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John P. Scmitt
Regis University

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The Art of Collection Development: Reference Style

by **John P. Schmitt** (Reference Librarian, Dayton Memorial Library, Regis University, Denver CO; Phone: (303)458-4597; Fax: (303) 964-5497 <jschmitt@regis.edu>)

It's been said that reference librarians have a dilettante's familiarity with everything and a scholarly grasp of nothing. While not completely true on either score, this is one of the hazards of being a reference librarian. It is also one of the joys. The most rewarding thing about reference librarianship, hands down, is the fact that you become a partner in the research interests of so many people. The sheer scope of intellectual interests that present themselves at a reference desk in any one week can baffle, amuse, provoke, or encourage the most hardened of librarians: the gestation period of kangaroos; federal subsidies to advertise cigarettes overseas; pagan elements warring with Christian in *Beowulf*; pet food sales in Sacramento; anti-Semitism in democratic Poland.

There are some, perhaps many, librarians who are scared off by the prospect of such questions. There are others, however, who find them endlessly engaging and profoundly affirming. These topics matter to these patrons, and they have the confidence in librarians to bring them to our attention. But a reference librarian is only as good as the resources at his or her disposal and the lack of a good reference collection will undermine the best talent and motivation behind the reference desk.

Decisions, Decisions...

How do you go about deciding which titles to add to your reference collection? Just following the recommendations in *Choice* would outstrip the reference budgets of some libraries by the time the fiscal year was half over. Broader review sources such as *American Reference Books Annual* cover a staggering 1,500 new titles and editions each year. It's been suggested that *ARBA* could only be employed to fill in gaps where some subjects were under-represented. Some librarians base their judgments on "prestige" titles and publishers; others employ a strict rule of utility.

Some librarians use an intuitive hunch and buy only those works which, in their judgment, would be "useful." How would I, as a reference selector, know which those were? The answer seemed elusive, but I used to hold the opinion that the right works would be those which I would be most inclined to use: dictionaries, thesauri, statistical works, directories of corporations, and the old standards. If the work were spoken of in a bibliographic shorthand such as "Fowler," "Wing," "Bartlett's," "Roget's," "S&P," "DNB" or "CRC," it also would become a top priority. There were two elements my simple outlook was not prepared for: the scope of the reference questions asked and casual use of the collection by library patrons, not reference librarians. You can already see from the questions above that anticipating the next reference question is like betting on the Mexican stock market. But many librarians underestimate the use of their reference collections by "go-around" users.

I use the term "go-around" to indicate clientele who, to the dismay of our profession, do not want to deal with a reference librarian. They go around the reference desk and delve into the collection with their own hidden motives: curiosity, browsing, looking for a topic, or just a desire to experience the library without mediation. The number of people who use the collection like this can in some ways be gauged from what is reshelfed, but you may find it more useful simply to walk the length of the reference stacks once an hour and count the patrons helping themselves.

Coping Strategies

Consultation

So how do you account for the unanticipated questions and unan-

nounced users when making reference purchase decisions? An authoritative, standard reference work is just another volume on the shelf to most users. Selection, after all, means that you choose some and bypass other publications. One strategy which helps ensure well-rounded coverage is to have input from other librarians. Many of them will be subject specialists who will be looking out for the departments and programs they represent. Routing publisher's blurbs, approval forms, and reviews from *Choice* to appropriate selectors helps this process along. In many reference departments, a little information sharing like this can demonstrate just how limited your budget is.

Creative Budgeting

For all but the best endowed reference collections, it is important to be able to state which types of purchases will come out of the reference budget and which should come out of a budget allocated to a teaching department. In the most general terms, a reference book with broad applications or of interest to students and researchers in more than one discipline, should ordinarily come out of the reference budget. This could include dictionaries, handbooks, general encyclopedias, atlases, and current events sources, for example. Recommendations for books which are quite narrow or specialized are good candidates for purchase out of the funds allocated to teaching departments. Some examples might be specialized directories, bibliographies, or marketing surveys. Sometimes the difference needs to be negotiated. A department with emerging sub-disciplines may feel that it has no extra cash to spare for "staid" reference books.

Cutting a Deal

Occasionally a reference title will appear which is both specialized and completely unaffordable by a single department, a title like the recent *Grove Dictionary of Art*. Here some reference funds will have to be tapped — and probably some other discretionary funds as well — and joined with departmental monies to make the purchase happen. An institution can help with this sort of arrangement by administering an interdisciplinary fund specifically to assist with shared purchases. An arrangement might be struck whereby the selector will find at least 40% funding for a given title and the interdisciplinary fund will cover the remainder. Such a fund might be under the authority of the Head of Collection Development or a committee of subject specialists.

My personal record is securing money from ten different funds to purchase Elsevier's *Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, a title which reflected the interests of numerous departments but exceeded the ability of any one of them to fund. My university did not offer a degree in linguistics, but disciplines ranging from anthropology

to philosophy had a keen interest in the area and were willing to commit small sums to make it happen.

But Collection Awareness is the Real Key

An understanding of your collection's strengths and how they relate to the needs expressed by your clientele is essential, of course. In some areas it seems that libraries cannot purchase enough reference books dealing with some subjects. In my experience, corporate directories, guides to scholarships and financial aid, resumé books, and directories of higher education would be high on the list. Libraries serving unique programs will have their own short list. But an affordable balance in reference collection development is important, too.

At a certain point, a reference buyer needs to decide how many look-alike titles are needed. If you have the companions to English literature

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In many respects we are in a Golden Age of reference publishing ...

published by Oxford and Cambridge, do you need one from St. James Press and Longman also? Reference book purchasing decisions can suffer from a halo effect: if one companion works well in literature, two more will make your collection that much more valuable. A buyer has to be aware that a decision to duplicate a resource is also a decision not to purchase something new. This seems obvious, but frequently needs to be articulated. I have watched reference librarians debate duplicating microfiche phone directories by purchasing the identical print editions because "a lot of people are interested in these cities."

More problematic is purchasing in areas where you may not have clear evidence of demand. For instance, the various Jane's books detail models and technical specifications of warships, civilian and military aircraft, and the size of foreign military forces, but they may not fit into any curricular need or match up with recent reference questions. But Jane's data is frequently cited in the press, particularly when there is a military conflict, and is used to evaluate regional balances of power.

For the reference buyer, a \$335 layout for a single annual which deals just with naval warships may seem like an extravagant expense when you have curricular needs which must be met as well. You might decide this is out of scope, that you will rely on a nearby institution's holdings, or that you will buy an edition every five or ten years just to have something on hand. (In a case like Jane's, older volumes may even show up on sale in remainder catalogs.) In making decisions like these, a reference librarian needs to weigh the relevance of the title to the curriculum, the utility of the volume as best you can predict it, and other means of getting the same kind of information, such as news reports, an association, or directly from a government agency. One should not feel as though there is only one acceptable method of accessing this information.

Similar judgment calls are made on numerous other expensive items such as directories of advertisers, advertising agencies, consultants, corporate affiliations, and congressional staffs. Some of these may seem like mainstream selections — no brainers — but frequently the information is incomplete or obsolete shortly after being published. If you doubt it, just take a look at the mergers and acquisitions information reported daily in the *Wall Street Journal*. Some publishers, such as **Dun's Marketing**, recognize the danger of outdated information and will only lease their printed corporate directories.

At the **University of Wyoming**, the reference department canceled a \$980 subscription to a directory and chose to rely on a corresponding **Dialog** file to answer questions. The online searching was done at no cost to the user and the estimated savings in the first year was over \$900. Previously the title had been a standing order — an invisible cost. Since reference librarians rarely ever see an invoice, new editions on standing order arrive like jelly beans at Easter —

through the charity of someone else. Addressing this specific source heads-on underlined the cost of these standing orders and vividly demonstrated why reference budgets aren't larger.

The Role of Reviews

I've worked in three libraries with more than one million volumes, but I've never had a budget which allowed me to buy every reference book in which I was interested. In 1998 it has become that much more complex because we now have attractive electronic reference products competing for the same dollars as attractive printed reference products.

Much of the angst over reference collection development stems from the sheer cost involved. A single reference book costs \$86 on average in 1996. A typical 4-volume subject encyclopedia will set you back \$425. If you go beyond "prestige buying" (ordering on the basis of the title alone or the publisher), you don't make these purchase decisions lightly.

Because of their expense, reference books are more likely to be purchased on the basis of good reviews than would the typical trade book. As with most books, however, the reviews seriously lag the publication and the temptation is to accept the publisher's blurb at face value for lack of anything definitive and buy the work while it is still available in hardcover. Is there a way to work around both the delay and word count limits of print reviews?

A Modest Proposal: R-Net

Recently we have seen the appearance of academic listservs and affiliated Web sites which post timely reviews of new books and even invite reader response. In the academic realm, **H-Net**, aka **Humanities and Social Sciences Online**, (<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/>) has been providing scholarly reviews in American and World History, diplomacy, and popular culture since 1992. They have demonstrated that it is possible to have a low-cost rapid turnaround for online book reviews and to accommodate reader response. What could librarians do for reference that might approach what H-Net has accomplished in the humanities and social sciences? What follows is a modest proposal to speed up the reviewing of reference books and to involve more voices.

The "R-Net," as I might call it, would involve numerous reviewers from diverse areas and institutions. Librarians with subject strengths would be designated for certain in-depth reviews, but any librarian with an interest might choose to submit a review of a newly-acquired title. Significant reference works might merit multiple reviews. Reference librarians could post their responses to the reviews like so many letters to the editor, based on their own real world experience. Graphics could be employed to indicate the strength of the review and for which types of libraries a title is appropriate. With broad enough participation, R-Net would take **Jim Rettig's** online review column one interactive step further (<http://www.gale.com/>), add multiple views, and create an ongoing dialog.

Publishers might use such a forum as a sounding board to float ideas for new reference products or to conduct market surveys. Reference librarians who respond to a marketing questionnaire through R-Net could be rewarded with virtual credits from the publisher, bibliographic frequent flyer miles if you will, for participation in such focus groups.

Should ordering on the Web ever be secure for large transactions, R-Net might feature buttons for authorized direct ordering from **Gale**, **Reed/Bowker**, **Oryx** and other reference publishers who would pay for a little advertising on the page. The secured ordering module would feature a linked pass-through for the earned "credits." Does this sound far-fetched? Have you ever bought a book through **Amazon Books** (www.amazon.com) or posted a reader response with **Book Stacks** (www.books.com)?

Complicating Matters: Print vs. Electronic

A larger question looming for reference publishing is the future of print vs. electronic reference products. Several factors would seem to weigh in for the electronic format. Reference books are costly to produce and ship, or worse, to stock what's not shipped. Many need to be updated about as often as textbooks. Users tend to need just small entries or excerpts from the larger work, making cut and paste an effective process. Three great strengths for electronic formats are a built-in capacity for indexing, the ability to link disparate pieces of information, and the cumulation of several years' data in one file. Every reference librarian knows how hard it is to convince an undergraduate to use more than one year of a print index before surrendering and changing term paper topics. And reference librarians everywhere recognize that an interactive medium carries far greater appeal than a printed book with the same information.

On the other hand, users shouldn't require a \$2,000 workstation and a network to look up a standard industrial classification or browse an entry in *Who's Who in America*. When a PC is a prerequisite for consult-

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We may be facing a rising generation of young adults who see all information as equal, all knowledge as relative, all wisdom as variant forms of opinion, some of it expressed more forcefully or graphically than others.

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ing common reference sources, libraries will be pressing the margins of comfort our users expect. Electronic reference tools cannot simply mimic the printed form; they must add value and show they can endure.

Librarians notwithstanding, some reference publishers have elected to eliminate their printed products and begin producing solely electronic products. **Newsbank** has dropped its printed index to the **Foreign Broadcast Information Service** in favor of a CD-ROM covering global news reporting. **The Human Relations Area File** has also migrated from microfiche and loose-leaf to CD-ROM (and online). **Buros' Mental Measurement Yearbook**, has released an electronic version of its many editions. **The College Catalog Collection** exists in two formats (fiche and online), but seems likely to become just one. Showing their traditionalism, reference librarians catch their breath and express dismay about the loss of the "print archive." On the other hand, no one laments the CD-ROM format of **Compact Disclosure**, a financial tool so complex in paper that it was all but unusable.

Occasionally publishers like to supplement their print reference work with a CD-ROM. The various **Hoover's** corporate directories appear annually and are an inexpensive alternative to larger established directories. To make their product seem like a better bargain, the publisher includes supplemental information on a CD-ROM. Librarians are likely to catalog and encase the disk before moving it into a separate non-print media collection, either in or outside of reference. It's ironic that publishers choose one of the most permanent forms of publishing as the medium for some of the most ephemeral information they have.

Reference librarians can be persuaders on matters such as format. They are, after all, the market that publishers must reach. But the economics of book publishing will also drive format decisions. Right now publishers are trying to cope with the variety of electronic formats and standards to determine what may become the next hot storage and retrieval device, decisions which carry very large start-up costs. Just as some publishers took steps to convert their product to CD-ROM, others began offering access to their publications through client-servers or the Web. Going one step further, **SilverPlatter** has announced that they are working to make their products available in **DVD**. Others will be watching carefully.

The print side of reference publishing has not exactly been running in place either. We have been blessed with an increasingly better selection of reference books than the skimpy compendia and unannotated bibliographies so common 20 years ago. Then you would not have found subject encyclopedias as authoritative as those published by **Grove's Dictionaries** or **Macmillan**, literary sets as comprehensive as those we see from **Gale** and **Scribners**, topical handbooks such as those published by **ABC-Clío**, and directories aimed at capturing even the smallest of organizations and corporations. In many respects we are in a Golden Age of reference publishing when one considers just those titles to have emerged in the last ten years: *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. (OUP, 1989); *The Dictionary of Art* (Grove's, 1996); *The Encyclopedia of Bioethics* revised ed. (Macmillan, 1995); *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Macmillan, 1987); and *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Money and Finance* (Stockton, 1992), among others.

Some reference books have suffered attrition in the electronic age, outflanked by a medium that updates more frequently and can be searched more flexibly. Among those which have less relative value today are bibliographies, library catalogs, and periodical indexes. While subject bibliographies continue to be published in surprising numbers, the monographic bibliography is more likely to be a form reserved for truly scholarly subjects and kept alive by approval plans. Dictionary catalogs have been displaced by **WorldCat**, which not only has ten searchable fields,

but also links to the local institution's interlibrary loan module, a compelling interactive feature. A few acquisitions lists, such as those of **Harvard's Baker Business Library**, serve a purpose as a selection tool and as a measure of one's local holdings. Print periodical indexes, such as those in the **Wilson** series, are seriously challenged by much larger electronic products which cumulate many years in one file.

The changes wrought upon reference were in more or less equal parts sought by reference librarians, driven by technology, and demanded by our users. A certain trendiness has always been evident in reference objectives, regardless of practicality. To their credit, librarians were leaders in persuading recalcitrant faculty that online catalogs were just as systematic and complete as card catalogs. Sometimes that persuasion took the form of removing all the cards over Spring Break, a fact some faculty didn't notice until they found an abundance of scratch cards where the card catalog used to be.

But electronic advances in reference also have a downside which should not pass unnoticed. Just as some print reference books are more worthy than others, the reliability of electronic resources, particularly free ones, is notoriously variable and far more difficult for young people to assess. Users may wind up turning to reference librarians merely as credentialed technicians who can help them find a browser, but never learn how to restrict a search to award-winning sites, for instance. If, as the cartoon has it, on the Internet no one knows you're a dog, it's equally true that many 19-year-olds have a hard time discerning whether your Web page is a "dog."

We may be facing a rising generation of young adults who see all information as equal, all knowledge as relative, all wisdom as variant forms of opinion, some of it expressed more forcefully or graphically than others.

But it will be the responsibility of reference librarians to insist on high standards for reference books and Web sites; to teach assessment techniques; to spread the word through review media; and to create useful links to reliable reference sources. Reference librarians need to reinforce their role as partners in the research interests of all those patrons with their beguiling questions. 🐕

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