must also have good, established relationships with hundreds, even thousands of publishers, plus an excellent financial record. A vendor must have a high level of technical expertise and be willing to devote personnel time and work to this process until the day when the review is completed and the contract is signed.”

So, why not just Joe Q, who has been one of your favorite vendors for years and who tells you that his company can manage an approval plan for you, proceed without further scrutiny? For the simple reason that it takes years of experience to set up a company that can make the commitment to service that only serious, well-trained personnel can guarantee. It must also have good, established relationships with hundreds, even thousands of publishers, plus an excellent financial record. A vendor must have a high level of technical expertise and be willing to devote personnel time and work to this process until the day when the review is completed and the contract is signed. Depending on the size of the plan, it may take a couple of years or more to receive the return rate of an approval plan to an acceptable level, by which time the process or sub-processes will have endured much “tweaking.” In order to achieve this the librarian must rely on the prior training and experience of the vendor’s expertise. Would you hire Joe Q, alone or was the little store can do this for you?

The writing of an RFP should be done either by a librarian with experience in this area, or a committee of librarians who represent both public and technical services. Consult with your purchasing department and ask for their help and participation, too. In the RFP there should be a section requiring financial statements from the vendor. These are very important. Usually these statements are confidential and are sent only to the purchasing department, where they will be evaluated.

Ask two or three vendors who are experienced with approval plans to come to the library and speak about their services. These presentations will provide an opportunity for initial evaluation and comparisons between vendors and their offerings. Does a vendor have a good intuitive system that allows searching and selection by title, author, subject, or ISBN? 

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Does this system permit online ordering? Does it allow you to "force" a forthcoming book into the approval shipment? Does it tell you when a book is out-of-print or out-of-stock? These are important services that most major vendors can offer, and they save staff time. You may want to invite teaching faculty, library staff and members of the administration to these presentations, to inform them of the changes that may take place. Make it clear that these changes will ensure greater objectivity in selection, and better balance in the library's collection.

For most college libraries and some mid-size university libraries, it may be a good idea to consolidate all purchases for U.S. imprints with one vendor. The more money committed to the RFP, the greater the discount will be. Some librarians also include standing orders in the RFP. Consolidation reduces staff time and labor, reduces the chance of duplication of books received, and gives greater influence with the vendor. A large, major vendor can supply almost everything required, in terms of domestic imprints, and by virtue of the company's size, can offer more services.

A most important requirement to include in the RFP is that each vendor must provide a list of three client references of an institution similar to yours in size and scope. Reference calls can be made after the vendor has submitted a response to the RFP, to verify the vendor's own information and to ask about services. Don't be afraid to ask questions about response time, ability to fill orders, and satisfaction with the vendor. If they had to do it over again, would they keep the same vendor? If not, why not?

After selecting a vendor, the most important point to remember is that the overall success of an approval plan depends largely on the quality of the plan's profile. A profile may be composed of two or more sub-profiles, one for each discipline. If carefully and thoughtfully developed, the profile should cover all those areas as thoroughly and accurately as possible. This is where the training and skill of the vendor's staff become critical. Not many librarians are trained to draw up an approval plan profile. A well-trained new titles coordinator can save you many hours of grief, and through their experience and guidance make suggestions that will lead to the creation of a successful approval plan.

**Endnotes**

1. By "comprehensive" I mean an approval plan that would cover all the disciplines in the curriculum of a college or mid-size university library, the type of library for which this article is intended. This is in contrast to an approval plan that covers only one specialized subject area or discipline, such as law or medicine. For this type of plan, it may be necessary to go to a vendor specializing in the subject area.


3. Wilkinson, Frances C., and Thorson, Connie. Capers. The RFP Process: Effective Management of the Acquisition of Library Materials. Englewood, Colorado: Library Unlimited, 1998, p. 4. This is a worthwhile publication to consult, and many of its recommendations can be adapted to your library's RFP.


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