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Great Expectations (With Thanks To Joyce McDonough)

by **Sandra K. Paul** (President, SKP Associates)

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Some time ago, the folks at SISAC (the Serials Industry Systems Advisory Committee of the Book Industry Study Group for those of you new to *ATG*) realized that there is a major difference between what publishers consider to be their "publication patterns" and the publication patterns found in library systems which form the basis for acquisition librarians' delivery expectations. **Joyce McDonough** (Columbia University Library) agreed to chair an exploration of these matters, calling it "Great Expectations" (thanks for the title, Joyce!).

An outgrowth of her concerns was a session of the ALA ALCTS Serials Section Research Libraries Discussion Group entitled "GREAT EXPECTATIONS: Predictive Check-In" during ALA Midwinter 1995 in Philadelphia. Some very interesting facts were revealed in that session. Two among them are:

- **Sue Malawski** of John Wiley reported that there is LESS likelihood of Wiley publishing the next issue of, let's say a quarterly journal, exactly three months after the date of the last issue of the same journal than on any other date.
- **Fritz Schwartz** of Faxon noted that the Serials Holding Record patterns field has only a handful of alternatives, while Faxon's records show hundreds. He compared the library set to a noun, whereas, when the action takes place, the verb is the publisher's actual pattern of publication (I particularly liked that, Fritz!).

- **Joyce McDonough** and various members of the audience reported on the difficulty of getting their library systems vendors to understand the changes required for back room operations such as serial check-in.

What became clear in the course of the discussion is that publishers such as Wiley CAN, TODAY, send subscription agents (and libraries, if they were interested) proposed publication dates for future issues of their journals. Those dates can be "ball park" guesses a year ahead, but become more and more realistic as the publication data actually approaches. Finally, once the journal content is finalized, these publishers can provide the actual dates that copies will be shipping from the printer AND the actual date that happened, after the fact. The reason that Wiley and the other publishers which are members of the International Committee on Electronic Data Interchange for Serials (ICEDIS) are willing to provide this information is simple — they want to stop having to research and respond to claims for journal issues which have not yet been printed and shipped. Sue made it very clear that she IS, TODAY providing this information to those subscription agent members of ICEDIS interested in receiving it. Yet, she is not seeing a reduction in claims for unpublished issues. "Why," she asked?

The answer is clearly that the library systems are NOT receiving Sue's predictive publication dates, but are relying on the publication pattern and date of the last issue to create a claim for the next one. How can we get the systems to rely on this meaningful information rather than a less-than-accurate publication pattern and previous issue date? Should publishers be sending this information directly to library systems, or should the subscription agents now receiving it send it on? Or, should subscription agents' computer systems be programmed to stop

a claim before it reaches the publisher and "advise" the library system of the expected publication due date?

As was pointed out by several of those attending the ALA session, it's much easier to program a computer system to send out information than it is to program one to receive and act appropriately upon the data it is receiving. What became clear in the course of this meeting was that if we want to fulfill 1) publishers' great expectations that their provision of shipping dates will reduce the number of unnecessary claims they receive and 2) librarians' great expectation that they are claiming an issue AFTER it was published AND BEFORE copies are no longer available, we have to better understand what information library systems CAN and SHOULD receive and what they should do about it once it is received! If nothing more was accomplished than having everyone in that room understand this concept, the morning was meaningful. The fact that all of you reading this column now know this, too, is even better! NOW, if we can get the library system user groups to concentrate on the information they could receive and what to do with it, we'll fulfill EVERYONE's great expectations! To this end, SISAC continues to work with librarians, subscription agents, publishers and library systems vendors to obtain the benefits of standardized electronic commerce. ☛