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Academic Book Trends - The Books Libraries Don't Buy

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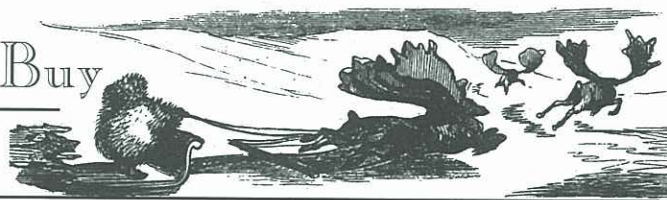
Times change. (I've accumulated over twenty years as a book vendor, and I'm celebrating by allowing myself an obvious observation or two.) A case in point:

When I began working in Approvals, we spent a lot of time winnowing through publishers' catalogs, sifting out "non-scholarly" titles that we knew academic libraries would never want. We felt we were carefully preserving the quality of our title database, keeping out the lightweight (collecting antiques), the popular (biographies of rock stars), and the fringe (diseases from outer space). I've been told that this sort of winnowing was also characteristic of libraries twenty years ago, conceptualized as building a "worthy" collection.

Twenty years ago, libraries could only check a vendor's title coverage by looking each title up on microfiche — and no one particularly wanted to do that. For one thing, books displayed only under the main entry and the title (if the title wasn't the main entry, that is), and finding them was not always easy. The person searching had to know the rules.

Two things happened, as time went on, to move us away from selectivity about the books we profiled, and towards comprehensiveness. One change was that information became available electronically — microfiche was replaced by Internet and then by Web displays, and keyword searching became possible, so that no one needed to know the "rules" in order to locate a given title. The second change was that libraries suffered staff cutbacks that made it necessary to rely more and more on vendors for information and assistance in selecting books.

When I began working in Approvals, our standard presentation included the reassurance that having an Approval plan would not replace ANY staff — it would deliver, automatically, the core (we usually said 80%) of new titles in each library's areas of interest, so that librarians could do book-in-hand review, and reject unsuitable or unwanted titles. Automatic receipt of wanted titles would free existing staff to devote more time to chasing down the elusive or specialized titles which made each library's collection unique. Approval plans covered mainstream publishers and worthy, academic titles; library bibliographers and selectors handled the non-mainstream.

Long ago, it was assumed that all selectors would review approval shipments, and that they all wanted to see more books than they actually kept. Long ago, I was told that a profile generating low or no approval returns was by definition too restrictive — what was the point of having an approval plan, if you couldn't disapprove of some books?

Times change.

Over the years, the burden has fallen more and more on vendors to expand Approval coverage to any publisher a library nominates. Librarians want to search a vendor's database, and to find any title they seek. They may not buy the title, but they want to find it and discover as much about it as they possibly can. Similarly, vendors are charged with covering all titles in publishers' catalogs — no more winnowing out the unwanted. Every title should be represented, if only by a note explaining why it is not suitable for Approval coverage.

But while every title should be in the database, only suitable and wanted titles should arrive in the library on approval. Most selectors no longer "enjoy" the privilege of returning unwanted titles — more often, they resent receiving unwanted books at all, and ask their vendors to be more careful. A return rate as low as five percent used to seem reasonable, but now is often viewed as a form of vendor sloppiness. In fact, true Approval plans (where unwanted books can be returned) are now being transmuted, more and more, into "shelf-ready" plans, where books are processed by the vendor prior to shipment, and therefore cannot be returned. For libraries, the savings that come with shelf-ready processing often outweigh the cost of keeping a few unwanted titles — so an Approval plan that has a very low return rate is a good candidate to become a shelf-ready "blanket" plan.

Recently, in response to RFPs from libraries, I compiled some statistics on the titles we profiled through our Approval plan, and some additional statistics on the titles we shipped. I had not given the matter too much thought before, but I suddenly wondered: if I subtracted the titles we shipped from all the titles we profiled, what would be left? The titles nobody bought. I wondered what those books had in common, if anything. Were they all in similar subject areas? Were they all from similar publishers?

Here is what I found. Over all, about twenty percent of the titles we added to our database were not billed to any customer libraries. (Since I'm stating the obvious, I will pause here to mention that covering these books was arguably not the most cost-effective operation we performed last year.) Unsold titles clustered in the following subject areas (in descending order of unsold-ness): Computer Science, Business, Law, Fiction, Home Economics, Military and Naval Science, and Library Science. Academic book vendors don't represent the entire book-buying universe, of course, and no doubt computer books, business books, cookbooks, and novels are bought far more readily by individuals than by aca-

demic libraries. I do find the presence of Library Science on the list intriguing, though. I suppose librarians and library students support this market through individual purchase.

Just as the un-purchased books clustered in particular subject areas, so too highly-purchased books tended to group together. In Political Science (all J classes), for instance, 97% of the titles were bought, and in Education (all L classes), 91% were purchased. At a more specific subject level, a publisher trying to sell to academic libraries might profitably view the market as "hungry" for titles in:

BQ	Buddhism (95% purchased)	
GN	Anthropology (94%)	
H	General Social Science (95%)	
HN	Social History (98%)	
HT	Urban Studies & Race Relations (100%!)	
JF	Public Administration (96%)	
JK	U.S. Political Science (92%)	
LB	Educational Theory (93%)	
N	General Visual Arts (91%)	
P	Philology & Linguistics (92%)	
PT	Germanic Literature (96%)	
QB	Astronomy (95%)	
QD	Chemistry (93%)	
QL	Zoology (92%)	

As might be predicted, university presses published fewer un-purchased titles than did trade presses. Almost ninety-seven percent of university press titles were purchased by at least one library. (Before university presses went into the regionalia business in a big way during the last few years, I would imagine that percentage was even higher.) But if twenty percent of all titles are not purchased, and nearly every university press title is purchased, then the rate for trade titles must be correspondingly worse than average. And it is: about thirty percent of non-university press titles are not purchased by even one library.

Two final thoughts demand mention here. First, libraries have every right and reason to require that vendors maintain a comprehensive title database, and vendors will go on doing so. Second, the myth that Approval plans cause library collections to become more and more homogeneous is just that: a myth. In a future column (perhaps "The Books Few Libraries Buy"), I'll explore the homogeneity issue further. For now, suffice it to say that if libraries do tend to purchase the same books (a supposition I question), it isn't because Approval plans are forcing them to do so. Vendors would dearly love it if every Approval customer bought a copy of every book. But they don't. ✿