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Electronic Order Transmission Benefit or Gimmick?

By *Glenda Thornton*

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Utilizing a variety of technologies, electronic transmission of book orders has been around for several years. Perhaps our first experience with this ordering method came when we transmitted order information electronically to our bibliographic utility, where the orders were printed and mailed to the vendor of our choice. Or perhaps others recall punching in ISBN's on a small electronic device, hooking it up to a telephone, and transmitting the numbers to the vendor.

Today, electronic order transmission is still available to libraries in a variety of technologies from a number of book vendors. It would be great if all of our integrated library systems electronically transmitted ordering information directly into our book vendors' computer systems. However, such is not the case, and I suspect that it may be some time before this occurs. Unfortunately for acquisitions librarians, some book vendors and integrated library system vendors jealously guard their proprietary software.

How then, can acquisitions librarians benefit from the newest form of this technology? Libraries using the acquisitions modules of their integrated library systems may find it difficult, at best. For many of these libraries, orders are transmitted to an electronic mailbox, where they are picked up by the vendor. If the library's system produces only printed orders, they may be faxed or mailed to the vendor. In any case, upon receiving the orders, the vendor is probably faced with rekeying the

entire order into his own system.

Those acquisitions departments, whose libraries do not have an integrated system or have not implemented the acquisition module of their integrated system, may have a technological advantage, if they choose to use book vendor-supplied ordering software. Usually, the library's only equipment requirements are a PC (generally IBM-compatible) and a modem. Usually the vendor supplies the ordering software free of charge and foots the bill for transmission charges. Real progress is made if the PC ordering system interacts with the vendor's in-house computer system, eliminating the need to rekey data.

BENEFITS TO THE LIBRARY

The most obvious library benefit of electronic transmission is the reduction in turn around time for receipt of ordered materials. However, this time savings alone may not be that significant. In fact, some studies at the University of North Texas Libraries show that the time saved may only be the days that the order was actually in the mail. Depending upon location, this savings could range from two to six days.

However, at the University of North Texas, we have been transmitting the bulk of our book orders electronically to our three major book vendors for four years. While two of these vendors share essentially the same ordering software, we do have to contend

with two different systems. We have also requested and received additional ordering software from other book vendors with the intent of expanding our vendor selection. Obviously, we believe that we have derived significant benefits from this method of order transmission.

While originally we could send only ISBN's to our major vendor, we can now also send author and title information. At first, we spent very little time verifying ISBN's because we could depend upon the vendor's computer to identify wrong numbers. Because a confirmation was usually available within 30 minutes, we saved a great deal of time by verifying only those numbers that were incorrect, or titles without ISBN's. We always got a few wrong titles by this method, but never very many.

As soon as it was available, we purchased the CD-ROM version of *Books in Print* and incorporated it into our process, greatly increasing our accuracy. When the vendor added the capacity to transmit authors, titles, etc. as well as ISBN's, the accuracy increased again. With our other two major vendors, we always had the ability to transmit author, title, and other bibliographic information.

However, the greatest benefit derived at the University of North Texas, was the development of a computer literate staff in Materials Acquisitions. Electronic order transmission was our first major experience with personal computers. Because our integrated library vendor planned an acquisitions module, the use of

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vendor-supplied ordering software was viewed as an interim step in the automation of the acquisitions process. However, our growing knowledge of personal computers enabled us to eventually automate the entire monographic acquisitions process.

Basically, orders are searched in *BIP+*, uploaded into the vendor-supplied ordering software, and transmitted. The returned confirmation is an ASCII file which we turn into complete on-order records and load into our database system. These records are available in the library via the local area network and are used for accounting, receiving, and the production of vouchers. The department no longer produces multiple order forms, but does produce a 3" x 5" multiple-copy paper record to be used by the Bibliographic Control Dept. Currently we have 25,000 items in our online on-order, in-process file and hope that we can eventually provide access to this database through our OPAC.

The process for ordering from other vendors supplying us with software works much the same. If we need to order from a vendor who does not support electronic transmission, we simply use the database system to create records from which we produce purchase orders. Purchase orders can be put in the mail or faxed to vendors. Gifts are also entered into the database. The system is flexible and does almost everything that we need. This experience has helped us find ways to automate other processes in our department, which also includes serial acquisitions, check-in, and bindery preparation. Despite a budget increase of over a half million dollars in the past five years, we have not needed to increase staff because of efficiencies resulting from these automation activities.

Some librarians (see, for example, Joe Barker's "Library-Vendor Electronic Order Transmission Today," in *Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory*, v.13, 1989) have indicated that vendor-supplied electronic ordering software might be viewed as a marketing gimmick which encourages librarians to consolidate their orders with a particular vendor. Our primary vendor, who supplies ordering software, is the state contract vendor for in-print trade titles published in the United States. We are free to select other vendors for materials that the contract vendor cannot supply. Therefore, consolidation of orders is a state requirement which results in a healthy discount. If use of vendor-supplied ordering software encourages a library to consolidate orders, perhaps they can also negotiate better discounts for doing a higher volume of business with that vendor.

Another concern that I have frequently heard is that vendor-supplied ordering software shifts the vendor's labor back to the library. However, since initial order entry is something that must be done by the library anyway, I am delighted that I can pass this labor savings back to my vendors. Libraries are always looking to the book vendor for better discounts, better service, better fulfillment rates, and funding for conference-related activities. Isn't it time that librarians were willing to reduce the vendors' overhead, when it doesn't increase our own? Acquisitions librarians have a unique opportunity to contribute to a more efficient and less costly book procurement process. Shouldn't we find ways to incorporate this efficient technology into our acquisitions processes as well as educate our integrated system vendors to our needs?