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Biz of Acq — Out-of-Print Books: A Practical, Web-Based Solution

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Column Editor's Note: *Acquisitions librarians seem unanimous in their praise for how the Internet has improved out-of-print searching and purchasing. Yet Internet out-of-print tools can be extremely labor intensive, and do not always fit comfortably into library acquisitions workflows. Integrating Internet resources into the OP search process may therefore require experimentation and considerable creativity. In this month's column, Michelle Flinchbaugh, Acquisitions Librarian at the Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, describes how her acquisitions team successfully incorporated the Internet into OP work. She then details the procedure that works best at her library. — RR*

I recently undertook my first out-of-print acquisitions project. At the outset I knew that the Internet had made locating out-of-print books easier than in the past. Yet I still thought that out-of-print searching would be somewhat difficult, time-consuming, or expensive. To my surprise, I found that locating and purchasing out-of-print books was cheap and easy, because most of the decisions and work involved could be assigned to student workers.

As a relatively new library with a relatively new collection, **Albin O. Kuhn Library** at the **University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)**, urgently needed to find a way to effectively purchase out-of-prints, especially those items specifically requested by faculty for research and teaching. Historically in many libraries out-of-print "wish-lists" were turned over to professional search services that would attempt to locate titles. Alternatively, "wish-lists" were sent to numerous bookstores, each of which would provide those titles they had in stock. Yet these processes were expensive and time-consuming, and the results were at best marginal, with success rates seldom more than 10% (Tafari). **UMBC** library, like many libraries, historically could not purchase out-of-prints because of the high price of poor results.

As a new acquisitions librarian, I had to figure out the out-of-print "riddle" from the beginning. Our out-of-print backlog, which stretched back to the 1970's, was sorted by subject area, to facilitate sending orders to search services or bookstores specializing in the subject area. This method obviously had not worked very well in the past, and I did

not think it would work very well now. I suspected that Internet searching might be the key. Internet searching can, in fact, revolutionize out-of-print buying if we are willing to change the way we work and utilize Web sites, and credit cards. Hit rates become much higher and prices much lower. (Black)

While our old and low priority backlog of out-of-prints might have languished for some time, I immediately had to begin purchasing out-of-prints in response to faculty requests. When the first requests came, I began surfing the Web. There were copies of the books I was looking for all over the place, and it took me less than a minute to find a copy of each.

At first I thought, "Wow, this is really easy," but this was, in fact, when it became complicated. There were many sites, often with many listings for each book. My main problem was not locating copies, but rather determining how to sort through the available copies on the various sites. It also quickly became apparent that the various sites functioned in vastly different ways, and that I would have to understand the different functions of each site in order to make intelligent decisions. What follows is an annotated list of out-of-print Web sites that we at **UMBC** have found particularly useful. The list is not comprehensive.

Abebooks (<http://www.abebooks.com/>). This site lists for numerous out-of-print bookstores and allows you to order but not purchase through it. That is, financial transactions take place between the purchaser and individual booksellers.

AddAll (<http://www.addall.com/AddBooks/Stores.html>). This is a meta search site that searches numerous other sites. It lays out the results in a chart so that you can compare prices among the sites. You can't order or purchase through it.

Alibris (<http://www.alibris.com/>). This is a search site for an out-of-print dealer catering to libraries. They have a warehouse and a network of out-of-print dealers. You can order and purchase through them.

Barnes and Noble (<http://shop.barnesandnoble.com/oopbooks/>). Barnes and Noble has a network of out-of-print dealers. You can order and purchase through them.

Bibliofind (<http://www.bibliofind.com/>). This site lists for numerous out-of-print bookstores and allows you to order but not purchase

through it. That is, financial transactions take place between the purchaser and individual booksellers.

BookAvenue (<http://www.BookAvenue.com/>). This site lists for numerous out-of-print bookstores and allows you to order and purchase through it.

Bookfinder (<http://www.bookfinder.com/>). This is a meta search site that searches numerous other sites. It lays out the results in a chart so that you can compare prices among the sites. You can't order or purchase through it.

Powells (<http://www.powells.com/>). Powells sells new and out-of-print books. You can order and purchase through them.

21 North Main (<http://www.21northmain.com/>). This site lists for a network of out-of-print dealers. You can order and purchase through it.

In our initial use of these Internet out-of-print services at **UMBC**, close scrutiny of the records retrieved proved that the same booksellers were listing on many, if not all, of the sites. Many listings were, however, for apparently different copies of the titles. Determining which copy we might want to purchase proved quite tricky, as the listings were themselves in bookseller jargon, which I did not understand. I found **Bibliofind's** help file included a "Glossary of Antiquarian Book Collectors Terms" (<http://www.bibliofind.com/privatelabel/glossary.htm>), and was able to translate. To my surprise "8vo" had nothing to do with volumes, but with the folds of the pages, indicating something about the size of the book, and "wrappers" means soft cover.

Information pertaining to the book's condition, such as "shaken," (indicating the book is no longer firm in its covers) proved particularly difficult to process because, without mending experience, I could judge neither what we could repair, nor the time and expense involved. Very soon I was trying to judge the relative merits of a "shaken" book for \$50, and a "rubbed" book for \$75, "wrappers" for \$30, or "fine" for \$100! Consultation with our local mending expert was a must!

Keeping in mind state procurement regulations, I could eventually determine with reasonable certainty the cheapest copy in reasonable condition, and we would try to buy

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it. This was also more complicated than one might initially think. First, some companies would not accept VISA, but wouldn't hold a book long enough for us to get a purchase order. Some companies refused to hold books at all. Still others simply refused to respond to the inquiries required by our VISA procedures. Finally, acquisitions staff absences and other events delayed the processing of the orders, causing items put on hold to be lost.

We managed to mostly fill occasional faculty orders for out-of-print items, but this highly labor-intensive enterprise seemed clearly impractical for our large backlog. However, research in the library literature did not yield practical options. In one article **Rosanna M. O'Neil** recounts the general methods mentioned at an **ALTCs Out-of-Print** discussion group: 1. reprint on demand, 2. online books, 3. OP search services, and 4. used book databases (O'Neil). However, none of these options seemed viable for us. Reprint on demand services would only provide a relatively small percentage of our out-of-prints. At that time we weren't yet purchasing online books. Out-of-print search services were prohibitively expensive for our modest book budget. **Narda Tafuri** described outsourcing an out-of-print project to a wholesaler in a 1998 *Against the Grain* "Biz of Acq" article. While this method had definite advantages that **Tafuri** described, the wholesaler only supplied 15-20% of the books, and **Tafuri** reported that they cost up to 50% more than if purchased from the individual booksellers (Tafuri).

After reviewing the capabilities of the various World Wide Web sites, I came up with three totally different options:

Option 1: Use one large out-of-print retailer, preferably one that lists online. Using one bookstore would greatly simplify workflow, since we would have to make the vendor decision once and only once. In this case, the retailer could presumably bear the burden of providing copies in reasonable condition and at a reasonable price. However, the retailer would have only limited holdings, and would be unable to provide many titles. In addition, since we would not be doing price or quality comparisons on a title-by-title basis, we would not be sure that we were obtaining the best quality, lowest-priced copy on the market.

Option 2: Use an online vendor that in fact acts as a search service by maintaining a network of other bookstores and that actually sells books owned by third parties. These vendors offer the same advantages of using a single bookstore or bookseller in so far as we would be doing business with only one company. They also offer choices in terms of condition and price, allowing some shopping for materials in the best condition. However, these are in fact "middle men" who

charge for their service, resulting almost always in higher prices than elsewhere on the market. My observation was that these books usually cost at least 30% more, and sometimes as much as 100% more, than if purchased from individual booksellers.

Option 3: Do business with individual booksellers, and use **AddAll** to find the best deal. **AddAll** lists holdings from both individual online booksellers and networks of online booksellers. **AddAll's** scope is so large—embracing books offered by thousands of companies—that if a copy is available, **AddAll** should find it. Yet **AddAll's** rich search results make our decision-making very complex. We must simultaneously consider the vendor, quality, and price of each title.

We preferred Option 3 because it would give us the highest fill rate at the lowest cost. Although Option 3 initially appeared to be the most time consuming solution, I realized that actually just filling most of the orders would reduce repeated handling, likely reducing the duration of the project and the amount of staff time needed to complete it. While Option 3 might require more staff-time up front, this option would likely require less staff-time for follow up.

While we were able to do projects in the summer, the staff available had limited time, so much of the work would have had to be done by student workers. If we wanted to do Option 3, we would have had to reduce the complex decision-making to an easy-to-follow decision tree, and develop defined procedures for each step of the ordering process. I initially thought this would not be possible. Yet after doing enough out-of-print ordering myself, I realized that this was a set of routine tasks similar to all the other types of ordering we do. The entire project was reduced to the following simple steps:

1. Students searched each book in our catalog to determine if we had subsequently purchased it or another edition of it. Selectors were notified of our results, and were asked if they still wanted us to buy a copy. If they didn't, we deleted the order in the system if there was one. Otherwise we proceeded to search and purchase the book.

2. Students searched the books in **Books in Print**. If other editions were found to be available, we asked the appropriate selector if the in-print edition would suffice. If so, we purchased it. Otherwise we conducted an out-of-print search.

3. Lead Students (LS) (high performing students with substantial training and higher pay) searched the items in **AddAll**. LS were taught to limit the search results if necessary, and then to sort the items by price in ascending order. LS were given a list of Maryland book dealers listing on **AddAll**. LS were in-

structed to select any copies owned by Maryland book dealers (as required by state procurement regulations), unless in poor condition or substantially more expensive than other available copies. Otherwise LS were instructed to select the first hardcover listed in reasonable condition, which would be the cheapest since the titles had been sorted by price. LS would then click the link and view the vendor information to confirm that the vendor accepted VISA. If the vendor did not, LS were instructed to select the next best copy. Items not found were held for one month then re-searched.

4. Upon selecting a copy, the LS would copy and paste the vendor and title information from **AddAll** into an e-mail inquiry template. Minor reformatting was required, but this generally took less than a minute. The LS then e-mailed the inquiries to staff, who checked them and the selection, and forwarded them to the vendor.

5. Upon receipt of a positive response from the vendor, the staff member would prepare a VISA order according to normal procedure, forwarding the order to the Account Clerk to be placed. If the vendor's response was negative, the order would go back to the LS to be re-searched.

The project has successfully eliminated our backlog of out-of-print orders, and also has provided us with workable out-of-print procedures that we are using on an ongoing basis. Acquisitions librarians enthusiastically report 50-90% success rates and good prices using the Web in **Eamon T. Fennessy's** 1999 *Against the Grain* "Biz of Acq" article (Fennessy), and I've found that, with careful thought and planning, we can use the Web quite effectively. However, constant changes in the available search services, Web sites, and the pricing of out-of-print books demand that we frequently re-visit out-of-print decisions and procedures. Ironically, we can already foresee the obsolescence of used book e-businesses as the best means of filling orders for out-of-print books, as innovations like online books and reprint on demand services emerge.

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