The Core Nemesis

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by Chuck Hamaker (LSU)

I was delving along the Internet one day and ran across a posting from Chuck Hamaker. I said to him, I said, “Chuck, why don’t you develop this into something for Against the Grain?” The rest is written below. Thank you, Mr. Hamaker! and Happy Terminology. — Yr. Ed.

One of the many buzz “phrases” we are all living with is Access vs. Ownership. The phrase and its companion applied to library collections — “Just in Time vs. Just In Case” really irritate me. They seem to set up a complementary pair, a logical construct that says if A=B than C=D. Ownership of library materials = just in case purchasing (you don’t know you really need it) and Access (as “opposed” to ownership) = just in time acquisition (when you know you need it). Both these phrases and their corollaries are no-brainers. That dog don’t hunt.

Access vs. Ownership

Librarians who have just discovered we don’t own everything our patrons need, seem to think this means there is somehow a newly discovered quick and CHEAP solution to the age-old puzzle of what to buy. If you assume this, you are forgetting library history. We have always provided access to the universe of publications in the world. The first rank of purchases of any academic library has always been bibliographic access materials. Since the late 1970’s most research libraries have been acutely aware of how little of the published universe they could actually own. And since at least the 60’s most academic libraries have put a premium on bibliographic access tools. What is NEW today is the speed with which we CAN provide access to material which previously could only be obtained with lengthy delays. New bibliographic access tools, table of contents services (TOCS) and document delivery options provide a link of citation to cited work that was impossible previously. The ease of access and the range and sophistication of bibliographic tools is new. The concept of access to what we don’t own is NOT NEW.

What is new in this phrase is the challenge to consciously design our collections not just for what we can afford, but for what is most reasonable in-house and what is most economical for purchased delivery. It is not so much the VERSUS that we are worried about, but whether the concept of core in-house material is changing. And I think the answer to that is a definite yes. So instead of access vs. ANYTHING, we should be asking, what is the core material we need for in-house use, not only now but in the foreseeable future. And what specific materials does it make more sense to provide via access services for our patrons.

Core has traditionally meant something derived from a sort of best books theory. What I see happening is that the best books theory is becoming something else: what do we need physical access to because of format (photographic reproductions perhaps), frequency of use, type of use, cost effectiveness, collecting mission of our institution AND — what is most cost effective for our PARTICULAR institution to provide through access services? Because of this, planning for access services is as important to collection development as ownership decisions. Both the bibliographic pointer and HOW we acquire the item described are first-level collection development decision points.

The fly in the ointment is that access services seems to be a “public” services field because of historical associations with Interlibrary Loan, and bibliographic services seem to be a “cataloging” decision. That kind of thinking has to change to make the most rational allocation and use of “collection” resources which traditionally have encompassed both of these angles — ease of access and bibliographic pointers. In developing collections, context is everything. And the context is now broader than ever before. The context includes “insurance” which is part of what external access services provide. We cannot “develop” collections intelligently today without considering not only the cost of insurance, but the cost of leasing or renting. You don’t buy a car or a home without planning for the “associated” costs, insurance, utilities, upkeep, etc. And you don’t run a business without considering the cost for advertising your wares — our bibliographic “control” counterpart.

Another metaphor may help. When we are at home, we have our own car. However, when we fly away from home for a brief stay, we rent a car. Access services are much the same. We have patrons who are “flying” into areas that may be peripheral or may be more cost effective to “rent” — lease, if you will, for a while. We don’t buy a new car every time we go to a distant location. Some of the in-house demands our collections now fulfill are quite simply, distant locations. Some serial titles are “far” away and how we define that is the next major challenge for collection development. If Collection Development doesn’t rise to the challenge, someone else will define what is appropriate for “access” for us. (Maybe even publishers, who will decide based on THEIR goals, which may have nothing to do with OUR goals).

Core titles, rather than being an intellectual exercise in “collection building” are likely to become an effort to define heavy (pick your definition) use areas vs. distant use areas. Do we pay the mortgage (serial purchases) or rent the apartment. Depends on our own resources (money) and how long we are staying.

Just in Time vs. Just In Case

This inventory control/manufacturing derived jargon gives me a cramp in my my know what. I’ve seen librarians (not Collection Development folks) ANGRY because they believe that less than 50% of what libraries add are things that people want to use. This is a case of mistaken identity. It is a hangover from the Pittsburgh study and has nothing to do with my experience of today’s collection decisions. There may still be a few libraries out there collecting for the hypothetical user of the year 2050, but they are few and far between. In fact,
with the advent of the on-line catalog, keyword searching, gophers, CD-ROMs and everything else in our current panoply of tricks, MY collection sees 50% of what we add in a given year circulating within the first twelve months of acquisitions. If you look at the publication in ATG of "library bestselling" titles you will find that it ain't the public library stuff being used, it's "hard" academic titles that are being used the most in academic libraries.

The leisurely decision-making process, that so-called elitist activity - deciding what to add or not to add - is no longer a back room operation. Our decisions and their results are publicly available almost immediately. And what have we learned from making selection decisions in a fishbowl? They want it and they want it now! I haven't added a "just in case" title for so long I wouldn't recognize it unless it bit me.

Cases in point. Khadaffi put out as a "gift" his little green book which was a guide for the true believer and revolutionary. That was about 6 months before Reagan sent the bombers to Tripoli. There was hardly time for the "gift" pamphlet to make its way into the collection before it was a hot item. The same thing happened with those "esoteric" titles that Khomeini issued on the atrocities Hussein and his troops perpetrated during the Iran-Iraq war. Because those books came out while the Imam was still alive, they were sort of a tenuous gift when they walked into our libraries. Hey, surprise, they are front and center stage today.

And that is what has changed. We are not adding "just in case" even in these two examples of esoterica (or esoterica) but barely "just in time". The "just in time vs just in case" rhetoric has been used to support the concept of a massive move to document delivery service. For "Collection development has moved out of the backroom and onto the front desk."

my money, professional, conscientious and above all curious, selectors still provide the best "just in time" delivery we can provide.

The world is changing, but the basic principles of intelligent selection are not. They are expanding. And these options must be integrated into our selection decisions.

"Just in Time" is the kind of additions most of us are making now. Our circulation statistics prove it. In fact, we get any closer to just in time, and you can kiss research collections good-bye. The stuff we are adding is so hot it sizzles on the shelf and is snatched off faster than a special at McDonald's. Take a look at what we are "replacing" right now. I don't know about your library, but I'm willing to bet that a fair amount of your replacements are "vintage" 1987 titles. I know I'm replacing more of what I added in 1987 than from any other period of time in our collections. Of course the online catalog lets me know when I added it - I don't have to guess anymore.

And this is my final point (honest). The OPAC changes our knowledge of our collections, of the results of our decisions, and the pressure for sound selection decisions. Collection development has moved out of the backroom and onto the front desk. Even a cursory study of circulation and replacement patterns confirms this trend. For my library and I suspect for yours as well, we are adding books just in time, and we are making ownership decisions because access to the titles is needed — NOW. And as our understanding of this new and dynamic environment improves, we will provide coherent planned leadership into distant access arenas, into services that link the bibliographic citation with the bibliographic item — just in case.