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Doc Aquis

The Review-driven Purchase Plan at Detroit Public Library

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We don't usually include research articles in Doc Aquis, but we thought Robert Chapman's contribution would really interest those who read the April 1997 article on Brodard's TIPS. Thanks for sharing, Robert. — EP & WT

Abstract

Spurred by long-standing dissatisfaction with the selection of materials provided by its primary and supplemental vendors of adult titles, the **Detroit Public Library** decided instead to purchase virtually all of the new titles reviewed in *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and the *New York Times Book Review*. A vendor was employed to identify, accumulate, and automatically ship these titles along with MARC records and lists of bibliographic citations and reviews. Book acquisition and processing was streamlined, placing books in the hands of library users much faster than was possible through approval plans. Projections indicate thirty percent more titles will be received at an increased cost of eight percent. Reference librarians and book selectors approve of the new plan, but costs, implementation problems, and collection development issues are yet to be adequately evaluated and resolved. For this library, the review-driven purchase plan offers an acceptable alternative to approval plans.

Introduction

In response to dissatisfaction with the materials made available for purchase through our primary vendor of the adult approval plan and through supplemental vendors, staff at the Detroit Public Library undertook a series of changes that substantially altered the way materials are selected and acquired. It was felt by reference staff that many selection needs could be met by

simply purchasing automatically one copy of any title reviewed in a few specific library resources. It was felt that whether the review was positive or negative, the collection should contain at least one copy of any work considered by our preferred resources to be substantial enough to be reviewed in print. Our preliminary evaluations indicate very positive results using this method of material acquisitions.

Historical development

The Detroit Public Library, like many similar institutions, for more than two decades relied on vendor approval plans to provide a continuous flow of current and relevant materials into the collection. Approval plans were maintained with our primary vendor for a broad range of subjects, and with additional vendors for small press titles, books on cassette, and exceptional materials. Librarians and support staff expended considerable energy receiving, researching, and evaluating titles selected by the vendors, based on detailed subject profiles, to be considered for purchase. Librarians also used review journals, catalogs, publicity flyers, and other traditional methods to identify titles to supplement materials received on approval. Book-in-hand decisions were made on each approval plan title to either purchase it for addition to the collection or return it to the vendor as unwanted. It would routinely take three months to evaluate and either accept or return unwanted books, and frequently approval books would remain with us for six to nine months before a decision was made. While many librarians found evaluations to be an enjoyable and worthwhile exercise of professional skills, the process of manually tracking the approval books within the library, protracted and cumbersome review and order proce-

dures, lack of title availability after lengthy selection delays, problems with invoice accounting, and massive investments of time and energy made the approval plan process unsatisfactory for all concerned. Yet we labored under this system in the absence of more suitable alternatives.

Evaluating vendor services

Two years ago acquisitions staff began a concerted effort to examine vendor services to determine whether current technologies could alleviate problems with approval plans. We contacted several vendors to identify relevant services and fulfillment capabilities, and made selective purchases from three of them to evaluate bibliographic records, electronic ordering tools, problem resolution, and fulfillment rates. We were interested specifically in competitive pricing, the ability to provide cataloging records in electronic format which eliminated duplications from one shipment to the next, the ability to provide lists of titles which could function as our in-house added copy order lists, electronic ordering software that was both intuitive and informative, and the ability to transfer electronic records to the database of our NOTIS integrated library system. While we found that none of the evaluated vendors provided all of the features we wanted, we determined more importantly that our primary vendor was not the one most prepared to meet our needs.

Detailed discussions with our primary vendor revealed that its selectors needed the published books in-hand before they could determine which would be flagged for inclusion in the approval program. We also learned that many popular titles and self-help books were not flagged, based on vendor selection criteria. We unfortunately were unable to identify any way to receive a better selection of titles more quickly within the approval program.

Reference librarians felt instead that by reviewing a few selected library resources they could routinely identify prepublication titles they would choose for purchase. In fact, it was felt that a title should be in our collection if it was deemed appropriate for review in *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, or the *New York Times Book Review*. Our task, then, was to find

Pulitzer Prize winner Herman Wouk, noted for authorship of such books as the Caine Mutiny and the Winds of War, honed his writing skills as a writer of humorous matter for the popular radio comedian, Fred Allen, prior to WWII.

the best way to identify and purchase these materials.

Each of the vendors under evaluation claimed the ability to provide automatic shipments of reviewed titles. One vendor would develop actual procedures only if we contracted at the outset for the service. Our primary vendor indicated that it was engaged in a nascent project with another library to provide this service using two of the three review sources of interest to us, and could add the third source without difficulty. The vendor was in fact providing that library with a review-driven booklist as a selection tool, but without the automatic shipment of books. By contacting the other library we determined that the lists being provided were not as satisfactory as had been anticipated, and consideration was being given to dropping the service.

The third vendor under our consideration, **Brodart Co.**, already had an appropriate plan in place, in use at other libraries, with most of the bibliographic tools and services we needed. We contacted the libraries being serviced by Brodart and learned that their review-driven purchase plans, although somewhat different from our proposal, were in operation and had helped greatly with the selection of materials and the timeliness of receipt.

A decision was made to obtain only citation lists for a single subject category, biographies, for a two-month trial period, from each of the three vendors being evaluated. The lists provided by Brodart were clearly superior to those of the other two vendors. Appropriate titles, with relevant bibliographic and ordering information, review citations, and, for most entries, reprints of the actual published reviews provided our selectors with very satisfactory information in a single source. We questioned, however, whether the same lists would be appropriate across a full range of subjects, and whether we could afford the service.

In July, 1996 DPL entered into negotiations with Brodart to begin a review-driven purchase plan. We provided a copy of one of our in-house added copy order lists for their evaluation, and learned that Brodart could have provided most of the titles on the list. We asked for a retrospective list of all of the titles we would have received under this plan for the period from July 1, 1995 through June 30, 1996, which coincided with our fiscal year. We determined that we would have received approximately 30% more titles than were actually received under our approval plan, and that the review-driven plan would have cost approximately 8% more. Since we wanted to continue to display as many of the new titles as possible for our selectors while they were working with the lists, Brodart projected that it could provide a "first pick" shipment of 30-40% of the

titles at the time the lists were mailed to us. The remainder of the listed titles were prepublication, and books would be shipped to us as they became available.

We revised our criteria for selection to limit the maximum price for the titles listed, and to eliminate some of the unavailable or unwanted review sections in each of the three sources. For example, Brodart was contractually unable to provide reviews for books in the "Noted" sidebars of *Publishers Weekly*, DPL excluded reviewed titles appearing on retrospective collection development lists in *Library Journal*, and we chose not to receive titles in certain regular columns in the *New York Times Book Review*. We then requested sample lists for a two-month period, which were reproduced and distributed for review. It was decided that Brodart selection lists and services were superior to those of our primary vendor. A letter of understanding was communicated to Brodart, and clarifications were passed between us. A recommendation for implementation of the plan was then forwarded to the library administration.

Changing vendors

Using the approval plan of our primary vendor, we established separate accounts for each reference department in the main library, allowing appropriate notification slips to be sent directly to the correct subject department. It was felt that these notification slips were an effective way to maintain awareness of new research and esoteric ma-

terials appropriate for our collection, materials that were unlikely to be reviewed in our selection sources. We then discontinued the automatic shipments of books from that vendor, and immediately began receiving Brodart TIPS Plus lists, books, and electronic records. By giving Brodart materials top priority for cataloging and processing, we were able to make popular new titles available to patrons within a few weeks of publication and months sooner than our approval plans had allowed. An additional benefit was that, frequently, branch libraries received their ordered books at the same time the main library departments received the automatic shipment copies, softening somewhat the neglected stepchild angst sometimes felt by branch staff.

Problems

Daily operation of this plan has not been without difficulties, however. Instructions to our primary vendor concerning the notification slip accounts were misinterpreted, and several revisions were needed before the slips were being sent to the correct departments.

But our most challenging difficulty was with electronic records. It was our intention to load the records into NOTIS and attach order records at the start of our acquisitions process, making all order information immediately available online. However, because so many of the titles on the TIPS selection lists are prepublication, no MARC records exist for them at that point. Brodart

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manually enters information into a database that is used to generate the TIPS Plus lists. This same data was being sent to us with MARC variable field coding attached. Unfortunately, since MARC fixed fields were missing the records could not easily be loaded into NOTIS. In addition we were committed to using true MARC records if possible. We did receive true MARC records for the titles actually shipped to us, but too late to be useful for our ordering purposes. Working with the vendor, we developed a way to obtain a large percentage of true MARC records a few weeks after the list is generated for us, but still early enough to be useful for ordering purposes. As expected, this has streamlined our cataloging and ordering process.

The vendor lists are very reliable in general, but problems and errors do occur. Brodart selectors occasionally include reprints that should be excluded under our profile. Sometimes the price of a book legitimately exceeds our limit, and sometimes the Dewey classification assigned by Brodart is other than we would expect. In one

instance we received both the hardcover and paperback versions of a title when only the paperback version should have been sent. Our preliminary findings indicate vendor errors during startup represented less than one percent of the allocation for the plan. Considering the complexity of the process and the number of titles involved, we consider these problems to be minor. Problem resolution by the vendor has been outstanding, and our corrective costs have been minimal.

We have determined that the number of "first pick" books provided at the time the lists are sent to us is closer to 20% than to the 30-40% we had anticipated. Selectors now spend their very limited funds with a great majority of the books being unseen. Even with reviews included on the lists this was an adjustment many made unwillingly, since under the former approval plans selectors were able to examine most of the books listed.

We continue to evaluate our profile. We found that by including the "Prepub Alert" section of *Library Journal* in our profile we were not seeing full reviews for these titles. By limiting titles from this section most of the same titles began to appear on later lists, with reviews included. For one list we received a large number of books in Spanish, based on an annotated bibliography in *Library Journal*. We collect in 53 languages and were glad to have the materials, but this was an expenditure we had not anticipated. Since our selectors know a title will be re-

ceived automatically if it is reviewed in one or more of our sources, we are reluctant to define the profile too narrowly. Yet there is growing demand for adding *Booklist* as a fourth review source, and fiscal limitations may force us to make hard decisions to modify the profile further.

Impact

Titles reviewed in our three sources tend to carry large publisher discount rates. A preliminary study indicates the aggregate discount of titles received under the review-driven plan is almost double that of our approval plan. The review-driven plan provides many of the titles requested by library users, we're shelving books faster, we're getting more titles, and overall we're paying less per book. In fact, some managers now consider their lease book plans to be unnecessary. Canceling these superfluous contracts could mitigate the added costs of the review-driven purchase plan.

Under our previous approval plans we received a substantial number of technical, esoteric and research materials that maintained the quality of our collection. We supplemented approval purchases with firm orders for more popular materials.

Our review-driven purchase plan reverses the types of materials received. We now automatically receive a large number of popular titles, and supplement those with firm orders and notification slip orders for research materials. We are monitoring these supplemental orders to insure that appropriate technical, esoteric and research materials continue to enter the collection.

Under the approval plans most of our librarians were involved in the review and selection of titles for addition to the collection. The review-driven plan makes first copy selection automatic, and consolidates added copy ordering tasks to a limited number of staff. While this is very expedient from an acquisition perspective, it limits the ability of most of our librarians to develop and maintain selection skills.

The book reviews included with bibliographic citations have caused our biweekly order lists to become quite large, inconveniencing selectors and testing the capacity of our printing department.

We are attempting to evaluate circulation patterns for review-driven purchases. Studies have shown that 80% of circulation demands can be met by 20% of the titles in a collection.¹ We anticipate that titles purchased automatically based on published reviews will account for a substantially larger percentage of new title circulation. This would lend support to the validity of this plan.

Conclusion

The structure of the review-driven auto-

matic shipment plan has allowed us to streamline acquisition of adult titles, redirect staff efforts, provide timely online order status information, and offer prompt delivery of materials to our patrons. Considerable evaluation remains to be done and modifications are already in sight, but if we are able to properly maintain the quality of our research collection and can spend within our projections, the review-driven automatic shipment plan will have proven to be a very advantageous change for the library.

End Notes

¹ William A. Britten. "A use statistic for collection management: the 80/20 rule revisited." *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory* 14(1990): 183-189. cf. Richard L. Trueswell. "Some behavioral patterns of library users: the 80/20 rule," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 43 (January 1969), 458-461.

NB: As Acquisitions Specialist at Detroit Public Library, **Robert Chapman** monitors daily operation of the review-driven purchase plan. He is a member of the team of librarians and administrators that developed the plan. Comments may be directed to <rchapma@cms.cc.wayne.edu>.

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and staying current. I also felt the class needed to know the makeup of most Acquisitions Departments has changed, and that it is now common practice to join forces with Serials, Cataloging and Collection Development Departments in an effort to better streamline procedures, enhance productivity and utilize expertise more efficiently. No longer do technical services departments exist as separate islands, but more as partners working for the common good.

While I concede that I could have covered a lot more in the classes and perhaps covered some topics more thoroughly, I do think that the students got a pretty good idea of what the world of Acquisitions is all about. And even if it was in a very small way, I take pride in the fact that I had the chance to contribute to the education of our future librarians.

NB: **Terri-Leigh Hinkle** is Acquisitions Librarian and acting Serials Librarian at The University of New Hampshire-Durham. She holds an MSLS from The University of Kentucky, and is currently working on an MA in English Literature at The University of New Hampshire.