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Biz of Acq — Online Vendor Services

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Column Editor's Note: *As acquisitions librarians have come to embrace the Internet as a marvelous business tool, monograph and serial vendors have followed suit in developing resources that exploit the potentials of integrated library systems and networked acquisitions operations. In this month's column, Rob Withers, Systems/Technical Services Librarian at Western Maryland College, describes the range of electronic services provided by monograph and serials vendors, and discusses the wonderful possibilities these tools present for improving performance and lowering costs. Withers also notes that the potential for systems consolidation offered by these resources may compel librarians to rethink such basic issues as staffing, workflow, and task distribution within the acquisitions department — and even the organization of materials selection throughout the library. — RR*

The commercialization of the World Wide Web has changed the way many people do business by allowing them to perform a host of different transactions in one place, without mediation by a sales person, and at the time of their choosing. Bank customers perform financial transactions, consumers make purchases, and, most importantly to those of us who acquire materials for libraries, acquisitions staff process orders, all using resources developed by companies with whom they do business and have services made available over the World Wide Web.

Although Internet access has revolutionized the use of online vendor databases, vendor databases actually pre-date the World Wide Web. Vendor-based automated acquisitions systems date back to **Baker & Taylor's BATAB**, unveiled in 1969. This system supported selection lists, automatic purchase order printing, claiming, fund accounting, and generating statistical reports.¹ Since then, **Yankee Book Peddler's Folio** service and **Blackwell's Blackwell Connect** paved the way for remote login to vendor databases.² As **Lynne Branche Brown** observed, "the low cost of personal computers, local area networks, and access to the Internet have provided more and more libraries of all sizes the ability to access systems and services once affordable only by the largest libraries." As a result, vendors' in-house databases have become available to users, and acquisitions departments have grown closer to their business partners.³

The development of online services provided by vendors such as **Ambassador Book Services**, **Blackwell's Book Service**, **Coutts**, **Midwest Library Service**, and **Yankee Book Peddler** and others, has increased the efficiency with which acquisitions staff process orders. As these services grow more sophisticated, they provide information which would previously have been available only from consulting a wide range of resources, including library materials, publishers catalogs, sales representatives, and integrated library systems. While these systems have not totally eclipsed more specialized resources, they often allow acquisitions personnel the option of using one resource to perform many order processing functions.

An excellent overview of the services pro-

vided by individual vendor services appeared in this November's *Against the Grain*.⁴ The present article, based on the author's experience, an examination of acquisitions department Web pages, and results of a survey distributed on **AcqNet-L** — the Internet mailing list for acquisitions librarians⁵ — will examine the ways in which these tools are being used, or may potentially be used, by librarians and library staff.

Verifying Price/Availability

Many libraries consult their primary vendor's database to verify price and availability. Results from a survey placed on **AcqNet** indicate that this is the most frequently used function by library staff. There is one drawback to the information provided by most vendor databases, however. Unlike **Amazon.com**, few vendors provide the estimated amount of time needed to ship the book. This omission impedes the ability of acquisitions staff to predict the turnaround time of individual orders, and when under pressure to quickly obtain an item, acquisitions staff may use **Amazon.com** if it indicates whether or not the book will ship in the nick of time.

Vendor databases can help people outside of the acquisitions department to verify orders, as well. Some vendors allow database access by more than one user, each with a different level of security. Using this scheme, libraries can provide acquisitions staff with accounts which include the ability to place electronic orders, but supply selectors with accounts which lack this privilege. Collection development personnel and others involved in the selection process can search their or-

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principles in an age of consortia and electronic resources.

In "The Real World of Integrating Electronic Resources into a Web OPAC," **Christina E. Carter**, **Sever Bordeianu**, and **Nancy Dennis**, all from the **University of New Mexico General Library**, reported on the issues and surprises that they encountered while implementing a Web-based version of **INNOPAC**, their online public access catalog. They gave attendees a peek into their reality, discussed planning for the hardware upgrade, and described how collaborative teams worked on issues to be faced upon implementation of WebPAC. They looked at issues from the perspective of Systems, Cataloging and Maintenance, and Reference. Infrastructure requirements were discussed, basic hardware configurations for the desktop were suggested, cataloging and maintenance workflow and processing issues were addressed, and sample item and check-in records were displayed. Sev-

services for libraries. Successful vendors will continue those core

eral reference issues were raised, changes in periodical research were outlined, and policy issues, end-user policies, instruction, and staff training were discussed. Attendees were reminded that "it takes a village to successfully plan, implement, and support a Web-based OPAC."

In "Digital Information: The Library Director as Collection Development Officer and Head of Technical Services," **Kit Kennedy**, Director of Academic Sales for **Blackwell's Information Services**, **George Lupone**, Deputy Director of **Cleveland State University Library**, and **Jane A. Hedberg**, Serials Librarian and Preservation Officer of **Wellesley College**, briefly discussed how, due to long-range, political and cost implications for digital information, library directors are increasingly taking a hands-on approach in collection development and technical services regarding this electronic information. Attendees were then divided into two small groups, with each group given a different scenario to discuss. After these discussions concluded, each small group shared its thoughts and recommendations with the larger group.

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ders, rather than handing them to acquisitions staff for verification. One survey respondent felt that this setup could be dangerous, as people with poor searching skills or limited attention might not select the proper title; several others indicated that this setup, presumably with an acceptable level of error, was used at their institution.

However, use of vendor databases and Amazon.com does not preclude use of traditional services such as **Books in Print**. Close to 12% of American acquisitions Web pages listed in **Peter Stevens'** collection of acquisition department Websites⁶ include links to **Books in Print**, or mention of a CD-ROM based version of that product. Thus, this traditional tool continues to be useful for some items, presumably those not listed in either Amazon.com or in vendor databases.

Placing Orders (Within the Department)

Online services generally allow the option of placing orders through their service. How well this service is received often depends on whether or not the service has a direct interface with the library system. One survey respondent indicated that they had stopped using this feature when they migrated to a new integrated library system which lacked an interface; the result was that orders had to be double keyed, once in the vendor's system, then again in the integrated library system.

As **Dorothy Marcinko** predicted, however, vendors are becoming aware of the problems double keying can cause, and are developing workarounds.⁷ Some services have a direct interface with library systems, allowing transactions to occur simultaneously in the vendor's service and in the integrated system. **GOBILink**, which provides an interface between **Yankee Book Peddler's Gobi** and some integrated library systems, is an example of such an interface. Without such an interface, the ability to place orders can depend on departmental policy. Libraries may not feel comfortable ordering through a vendor database if placing an order in this manner does not automatically adjust funds in the integrated system.

Allowing Selectors to Place Orders

Many online services allow authorized users to create selection lists and/or place orders. While selection lists are available on some kinds of library software (e.g., **Dynix**), they aren't a universal feature. Some vendor databases, however, can be configured to allow selectors to create desiderata lists, which can be quickly reviewed by acquisitions staff and then ordered through the online service.⁸ Depending on how the user profiles are configured, selectors can even place orders without review by acquisitions staff.

One of the most revolutionary implications of online services is that they potentially allow people outside the acquisitions departments to place orders directly. Online services generally allow administrators to set up multiple fund accounts. In those institutions where it is feasible to set up one account per selec-

tor, or where the selectors have sole responsibility for any particular account, the selector may be able to place orders directly, without mediation by acquisitions staff. This method of ordering may prove problematic, however, unless either (a) all orders are placed with one vendor, or (b) funds are broken down by both subject matter and vendor.

Generating Order Reports

Online services allow authorized users to request and receive order reports. Nowhere are the idiosyncrasies and differences among vendor systems more evident than in their report modules. The specific reports available, and the means of generating them, can vary greatly. As a result, the use of reports features will require the most training, and hence the greatest investment of staff time, particularly if staff are using more than one integrated system.⁹

While the specific types of reports available vary from one service to another, most services will produce lists of open orders, orders placed during a particular time period, and recent shipments. Some databases, including **Midwest Library Service's InterAcq** and the new **Ambassador Book Service** database, allow libraries either to claim books or to request information on books located through searches. Several librarians report that they rely on open order reports generated by vendor databases to decide what to claim, rather than, or in addition to, reports generated by the library's integrated system.

Sometimes, the vendor may find creative ways to enhance the communication of que-

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ries. **Yankee Book Peddler's Gobi** allows the option of e-mailing order reports, rather than generating them on the Web—which can be handy if the Internet is sluggish, or if the report needs to be viewed by someone other than the person generating the report. **Midwest** offers one of the more interesting features included in order reports: their **InterAcq** system keeps a record of responses sent to the library by Midwest staff.

Reports for series orders allow users to retrieve information about individual titles within series or sets. Several users reported that such reports do not, however, always include information about the status of each title or the last action taken on the order. One survey respondent noted that: "We never know (unless we maintain folders of all our email correspondence, which is cumbersome and time-consuming to search) when the action was called for or why it was called for. Over time standing orders get canceled, etc., and patrons and bibliographers many times want to know the reason a book or slip is received or not."

Vendor systems differ from each other most markedly in the types of reports they provide and in the way they are generated. As **Brown** notes, for each system used, staff members must take time to develop expertise, for instance by learning which reports are available on each system, and how they are generated.¹⁰

Providing Cataloging Records

All vendor services supply some bibliographic data; many, including **Midwest's InterAcq** and **Yankee Book Peddler's Gobi**, allow libraries to download MARC format records as well, thereby duplicating a function previously provided by bibliographic utilities. Libraries who place online orders through the vendor database may find this a tempting way to streamline workflow, since they may place orders and download records from the same site, rather than placing orders with one resource and downloading cataloging records from a bibliographic utility.

Limitations

As stated in the introduction, no database has completely supplanted other tools used to locate, place, and track orders. Foreign vendor databases are still needed to track overseas imprints, and many acquisitions pages provide links to verification services such as **Alapage**, vendors such as **Harrassowitz**, and online services such as **Casalini Libri's**, in addition to links to U.S. vendors' services.¹¹ Of the acquisitions department Web pages included in **Peter Stevens'** listing, 19% include links either to overseas vendors and/or foreign "in print" services. However, U.S. vendors are working to expand their coverage beyond the United States, with **Yankee** and **Blackwell's** both covering British publications and **Coutts** covering Canadian, French, and Cuban (!) imprints.

Out-of-print materials are also best searched through other services. **Amazon.com** is helpful for recently out of print or out of stock items, while services such as **Advanced Book Exchange**, **BiblioFind**, and **Interloc** are useful for less recent materials. Nearly half of those libraries responding to a survey on **AcqNet** indicated that they used **Advanced Book Exchange** and **BiblioFind**, with slightly less using **Interloc** and **Amazon.com**. One survey respondent commented that the searching on these services was superior to any of the vendor's online services. Several other respondents mentioned that the searching features were comparable to, or better than, those on vendor services. A possible drawback to using these services is arranging for payment. The most effective way to purchase books through **Amazon.com** is through the use of a credit card, which not all libraries have.¹² The three OP services mentioned above require prospective buyers to make their purchases directly from book dealers which can involve negotiations as to condition of the materials and charges for shipping, and in some cases, currency conversion. Just last month the library at **Western Maryland College** found that a requested item was available, but only from an Australian OP dealer. Because the dealer was located within two weeks of the end of the fiscal year, the library decided not to try to arrange purchase and shipment.

Publishers' catalogs also supplement online vendor services in some cases. One person responding to a survey noted that online catalogs are helpful when selectors order new items that "aren't listed in [my vendor's online service] and may be nothing more than a gleam in the eye of the publisher." Not all publishers' home pages are equally useful: some allow keyword searching, but others may offer nothing more than lists arranged by subject or seasonal catalogs, and a few still have no catalogs at all.

Conclusion

Online vendors' tools have evolved into sophisticated and user-friendly resources for processing firm and standing orders. Current vendor products offer services traditionally provided by acquisitions modules (ordering, creating order reports, tracking fund activities) and cataloging utilities (downloading MARC records). As a result, selectors may be able to participate more directly in the order process, and acquisitions staff may be able to depend less on customer service representatives, print tools, and bibliographic utilities. As **Brown** observes, the integration of a vendor system into a library's workflow strengthens the library's ties with the vendor and increases the difficulties in moving to a new vendor.¹³ Moreover, as vendor services achieve the ability to interact with established library systems, they will likely become established fixtures within acquisitions operations.

How these developments will affect the ways in which acquisitions work is performed,

and also the number and type of library staff participating in the order process, will depend on the continuing evolution of vendor-based systems and the flexibility and inventiveness of library personnel. What is certain is that the ongoing development of vendor tools, by presenting new options and new processes, confronts us with the challenge of reinventing the way in which the order process works.

Endnotes

¹ Hale, Marylou. "Automated Library Acquisitions and the Internet: A New Model for Business." *New Automation Technology for Acquisitions and Collection Development* (Haworth Press, 1995): 68.

² Hale, "Automated Library Acquisitions," 76-77.

³ Brown, Lynne Branche. "Integrating Vendor Systems into Acquisitions Workflow." *New Automation Technology for Acquisitions and Collection Development* (Haworth Press: 1995): 83-84.

⁴ Luther, Judy. "Innovations Affecting Us: Second Generation Online Systems from Book Vendors." *Against the Grain* no. 5 (November 1997): 88-91.

⁵ ACQNET-L@LISTSERV.APPSTATE.EDU.

⁶ Stevens, Peter. Acquisitions Web Sites, <http://weber.u.washington.edu/~acqdiv/acqstaff.html#acqweb>.

⁷ Marcinko, Dorothy K. "Acquisitions and Vended Services: A Personal View." *New Automation Technology for Acquisitions and Collection Development* (Haworth Press: 1995): 92.

⁸ Eastern Mennonite University, for example, provides access to its vendor database "for all EMU faculty as an alternate method for book selection. Faculty may search the database and select titles for purchase instead of filling out book request cards. These titles will be saved in EMU's account and will be checked and printed periodically by the Acquisitions Administrator." No More Filling Out Book Request Cards, <http://www.emu.edu/units/library/gobi.htm>.

⁹ Brown, "Integrating Vendor Systems," 87.

¹⁰ Brown, "Integrating Vendor Systems," 87.

¹¹ Alapage, a French equivalent to *Books in Print*, <http://www.alapage.tm.fr/>; Harrassowitz Booksellers, <http://www.harrassowitz.de/>; Casalini Libri, <http://www.casalini.com/>.

¹² The library at the author's institution, Western Maryland College, recently was granted a credit card. The successful request for this credit card was accompanied by documentation, including the responses from one survey on **AcqNet** and another on the **COLLIB-L** discussion group (**COLLIB-L@WIL-LAMETTE.EDU**). The survey results from **AcqNet** indicated that libraries at a cross section of institutions differing in size, prestige, and endowment had justified the use of a credit card (**AcqNet** 8 no. 1 (Jan. 7, 1998)). The **COLLIB-L** survey found that 60% of responding libraries had a credit card, and that those libraries which had a credit card were from a cross section of institutions differing in size, prestige, and endowment. (Results of these surveys will be reposted at <http://hoover.wmdc.edu/ccard.html>.)

¹³ Brown, "Integrating Vendor Systems," 87.