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Approvals, Slips, and DDA! Oh My! The Yellow Brick Road to Collaborative Approval and DDA Profiling

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Abstract

In the last several years, approval profiling has changed significantly and grown increasingly complex, particularly due to the prevalent shift toward collecting in electronic formats. While approval profiles have been predominantly e-preferred for some time, the growth of demand-driven acquisition (DDA) has led to new license models, modes of acquisition, and tighter integration of DDA with approvals. With the advent of the DDA-preferred approval plan came options for the inclusion of multiple e-book platforms as well as complexities involving publisher embargoes. Additionally, the numerous approval and DDA profile parameters, workflow options, and administrator settings vary widely, resulting in a seemingly endless array of possibilities that can affect how titles are ultimately profiled. The task of creating a new profile or preparing profile reviews can be overwhelming, especially for those new to profiling or trying a new vendor. However, it can and should be a collaborative experience with vendors that leads to more than just great profiles. While library staff should strive to learn how to make the most of what a vendor offers, vendors should inquire about the library's collection development strategies, issues, and needs. Vendors can also share current trends and offer advice modeled on how other libraries handle similar issues, as well as gather feedback for potential development. This paper supplies tips that will help library staff who are preparing to create or review approval or DDA profiles or to profile with new vendors, to be better prepared in order to maximize their time profiling with vendors.

In 2014, I began working for a book vendor as a collection consultant, assisting customers in the United States, Canada, and Australia specifically on the creation and review of approval and demand-driven acquisition (DDA) profiles. Over the five years in which I held that position, I noticed overarching trends and issues related to profiling and garnered a bird's-eye view of how profiling was evolving. The major changes in profiling that I observed were largely due to the ongoing shift toward collecting in electronic formats and the increasing complexities that these imposed on the profile creation and review processes for both the vendor and librarian. In this paper, I have pulled from my experiences in this consulting role several tips and examples illustrating how librarians can best approach working with vendors to establish or review approval and DDA profiles in times of overwhelming options and constant change.

Background

At the time I undertook my consulting role, approval profiles were more frequently becoming e-preferred, in which a title that matched the approval profile will wait a designated amount of time for availability of an e-book before the print format is sent as an automated purchase. DDA, also known as patron-driven acquisition (PDA), is a method of acquisition

by which a pool of titles, typically generated by a profile, are made discoverable in a library's catalog, but the titles are not purchased until a title receives significant use as defined by the vendor. While DDA can be for print or e-books, print DDA is not as widely used and did not grow in popularity at the same rate as e-DDA due to the delay in the physical item needing to be delivered, whereas e-DDA is immediate, seamless, and undetectable to the patron when unmediated. The immense popularity of e-DDA has led to the term DDA being commonly used to mean simply e-DDA as opposed to print DDA, and that is how it is used in this paper.

With the growth of interest in e-books and DDA, vendors continued to invest in electronic materials and ways in which they could be acquired. New e-book platforms continued to be developed by vendors and publishers alike, as well as new license models for user access, such as concurrent and nonlinear licenses, which allow a certain number of loan instances per year that is set by the publisher. There was also the development of new modes of acquisition in conjunction with DDA, such as short-term loans (STL), which are loans that are separate from the purchase of the book and whose cost is set by the publisher and based on a percentage of list price, as well as access-to-own (ATO), a loan-based purchasing model specific to the Ebook Central

platform that is also based on percentages of list price. Additional acquisition options varied by platform but frequently include automatic upgrades, by which licenses can be upgraded to provide more user access on an as-needed basis.

Growing Complexities of Profiling

Prior to 2013, DDA profiles were often separate from approval and slip profiles, but the growth of DDA led to the integration of DDA with approval profiles and ultimately led to DDA-preferred profiles, whereby a title that matches an approval or slip notification profile is placed into a DDA pool when eligible rather than being auto-purchased or generating a slip notification. While this integration of DDA and approvals solved issues of duplication that came from having separate profiles, it increased the complexity of profiling by requiring the incorporation of the numerous options relating to e-books and DDA acquisition into the already staggering number of nonsubject and subject parameters that constituted approval and slip profiling.

Around the time that DDA-integrated approval profiles were introduced, vendors who provided approval profiles began selling e-books available on competitor platforms. When DDA was first integrated into approval profiles, a library could choose generally just one e-book platform for auto-purchases and DDA. A few years later, some vendors offered upward of 20 platforms that could be arranged in a customized preference hierarchy into their approval and DDA profiles. While only some publishers participated in DDA, only a subset of those participated in STL. Of those that participated in either, some made only a portion of their titles eligible, often utilizing backlist and frontlist embargoes that varied by publisher to determine eligibility. The percentage of list price that determined STL cost also varied widely by publisher, and title eligibility and prices were constantly changing, making DDA pools dynamic. By 2018, there were a seemingly infinite number of possibilities that influenced how a title matched a profile, and it is no wonder that I spent a great deal of time as a consultant being asked to determine why a title matched a profile in the way that it did.

Make It a Conversation

More complex profiles, whether or not they integrate e-books or DDA, no longer fit neatly into a form with boxes that can be checked off for the content

that is to be included or excluded. Instead they have become overly complicated, dynamic flowcharts with numerous if-then statements, exceptions, and required maintenance. Adding to these complexities is the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of titles and curriculum. Rather than a form, the profiling process now necessitates a conversation, one that focuses on goals and issues and is a collaboration between the librarian and the vendor to craft a profile with specific agreed-upon goals. Librarians must adjust their strategies accordingly when working with vendors to make the most of their time devoted to the profiling process.

Make Fewer Assumptions

It is an easy and common mistake to assume what changes need to be made to a profile in order to resolve an issue. However, due to the complexities of profiles, even the most seemingly simple and clear-cut change may not yield the intended result. This is why it is critical for librarians to focus on the goal and share the intent with the vendor when initiating any profile changes. One example that illustrates how simple assumptions can negatively affect a profile is when a customer once asked me to eliminate a certain Library of Congress (LC) number range from the profile, a common request. Following a subsequent conversation, I discovered that this customer had received some unwanted books on approval that prompted the requested profile change. However, after investigating I realized that the unwanted books were matching the profile due to an included interdisciplinary, and therefore eliminating the specified LC range would not have eliminated the undesirable titles but only excluded some titles that were wanted instead.

Focus on the Results

It can be a tricky and complicated process for the vendor to fine-tune a profile to output the desired titles and eliminate the unsavory ones. Too often librarians are used to focusing on subject and non-subject inclusions or exclusions, as in the past these were often sufficiently the main criteria for print approval profiles. However, now there are so many ways to include and exclude titles that a parameter as significant as an LC class may have no effect on how a title matches the profile. In the end, what matters is the actual content that is being delivered or excluded. An example that illustrates this idea is when a librarian asked me to provide them with the list of the LC ranges included in their profile.

After providing this, I was asked to remove an LC range that was included on the list, even though the nonsubject parameters specific to this range were so narrow that no content that fell in this range was matching the profile, and thus no unwanted material was being delivered that prompted the request. I was also asked to add several LC ranges that were not included on the list. However, no content was being treated for the approval process within these LC ranges, so their inclusion made no difference. In the end the profile output remained exactly the same as before the changes were made.

Preparation for the Profiling Process

If checking boxes on a form is no longer sufficient, how can librarians prepare for the profiling process? How does one prepare for a conversation? I have outlined some steps that can be taken and information that can be gathered beforehand that will help facilitate the profiling conversation, and I have noted questions that may be useful for librarians to ask themselves if not their vendors.

The Point Person

My first tip is to designate a point person who will act as the main point of contact for the vendor and facilitate the profiling process between the vendor and the various subject experts at the library. Having a designated point person helps to keep everyone on the same page and remind them of the goal at hand, which can be particularly important if there are librarians who may not fully support the intended changes. Involving selectors in the profiling process, while adding complexity, has many benefits, as it helps to build confidence in the profile and its output as well as better informs the selectors of how the profile works, which in turn better informs their selections. However, selectors, while experts in their respective fields, may not need to fully understand how the profile works outside of their subject areas. It is a common practice for institutions to have one approval profile that covers multiple subjects. Without a designated point person to communicate changes to the vendor and every subject librarian fully understanding the entire profile, librarians may request changes that have ramifications outside of their purview. A designated point person will naturally come to know more details about how the profile works overall and potentially address similar issues or questions that the subject experts might otherwise pose to the vendor on an individual basis.

Compile Lists

While completing a form beforehand is not necessary, it is helpful for librarians to compile lists of the types of materials that are and are not collected. I recommend looking at overarching collection development policies, such as ones pertaining to textbooks or reference materials. It is extremely helpful to accumulate examples pertaining to each of these areas as well as interdisciplinaries or problem areas for collection. What one vendor considers a textbook may differ from what each individual selector considers a textbook or from what a different vendor classifies as a textbook. Often a vendor can provide a list of definitions of their nonsubject parameters beforehand to help clarify these areas.

Plan a Good Time to Profile

While I recommend involving many selectors in the profiling process, this makes scheduling time with the vendor to craft or review a profile more difficult. While most librarians will consider the busiest times of the year to be off-limits, slower times should also be considered as many selectors may not be available to participate due to vacations or research.

It is also critical to allow adequate time for the profiling process. Frequently there is a substantial amount of time required for librarians to communicate back and forth with the vendor to fine-tune the profile, and more time needs to be allotted when more people are involved and need to supply feedback as well as a designated point person acting as intermediary.

Current Practices

Gathering as much information as possible about current practices beforehand will help to expedite the profiling process, particularly when setting up new profiles, as there are numerous steps that can be done concurrently while the profile is being fine-tuned. I recommend gathering fund and location codes, cataloging and processing specification and needs, and information pertaining to workflows beforehand.

If past profiles were unsuccessful whether due to expenditure or content, it is helpful to make lists of what worked well and what could be improved. By addressing these issues up front, librarians will help the vendor avoid those same pitfalls and ultimately save time. For instance, if the goal is to craft a profile

with fewer slips so that selectors spend less time on collection development, it is good to provide the vendor with a specific number of slips desired so that they do not craft a profile that far exceeds the expected output, thus requiring further refinement of the profile. When starting a profile with the intent of reducing spend, it is necessary to gather as much information as possible related to how much is currently being spent or has been spent in the past in addition to the specific reduction goals.

It is also good to gather current practices in order to inquire if the vendor has recommendations. Vendors should know what other libraries are doing and which of those practices are successful. It is helpful for librarians to mention any issues, as vendors have likely seen how another library has addressed the same problems, or they can at the very least be aware of those issues in order to potentially develop a solution should other libraries mention the same issues.

Know the Profile

While the vendor should be the profile expert, it is important for librarians to have a general understanding of how the profile works, and the designated point person can have an even more thorough understanding. It is advisable for librarians to think through the profiling process and note questions that arise. Some questions that I recommend asking are:

For e-preferred profiles:

1. What determines when a title waits and how long it waits for e-book availability?
2. If more than one e-book platform is included on the profile, do titles wait for a longer period of time for availability on the preferred platform?
3. What happens if an e-book matches an e-preferred profile but is over the e-book maximum price but under the print maximum price?
4. Will slip notifications be sent for both print and e-book formats of the same title?

For DDA or DDA-integrated approval profiles:

1. If a title in the DDA pool is firm ordered with another vendor, will the title be removed from the DDA pool or how can it be removed to avoid a second purchase potentially being triggered?

2. If an e-book matches the profile but is not eligible for DDA, will it be sent on approval or as a slip notification?
3. Are notifications sent for titles that are removed from the DDA pool when their price increases over the maximum price?

Profiling Driven by Budget Cuts

The majority of new profiles or profile reviews that I conducted as a consultant were done with the intent to cut down spending. It is helpful to provide as much information as possible regarding current and desired spend beforehand to the vendor as they can perform a lot of modeling and projecting based on past expenditure in order to make the best recommendations and better discuss collection development goals with regard to access versus ownership.

Some frequent methods that I employed to assist customers interested in reducing spend were suggesting setting adjustments based on modeling how these adjustments would impact spend. Some common questions regarding setting changes that can be analyzed by the vendor are:

1. When employing STLs, can usage and expenditure reports be analyzed to determine the best number for STL limits before an auto-purchase is triggered?
2. What is the impact on lowering the maximum price on the profile on spend and ownership, and how would the titles eliminated be addressed?
3. Should the preferred license model be switched to 1-user and an automatic upgrade feature implemented so that multiuser licenses are only purchased as needed?
4. Can older content be automatically purged from the DDA pool via a setting that limits inclusions to a rolling number of years?
5. Are there fund and budget trackers to help monitor ongoing spend?
6. Are there instances of a single user triggering multiple DDA purchases? I have seen instances where a single user triggered more than 40 DDA purchases in one day.
7. What are the optimal STL price or percentage limits based on usage and

expenditure? Can titles by publishers that are over these limits be auto-purchased without triggering STLs?

Profile Reviews

While time usually limits how often reviews are conducted, the goal should be to conduct profile reviews on an annual basis even if limited to a simple in-house checkup on selector satisfaction. Reviews are a good time for librarians to inquire with vendors about current issues and trends on a global scale as well as patterns at their libraries. It is very difficult for selectors to see patterns in their own spending habits, and vendors often have access to reports that can assist with this. For instance, more than once at a profile review, I would notice that a selector had firm ordered all the titles from a particular publisher from their notifications. In this case, it would be ideal to change the profile so that those titles came on approval and did not require firm ordering. Yet when asked, the selector would often want to leave the titles as notifications until presented with the data suggesting otherwise.

Profile reviews are also the optimal time for librarians to inquire about whether the profile goals are being achieved. If reducing spend was the goal, then comparisons to past spending should be analyzed to ensure this is happening. It is helpful for librarians to ask the vendor to prepare this information in addition to preparing in-house reports to compare the results.

Finally, reviews are opportunities for librarians to inquire about any changes that may have occurred at the vendor level to all profiles. For instance, if a publisher has decided to no longer allow their titles to be DDA eligible, then adjustments may need to be made to profiles to ensure these titles are being addressed. Inquiring about these changes also may help librarians get an idea about how the landscape of DDA or e-book eligibility and embargoes is changing over time.

Conclusion

While approval and DDA profiles grow increasingly complex, the process should not be an overwhelming experience for the librarian. Ideally the vendor expertise complements the librarian's subject expertise to craft a dynamic DDA or approval profile in which the librarian can feel confident that it is achieving the intended goals more efficiently than title by title selection. By focusing on the goals and issues that the profile should be addressing, librarians can worry less about the complexities of the profile's inner workings and ensure that the vendor is crafting a profile that meets their needs. Regular profile reviews will help continue to build selector confidence in the profiles as well as better impact their selections and inform them about current trends in the greater world of DDA and approval profiling while providing vendors with critical information pertaining to common goals and issues relating to the greater world of collection development and acquisitions.