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International Dateline-The National Acquisitions Group

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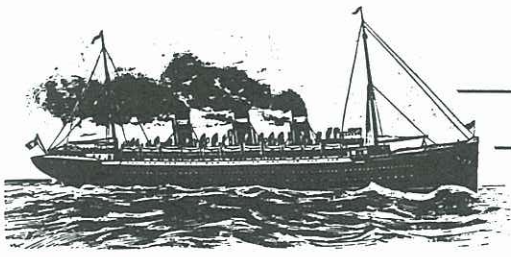
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International Dateline

The National Acquisitions Group

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Library/Book Trade Groups: The National Acquisitions Group Experience by Jim Vickery (The British Library)
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There is an evident need in all areas of the world for booksellers, publishers and librarians to get together. These three groups have many common interests, focusing on the production and supply of books and other materials for the library market, yet they rarely meet in any systematic way. Traditional book trade organisations have not succeeded in bringing all the parties together in a fruitful way, and progress has been spasmodic. Booksellers (library suppliers, wholesalers and retailers) naturally have close links with publishers and with their customers the librarians, but the weak link between librarians and the originators of the product, the publishers, remains.

In any supply chain there should be a feedback mechanism from the customer to the producer but the main indicator used by most publishers is unit sales of titles. Even then it is rarely possible to discover exactly what pro-

portion of sales are to the library market. Ideally publishers should know what titles librarians want, and the economic, social and other reasons underlying their selection decisions. Booksellers have a natural incentive to form a close working relationship with librarians, since the better they understand the factors affecting library acquisitions the stronger their position is in attracting business. This argument does not, however, have the same force in relations between publishers and booksellers; and except for publishers of academic, professional, reference, children's books and new fiction, librarians are scarcely featured in the picture at all.

What is needed is a forum for discussing and promoting library acquisitions issues across the whole book trade, so that informed decisions and sound strategies can be made by all parties. By talking frankly to each other

and engaging in joint activities, each participant can gain vital insights into the real motivation and aspirations of the others.

In the United Kingdom, one organisation has in recent years managed to make a significant impact in this area. The **National Acquisitions Group (NAG)** was set up in the UK in 1986 to promote mutual understanding across the library/book trade spectrum and to advance the cause of library acquisitions. Three factors combined to make the launch of a new group feasible at that time: a general dissatisfaction with existing means of communication, the willingness of several individuals to make the initiative, and generous sponsorship from various commercial companies to launch the venture. The proven success the **United Kingdom Serials Group (UKSG)**, set up in 1978 to cover the serials industry, indicated

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that a similar initiative focusing on books could also be worthwhile.

A key element in the successful working of a cross-sectoral booktrade group is its independence. The **National Acquisitions Group** is not part of nor affiliated to the [British] **Library Association**, even though the majority of its members are librarians. This deliberate policy ensures that all its constituent voices have an equal standing regardless of which part of the library/book trade world they represent. The Group itself does, however, actively liaise with other organisations in the field, and many members are involved in its activities.

The composition of a genuinely democratic cross-sectoral group must be carefully considered, so that both bureaucracy and vested interests are kept at bay. The constitution of the **National Acquisitions Group** stipulates that each of the following categories of the membership be represented on the Executive Committee by at least one, but no more than four, persons: academic libraries, public libraries, other libraries, booksellers, and publishers. A proper balance is necessary to reflect the whole constituency, although in practice it has sometimes proven difficult to recruit sufficient committed members from the publishing community; in the last resort, co-option can be used. It is also important that there is not perceived bias towards either public or academic libraries (although this is less of a problem for UKSG since public libraries acquire relatively few serials).

Book trade groups must be self-financing if they are to retain control of their destiny; tempting offers of financial help with strings attached should be resisted. If a supplier is seen to be exerting undue influence and so gaining unfair competitive advantage by its actions, then the group will soon lose its credibility. NAG jealously guards its integrity and independence; it accepts sponsorship for seminars when relevant to the topic of debate, but does not allow its annual conference to be associated with any particular commercial firm. The bulk of its income comes from membership fees and from its publications and events programme.

There is no substitute for personal communication in establishing real dialogue, especially in an arena as diverse as the book trade. NAG organises around ten seminars and workshops each year on a variety of topics of current interest, so that people (including non-members) can hear authoritative speakers, and discuss the issues face-to-face with their colleagues. The main event of the year is the Annual Conference, which attracts around two hundred delegates; the venue changes each time and the cost is kept as low as possible to give all members a good chance to benefit from the discussion forum and social interaction which are an inherent part of

the Conference.

NAG also runs a regular **Acquisitions School** for newcomers to library acquisitions; this has proved particularly popular with junior staff from library supply companies, and provides the participants with an intensive learning experience. Visits are also arranged so that individuals can see at first hand how libraries, booksellers and publishers really work.

The United Kingdom is a relatively small and compact country, yet even here many people find it difficult to find travel funds. The primary means of communication for any broad-based group remains printed publications (although in many countries electronic networks are fast supplanting printed newsletters as the preferred method of speedy communication). NAG has a flourishing publications programme, producing a Newsletter, a journal (*Taking Stock*), a directory of acquisitions librarians and other publications including proceedings of seminars, research reports and standards.

In the UK, **Book Industry Communication (BIC)** concentrates on the electronic transfer of data across the book trade, and also covers the maintenance and exploitation of bibliographic records. NAG, as a broad-based group covering a variety of issues of interest to librarians, booksellers and publishers, liaises closely with such bodies as BIC. There is no shortage of topics to be debated. In recent years NAG has held fruitful seminars on such matters as book selection; collection development policies; acquisitions from abroad; automated acquisitions systems; bookfund management; bibliographic data; electronic data transfer; acquiring electronic information; competitive tendering; business units; acquiring special categories of material; binding; stock management; pricing policy; marketing; book design; and censorship. Matters exclusively related to serials are considered the province of UKSG.

Unlike some areas of library work, acquisitions has an inescapable commercial element. Book trade groups have to address the economic and business implications of the library market, and while this adds a sharper edge to the discussions it can lead to special problems. Individual business agreements are commercial-in-confidence, but the general issues can and should be aired openly. NAG has published a **Code of Conduct** setting out broad guidelines for good practice; all parties need to be aware of possible conflicts of interest particularly if there is a danger that certain booksellers are perceived to be gaining undue influence in the group.

The political stance of book trade groups also merits close attention. In some circumstances a strong campaigning position may be warranted (e.g. NAG recently took part in a successful effort to prevent the application of Value Added Tax to books in the UK) but party-political bias should be avoided. One of the functions of the group is to represent the

interests of its members; it is more likely to influence the powers-that-be through constructive dialogue and firm statements of position than through strident and inflexible campaigning.

The **National Acquisitions Group**, as its name implies, is largely restricted to a single country: the United Kingdom; Ireland is represented in the membership but has now also set up its own book trade group. NAG has around twenty overseas members (out of a total of 480), mainly international book suppliers who receive mailings and may attend an occasional conference. The idea of extending NAG into the international sphere has been discussed many times, but has never come to fruition. A more practical aim would be to encourage other countries to develop their own indigenous versions of NAG, and for them to cooperate in joint initiatives and programmes. This strategy would be similar to that in the serials field, where the example of UKSG has led to the birth of the **North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG)** and comparable organisations in Australasia and elsewhere. A European Serials Conference is also held, but there are no plans for a pan-European organisation at this stage of evolution.

In other countries, there seem to be as yet no other library acquisitions groups on the NAG model. In the USA the equivalent focus is the **Charleston Conference**, which provides an admirable forum for acquisitions matters but is not constituted as a permanent group. There are book trade sub-committees of the **Association for Library Collections and Technical Services**, but being part of the **American Library Association** they act mainly as traditional discussion groups. A few major trade publishers in America have set up focus groups to involve librarians in the publishing cycle. The **Book Industry Study Group (BISG)** performs a useful role in producing regular statistics and research reports to promote and support the book trade in North America. BISG, formed in 1976, has over 200 organisational members from every sector of publishing and the book trade.

Efforts are being made to establish a library acquisitions group in South Africa, but it is early in the days of that new democracy and there are many political, geographic and financial issues to be resolved. In some large countries the most practical option may be to set up regional groups so that people can easily reach conference and seminar venues. In Australia a group of librarians has compiled a list of book suppliers, but there is no organisation spanning all book trade interests. The best way to make progress is to make full use of all the existing groups and to encourage the development of independent industry-wide organisations such as NAG. It is only by involving senior and middle-ranking staff in all sectors that practical achievements in the form of publications, seminars, conferences and the like can be sustained. The commitment is surely there, waiting to be tapped. 