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Biz of Acq — Challenging Materials: Taming the Continuations Monster

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Column Editor's Note: Librarians in many types of libraries struggle with the knotty problem of continuations. For their timeliness and depth and breadth of treatment, these materials have an essential place in research collections. Yet their uniquely "monstrous" nature, which blends characteristics of monographs and serials, presents the acquisitions librarian with many challenges—especially in terms of choosing the proper acquisitions technique, and obtaining useful data with which to select the right vendor. In our column for this issue, **Reba Leiding**, Collection Development Librarian at James Madison University Library, expertly surveys the intricacies of continuations ac-

quisitions, and offers us valuable guidance on finding the best solution for our local circumstances. — RR

Definitions and Difficulties

You know continuations are difficult when you can't agree on a definition. Some people in the serials world define them narrowly as sets that are published over a period of years, with a planned conclusion in mind. Others would include the whole gamut of non-periodical serials, such as numbered and unnumbered monographic series, multivolume sets, annuals, yearbooks, conference proceedings, and supplements. Some come as the result of memberships, or publisher service plans. For the purposes of this article, we will assume that continuations include the broad range of

examples noted above. Further, we will distinguish a continuation as the material itself, while a standing order is the open-ended acquisition process for obtaining these materials.

Most of us involved with serials or acquisitions could come up with a confusing or harrowing continuations story, even if we haven't been in the business very long. Why are these materials so problematic? Because they don't fit into a single category, and, as we all know, it's human nature to want to pigeon-hole things. (I would say it's a particular trait of librarians, but I don't want to perpetuate that stereotype.)

In a 1994 article, **Walter P. Hogan** devised a 27-cell matrix to analyze how continuations fit into nine technical processing routines, and found that they fell into a 3-3-3 distribution.¹ This may be the only recorded instance of continuations falling neatly into a pattern. Hogan found that continuations shared three characteristics of periodicals (ongoing expense, open-ended order, permanent checkin records), three of monographs (payment upon receipt, pieces are usually complete, items circulate separately), and three characteristics that aren't consistently like either books or periodicals (the basic unit is the volume, plus two varying local processing requirements). It's these odd characteristics which make it difficult to fit continuations into a processing workflow.

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There are other messy issues associated with continuations. Administrators don't like them because costs are difficult to predict. Payment is made after items are received, not in advance as with a subscription, and irregular publishing may mean last year's continuations expenditure isn't a good predictor for next. Further, price increases usually aren't announced.

If your institution's budget structure has a line for continuations, you are obligated to track their expenditures separately, but if not, you may have continuations payments in either or both your monograph and serials lines, depending on how they were ordered, what vendor supplies them, or who does the processing. There are probably many technical services departments out there which process continuations in a particular section based on a long-standing historical practice ("twenty years ago Shirley in serials handled all standing orders"), rather than any analysis of current workflows.

In order to reduce escalating serials budgets, many libraries are tempted to cancel their standing orders and order volumes using book funds. Acquisitions librarians hate this maneuver because they know these challenging materials are much more difficult to maintain without a vendor's assistance, and because firm orders mean more work for staff. Selector librarians should hate it too, because the burden is on them to track continuations in their subject areas, and it's likely they will neglect to order needed volumes, especially when they are intentionally skipping volumes to cut costs. Any savings are probably illusory anyway. Canceling a standing order may mean losing an existing discount. And while sparing the serials budget, continuations ordered as monographs are quietly eroding an already threatened book budget.

Of course, many libraries order at least some continuations directly in those cases where they want to maintain control of difficult materials, for example those tricky IEEE series. But in an era of downsized technical services staffs, it's not a good idea to try to manage all of a library's continuations without the partnership of a vendor. Continuations are difficult from an acquisitions standpoint because they present the librarian with an opportunity of choice in the type of

vendor—book vendor or serials jobber. Each type of vendor approaches continuations in a different way.

Go with a Book Vendor?

Many articles in the literature—as well as many librarians in the field—have emphasized the advantages of book vendors over serials vendors. The biggest advantage noted is the possibility of a discount for continuations titles, rather than a service charge. A book vendor may already have an existing relationship with the monograph publisher, and be better able to handle materials that are "bookish" in nature—monographic series, some annuals, etc. If the library has an approval plan with the book vendor, the vendor can coordinate the two services and ensure that duplicates are eliminated. Libraries can receive the same discount for continuations titles that are included in the vendor's approval plan as they do for other approval titles. And book vendor continuation services can provide assistance in transferring existing standing order accounts from the current supplier to their service. I spoke with one vendor, **Yankee Book Peddler**, that utilized notification slips in the transition from another supplier to their service. The library ordered from slips until the transition in accounts was complete, thus eliminating any duplicates.

It may be advantageous to acquire some monographic series through the approval plan if libraries are not interested in all titles associated with a series. As pointed out by **Warzala**, a monographic series may cover a wide range of subject areas, not all of which are within the scope of the series title.² In fact, publishers have been known to group monographs under a series title simply as a marketing tool, and sometimes these "new series" are actually existing titles repackaged in paperback. Receiving these series through an approval plan presents the opportunity to evaluate the material and return those items not suitable or needed for the collection.

The disadvantage of obtaining continuations as approvals is that it may mean more work for those who manage or evaluate approval materials, especially for those series where you want most or all volumes anyway. Receiving continuations as monographs and approvals may mean an adjustment in workflows and work levels as some materials formerly handled as serials are now received as monographs. Book vendors aren't going to handle subscriptions, so those materials acquired on a subscription basis, as well as materials

received through memberships or subscriptions to other titles, will have to be handled in other ways. Some book vendors will not work with "net" publishers (i.e. publishers that don't offer a discount).

Lastly, it may take longer to get materials by going through a book vendor rather than ordering direct or through a periodicals vendor who drop/ships. However, **Rouzer** argues in his article that approval plans can be just as expedient in providing materials from U.S. publishers.³

Or A Periodicals Vendor?

So what are the advantages of using a periodicals vendor? It may be useful to consolidate most of your continuations titles—monographic series as well as materials obtained by subscription and memberships—with a serials jobber, especially if the vendor does a good job in supplying these materials. Some libraries may need to consolidate all serials purchases with a single vendor for administrative convenience. You may be able to reduce service charges for standing orders or negotiate a better overall service charge rate on subscriptions by consolidating your standing orders and periodicals with a single vendor. This may be determined by the overall number and mix of titles in your serials collection; for example, a large number of STM subscriptions with their higher margin may allow the vendor to be more flexible on service charges for continuations. The serials jobber may be better able to handle the periodical nature of continuations, that is the claims, changes in frequency, determining the current volume, and so on. Reports from a periodicals vendor may contain more information, covering costs per year, titles and volumes per year by series title, as well as information on costs over several years by series title.

Continuations Under Analysis

To tame the continuations monster, you have to get to know it and analyze it. This means developing a complete list of titles,

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plus all other pertinent information, including publishers, suppliers, publishing history, cost information, library holdings, ordering history, start dates, and cancellation dates—in other words, a continuations database. This database is useful for determining which type of vendor to approach for a quote on handling your continuations, or for evaluating the mix of titles with regard to current vendors, processing routines, and so on. And, if you are considering changing vendors or consolidating titles, such comprehensive information enables a vendor to form a realistic quote, and gives them a chance to develop an attractive pricing package. The database is a valuable resource for collection development decisions such as cancellation projects.

If you already have such a database - congratulations! That is the reward for keeping on top of continuations. If you don't, collecting the information may not be an easy task, especially if standing orders have been canceled and titles ordered inconsistently from monograph funds in the past. It may mean starting from scratch, or finding a historical continuations file and doing some research to update it. The task may still be a difficult one if current standing orders exist but are supplied by numerous sources and processed in various ways in your technical services unit. The library's integrated system may be able to generate a listing, provided continuations have been coded consistently. Get input on the database's completeness from all persons involved with these materials, including serials and acquisitions staff who are familiar with current standing orders, or (in the case of cancellations) worked with them in the past. Ideally, acquisitions or serials staff are already working closely with subject selectors and reference librarians, since many continuations are reference titles.

The form a continuations database will take depends on specific local needs. The library's integrated system may be able to accommodate needed coding elements and generate lists or management reports.⁴ Or the ease of manipulation and calculation offered by a spreadsheet or other database software may mean a separate database is more useful. Maybe someday soon integrated library systems will provide reports that convert easily into a spreadsheet, or are so flexible that a separate database isn't needed. Once they are under control, continuations won't hurt you, and knowledge of your library's particular mix of titles can help you make the best decisions regarding evaluating materials, choosing vendors, establishing processing workflows, and making collection development decisions.

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