Library Perspective, Vendor Response

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Column Editors’ Note: This column for Against the Grain is devoted to discussing issues affecting library acquisitions, library vendors and the services and products they supply to academic libraries, and the publishing marketplace as a whole. It is an ongoing conversation between a book vendor representative, Robin Champieux, and an academic librarian, Steven Carrico. — RC and SC

Steve: It was good seeing you at the Charleston Conference as it celebrated its 30th year. I can remember when the conference was small enough to be held in the basement of the Lightsey Center. Even then it was my favorite library conference. This year’s conference was really good, yet again, but the overlying theme might easily have been renamed, “All About Patron Driven Acquisitions.” Lots of discussion about PDAs and how they’re influencing the library world: from their impact on budgets to traditional collection development to the publishing industry itself. It was all the buzz.

Robin: There definitely was a lot of programming devoted to demand-driven acquisitions and its impact on various spheres. I think the topic’s prominence reflects a few trends and developments: the funding crises many institutions are trying to manage and some through more non-traditional workflows, like DDA; the increasing use and experience with such non-traditional workflows; and a growing acknowledgement from vendors and publishers that they must find viable strategies for responding to these rapid changes and new needs.

Steve: OK, let’s just say the library of the future no longer was the content broker and buyer of scholarly materials for the academic community. You then asked, “what kinds of services and value is it delivering?”

Robin: I think you’re right, for some publishers and resources, selling directly to students and faculty would be unsustainable. But, as Rick Anderson argues, there are resources for which a direct-to-reader model is more viable and manageable, such as journals with relatively low site license fees.” Also, you are ignoring a very important incentive: publishers rely on the library market; if they can no longer do so or not without accepting steep revenue declines, then seeking out new markets and business models could be seen as a necessity.

Steve: Why is it so hard to get libraries to reconsider the business model we have been working with for so many years? I mean libraries, publishers, vendors — need to acknowledge is that we — libraries, librarians, publishers, and resources, selling directly to students and faculty would be unsustainable. But, as Rick Anderson argues, there are resources for which a direct-to-reader model is more viable and manageable, such as journals with relatively low site license fees.” Also, you are ignoring a very important incentive: publishers rely on the library market; if they cannot no longer do so or not without accepting steep revenue declines, then seeking out new markets and business models could be seen as a necessity.

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Steve: Yes! I do believe we can be optimistic, but that comes with being engaged, realistic, and creative, skills and qualities, thank you for saying that. I think we need to save a detailed discussion of Open Access for a future column, but you make a good point and identify another factor influencing the relationships between and in between libraries, publishers, and users.

Robin: I also think it’s important that we don’t see these possible futures as mutually exclusive. For instance, will the growth of OCA initiatives and locally-hosted repositories replace publisher online journals and resources, or will both access points be important and expected? If it is both, as I think it may be, is the library providing access to both, or are users buying the publisher access directly?

Steve: Aha, an excellent set of questions, and the ball is back in my court. But you’re right, let’s save the Open Access topic for another time. Rather, let’s say the academic publishing model is not going to blow up entirely anytime soon; then the question “what kinds of services and value are the library delivering?” really gets tough. Particularly if we are led to believe that such library activities as selecting books and materials, bibliographic instruction, cataloging, or managing the reference desk are going the way of the card catalog. Let’s see, if librarians of the future aren’t engaged in those activities, what’s left? Study hall monitors? Boy, that’s a bright future! Personally I believe that at least in the foreseeable future libraries will remain content brokers and that librarians will be doing various types of collection development and selecting (perhaps focusing on specialized areas and collection strengths); will be doing cataloging (but again very specialized); and will be doing reference and instruction, although probably focusing more on virtual interaction and distance learning. The value the librarians will continue to bring to users is an expertise in all areas of information discovery. How do you see it?
While the academic library where I am is in the thick of the eBook revolution and approaching patron-driven acquisitions, we have not yet abandoned traditional book selection via the time-tested book approval plan, although at times it seems like it is abandoning us. For the library selectors who still have the responsibility to build a print collection in their subject areas, the approval plan is a very useful tool.

The recent demise of a free-standing Blackwell, through its incorporation into YBP, leaves it and Coutts as the only complete academic approval plans in the country. There are still some smaller plans, but nothing absolutely suitable to large research libraries. So there are a lot of folks out there redoing profiles, reworking their workflows into those of new vendors, and working out a lot of technical details. Redoing profiles quickly is like translating a lot of complicated books, including poetry, from one language to another. It is bound to result in a lot of miscommunication.

When companies grow rapidly through the acquisition of other companies, or by the demise of competitors, or just by a growing market, it always results in Herculean efforts for any of them to keep pace with all those new customers. New staff may be hired quickly in anticipation, or soon afterwards, but it has always been my experience that new employees in this kind of work encounter a pretty significant learning curve. Sometimes companies cut corners by trying to do more with the same.

I worked for a subscription vendor many years ago, back in the days when print journals were the only medium for journals. The vendor hit at a time when business went through the roof. Libraries were still being built, money was the only medium for journals. The vendor time must be more limited when there is such an influx of new customers. This process combined with the rise of patron-driven acquisitions and eBook acquisitions as they are rocketing makes for very busy acquisitions librarians as well. It is all supposed to be getting easier and needing fewer people to get things done, but not yet where I am.

In a traditional approval plan, one is dealing with physical objects, and most of the elements of the process remain the same as they were at the beginning of all approval plans. Only now, in our case and many others, there is a lot more than just books. For us, PromptCat Marc records precede the arrival of the approval books. They all come preprocessed and ready to hit the approval shelves and shortly thereafter appear in the library shelves with a check of the invoice and minor copy cataloging procedures. These, coupled with some Edifact ordering for firm orders, make for a lot of work on both sides, and a lot of time to get things right. It takes a lot of time and effort on both sides to get these services and the procedures changed to accommodate the new vendor’s operation.

I know a lot of large libraries have given up on book approval plans, some unwillingly due to financial constraints, others because book buying has shrunk so much in tumtum almost completely to digital material, that the activity is no longer viable. In a lot of libraries, however, such as ours, a book approval plan is part of the mix of acquisition of materials of all kinds. There are some subject areas which will be the slowest to march off into eBookland. Art History and Modern Languages and Literatures, areas for which I select, are two of these. Other areas where a lot of books are still bought are History and the Social Sciences. We still have a pretty comprehensive approval plan, both in books and slips.

Niche vendors who provide approval plans, such as those that supply exhibition catalogs for art libraries and foreign vendors which provide language specific books, along with music, and perhaps some other specialty areas I’m forgetting, may continue supplying academic libraries with books through approval plans. Art history books may be the last to go. The reproduction of images in books are still superior to what can be digitized, and perhaps as important is the fact that a lot of the rights to the images are difficult to trace, and that has to be done for them to be digitized and available.

The approval plan arose during the Richard Abel era when libraries were building large comprehensive library collections to support teaching and research in all disciplines. There were no digital resources, and most areas were still very book- and print serial-dependent. When approval plans started up, during that era of “forklift librarianship,” they were considered quite revolutionary and were disdained by many who were given over to collection building through individual book selection and acquisition. However, it was very time- and work-intensive and slow as well. This was the selection entirely book-by-book based quite a lot on book reviews, some of which did not appear much later than the book. The New York Times Book Review was a main tool of selection, as were the listings in The Chronicle of Higher Education. These sources are still heavily used, but they still are labor intensive. Approval plans often track these sources and they can be built into a plan. Personally, I still use book reviews for my area of Art History. I catch important titles that seem to appear nowhere but there.

One area where a book approval plan still seems to win out in acquiring hardcover books rather than wait for the eBook has to do with the rapidity of publication in that medium. Some eBooks simply don’t come out immediately, and being current in many fields, including History is still important.

The eBook revolution will be nearly a total victory come too soon. I am not smart enough to know how soon that will be. Until then a well-functioning book approval plan continues as an excellent selection and acquisition tool, and one that accomplishes the job with great efficiency, especially when coupled with books cataloged with PromptCat and then preprocessed.

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Endnote

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