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Biz of Acq: Negative Decisions

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Negative Decisions

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NEGATIVE DECISIONS

by **Sandra A. Beehler**

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Among all the mail that comes into the library each week is a fair number of unsolicited books, serials and other miscellanies that have to be sent to selectors for a decision about adding them to the collection. Once a decision has been made to add something to the collection, it goes the normal route of acquisitions, cataloging and processing on its journey to the shelf. For both acquisitions and collection development, knowing what is not added to the collection can be just as important as what turns up in the public catalog.

In the normal course of a week, I look at hundreds of pieces of advertising mail. Since these materials are searched before being sent to the selector, valuable time can be saved when a negative decision has already been made and recorded. These items can be weeded out by a searcher, so that the selector's time is not wasted handling the same materials over and over again.

Libraries receive many unsolicited serial and monograph titles each year. Once a negative decision has been made regarding a specific title, the record of that decision instructs receipts/serials personnel what to do with the title should another copy appear. The negative decision record is particularly helpful with government documents in cases where more than one publication is attached to the same item number and the library does not wish to add all those titles to their collection. The record of a negative decision can prove useful when the main series has been added but not a particular sub-series.

The first step in recording negative decisions is to develop criteria for which types of negative decisions should be recorded. Obviously, out of the thousands of titles that are published and advertised every year, it would be next to impossible to record every one that wasn't ordered. The library needs to consider carefully what information will be pertinent to future collection development decisions. Some libraries record only

serial titles — periodicals and monographic series. Other libraries record all negative decisions for titles received on their approval plans. Others record negative decisions on slips sent by vendors such as Ballen, Blackwell or Rothman. Selection may be limited by subject area — for instance, since I am in a law library I record only law-related titles. For monographs, major sets only would be chosen for inclusion in a negative decision file. Price might be another criterion or decisions can be made on a case-by-case basis following a broad set of guidelines.

Another factor to consider when creating a negative decision file would be the amount of staff time that can be devoted to creating these records. The library must also consider the physical capacity of the online or paper system in which you record the information. At Cornell, the decision regarding which negative decisions are to be recorded online is the responsibility of the collection development team or the acquisitions librarian. The criteria are designed to limit the number of titles added to the online catalog. Decisions are expected to conform to the library's general collection policies and budget considerations.

The next determination required in this process concerns the format of the negative decision record and who will actually do the work of creating the record. At Cornell it became obvious to those of us involved in the planning process that we did not want to spend a great amount of time creating these records. It may be most convenient for library staff to simply use a record already existing in one of the bibliographic utilities. However for other collection development librarians, a minimal bibliographic level record would be satisfactory. At Cornell, we decided to use Library of Congress records or member records from the RLIN database, but drop subject headings so as not to clutter our local indexes. Libraries

may also want to drop some, if not all, added entries. If a library is considering adding negative decision records to its online catalog the project planners should experiment to determine the effects on indexing and the interface with other online utilities. For instance, we found out that a link between periodical indexes available to the public and the library's periodical holdings was retrieving negative decision records. This glitch occurred because our system was still searching by the ISSN, which we had not deleted from our negative decision records.

Other elements of information that might be considered for inclusion in a negative decision record would be the name or initials of the person responsible for the negative decision, the reason for the decision, and the date of the decision. If the decision concerns a title that was requested by a patron, that information should be added. It's a good idea to state briefly the reason for a negative decision, so that it can be justified or explained if questioned at a later date.

Usually the receipts division takes responsibility for putting the negative decision records into the system — though that may depend on who is responsible for adding records to an online catalog. Here at Cornell, a cataloger adds negative decisions when the only information available is taken from an advertisement. However, if the piece is physically present, the acquisitions section is responsible for adding the record.

Whether to add these decisions to the online catalog depends on a number of fac-

continued on page 69

Biz of Acq
from page 68

tors. The most important factor is whether such records can be suppressed from public view. There may be excellent reasons for the public to know about what the library is not adding — after all, we have public notes informing them that titles have been canceled. At our institution, however, the majority view seems to be that showing negative decisions would frustrate the average library user. For most libraries, adding negative decision records to the catalog remains the most convenient way to provide a central record that is accessible only to the library staff. If the library can't include these records in the local bibliographic database, they may want to create a separate computer file that could be accessed by the appropriate staff. Keeping the file in computerized form makes it easier to use and maintain, particularly if the file can be accessed through a network. The file could even be kept on 3X5 cards, as we did at Cornell for many years. What form the negative decision file finally takes depends as we stated earlier, on an individual library's needs, time, and resources available. The maintenance of the negative decision file should be the final step considered during the planning process. One important consideration will be whether or not it is possible to mark negative decisions in your system so that

they can be deleted at a later time. If it is possible, such encoding represents an ideal situation. The important question to consider is how long this information will remain useful to your collection development decisions. It may be desirable to keep negative decisions on serials indefinitely, while deleting the monographic records after a specified period of years. For unsolicited serial titles, some libraries delete their negative decision records after a year or two when no additional issues have been received.

In conclusion, the savings in staff time and online search costs, recording negative decisions can be very beneficial. Such information is useful to both collection development and receipts and acquisitions staff. With the high volume of titles passing over everyone's desk these days, it makes sense to have the "memory" of what gets discarded or refused, in an institutional database rather than relying on individuals' recall. The possibility of overloading the catalog can be minimized through careful planning, both for what information regarding negative decisions is recorded and the establishment of a regular schedule for maintenance. All these factors combine so that a negative decision file provides the institution with a valuable resource that supports an intelligent, cost-efficient, and intellectually defensible collection development program. 🐾

Profiles Encouraged:

Celia Scher Wagner

Early on: I was born in Seattle and raised on Mercer Island, a suburb where the local newspaper ran an article on stolen pet rabbits. (The headline was "Parents Stolen" and the article was written from the point of view of the orphaned baby bunnies.)

And then: I graduated from Yale in 1977 with a B.A. in English and a teaching certificate, taught briefly in the wilds of Washington state, fled to Portland, stuffed envelopes for the State of Oregon, and then joined Blackwell in 1978.

Family: Husband Rick and nine-year-old daughter Anne Marie, plus a wonderful extended family.

Favorite accomplishment: I once got to play the title role in a production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Other life: I choreograph high school musicals.

Pastimes: Cooking, dancing, reading, writing letters, having friends over.

Pet peeve: I dislike bullies. Also, in the way some people can't stand a crooked picture, I am undone by cute misspellings: the "Kleen 'N' Korner" laundromat bugs me, but not as much as the local establishment named "Clancy's Country Citchen." Aaak! I'm sorry I brought it up!

Biggest surprise: Labor and delivery.

Lifestyle shared by only 3% of the population: We don't have a TV.

Notable social liability: We don't have a TV.

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The Planning Committee for the 1995 Conference includes **Barbara Dean** (Fairfax County Public Library) bdean@Leo.vsla.edu, **Heather Miller** (SUNY-Albany) hm766@cns.vax.albany.edu, **Cerise Oberman** (SUNY-Plattsburgh), **Katina Strauch** (College of Charleston) and **Judy Webster** (University of Tennessee Library). The Preconference Coordinator is Julie Nilson (Indiana University) 812-855-1666, nilson@indiana.edu.

Send ideas by **June 30, 1995** to **Judy Webster**, Head, Acquisitions and Processing Team; University of Tennessee Library; 1015 Volunteer Blvd.; Knoxville, TN 37996-1000. Phone (615) 974-4431; FAX (615) 974-2708; Internet: Webster@UTKLIB.LIB.UTK.EDU. 🐾