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Biz of Acq — UMBC@BuyBooksFast.Com: Choosing and Using an Online Vendor to Improve Acquisitions Services

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Column Editor's Note: *We are all acutely aware of our patrons' heightened expectations of library acquisitions departments; online bookstores have accustomed library users to high fill rates and accelerated delivery. How can academic libraries hope to meet such standards? In this month's column, Michelle Flinchbaugh, Acquisitions Librarian at University of Maryland, Baltimore County, describes a multi-faceted approach to re-engineering acquisitions services. First, she outlines a method for choosing an online bookseller to use for rush and difficult orders. Next, she relates how her unit re-designed job assignments and revamped procedures to improve performance and make the department more responsive to users' needs. —RR*

Obtaining books quickly is a new goal for the **University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)** Library Acquisitions Department. Faculty had been asking why it took us so long to get books that they could get in a week from **Amazon.com**. Increasing expectations, created by the fast service provided by online book vendors, are putting new pressures on libraries and acquisitions librarians everywhere. **UMBC**, "An Honors University in Maryland," founded in 1966, is a fast-growing university that just achieved Carnegie Foundation Doctoral/Research University-Extensive classification. **UMBC's Albin O. Kuhn Library** holds approximately 750,000 volumes, and purchases approximately 9,000 new volumes each year. **UMBC** library excels at finding ways of supporting doctoral research and a fast-growing student population, while not having the collections or resources of other research universities. Fast, "on-demand" book purchasing was identified as one way to compensate for a small collection, so **UMBC** library recognized a substantial ongoing need for better "on-demand" or "just-in-time" purchasing, and a generally higher level of customer service in acquisitions.¹ **UMBC** is not alone in doing this - "just-in-time" or "on-demand" purchasing has been a trend nationwide, with authors drawing attention to the need for "just-in-time" purchasing as early as 1996.

By and large, traditional library vendors offer specialized services and steep discounts, but not fast service. In a 1999 article,² **Dana Alessi**, then with **Baker & Taylor**, identified the following new, higher fill expectations:

60% of the books in 30 days, 90% in 60 days, and all orders filled within 90 days. While library vendors are adapting to these higher service expectations (over previous expectations cited by **Alessi** of 30% in 30 days, 60% in 60 days, and 90% in 90 days, and all in 120 days), online book vendors appear to have already surpassed them and set the bar to a much higher level.

In early 2000, when we began investigating how to achieve better fill times, it appeared that we would pay prices at or below list with online vendors, and receive the books fast too. Regrettably, fees for our primary library vendor's fastest rush service were very high, making the cost of each book purchased in this manner well over list. We were already using a credit card for book purchasing, and had already received consent from our procurement office to purchase with the credit card via secure connections on the World Wide Web. We therefore decided to try using online vendors for two purposes: 1) purchasing rush orders, except in instances in which we are contractually obligated to purchase from our primary library vendor (at the time, we handled approximately 300 rush orders a year); 2) purchasing items that our regular vendor does not provide within 4-6 months — such titles would remain an ongoing faculty relations problem, so long as those items were readily available online.

Although simply using **Amazon.com** was tempting, we wanted to insure we would get the best value for our money, so we chose to explore a range of online vendors. We designed a small-scale vendor evaluation based on information stated in the vendors' databases. Since vendors' actual performance might vary from statements made in their databases, we understood that this study could only tell us which vendors might meet our needs. In viewing the study results we were quick to abandon any vendor that did not seem to meet expectations. Further, as **Graham Black** pointed out in his 1994 article, "Why Do Evaluation?," an evaluation can help validate vendor selection, and our evaluation has been invaluable in justifying our choices.³

Using a meta-search site, <http://www.best-bookbuys.com>, student assistants searched an eclectic sample of 205 books that we were ordering, and compared the following factors across eleven online vendors: availability, anticipated fill-time, and cost.⁴ The searching took place from August-September 2000. The sample was not scientifically random, and rep-

resented convenient sets of typical orders we were handling at the time. Titles were usually academic (college-level), in English, and published within the last ten years. Anyone wishing to see a list of the titles may email me at <flinchba@umbc.edu>.

Availability

Efficiency dictated a reasonable hit rate in the vendor databases. Not only did we require that a vendor list a critical number of the items we wanted, but also that the vendor have a critical number in stock and ready to ship. We wanted any vendor to have immediately available at minimum 25% percent of the items in which we were interested. Low hit rates would diminish our returns, as more staff time would have to be spent searching other sources. As the hit rate diminished and the percentage of books we could purchase from a given vendor diminished, our returns for the time spent searching that vendor's database also diminished. Further, our fast service would be unmarketable unless we could achieve some consistency.

We measured availability as a simple percentage of the desired items that were in stock and ready to ship. If a vendor indicated that it could provide a book within two weeks, the book was considered available and scored a value of one. The item was considered unavailable and the vendor scored a value of zero if the vendor: 1) did not list the item; 2) indicated the item was a special order; 3) indicated the item was out-of-stock, on backorder, or out-of-stock indefinitely; 4) indicated the book was not yet available or not yet published; 5) indicated the item was on order; 6) could only provide used copies.

Six online vendors indicated they could provide at least 25% of the sample items: **Amazon**, **Barnes & Noble**, **Borders**, **Classbook**, **eCampus**, and **FatBrain**. Later experience actually purchasing from the vendors, however, proved that, while most vendors are accurate in stating what books they can provide, some are not. In an experiment, one vendor cancelled nearly all orders for titles listed as on-hand: the books were unavailable after all. We quickly abandoned that vendor.

Anticipated fill-time

Since our overall goal was to fill orders faster, fill-time was the most important factor in determining what vendor to use for rush orders. For the orders that our primary vendor had not filled within 4-6 months, fill-time was less important

continued on page 71

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Biz of Acq from page 70

Anticipated fill-time was simply measured as the average number of days it would take a vendor to ship an item. For each "available" sample item, student assistants entered into a spreadsheet the number of days in which the vendor stated they could ship the item. In cases where the number of days was listed as a range, such as 3-4 days, the student assistants input the lowest number. Results ranged from 1 to 10.09 days.

Cost

We hypothesized that faster service would cost more, but we were still interested in value. For rush orders, we were willing to pay top dollar to get the books as quickly as possible. For the regular orders that our primary vendor had not filled within 4-6 months, we were willing to wait longer if we could pay less. Across the board we wanted the best deal we could get.

We would have liked to compare the online vendors' stated prices to list or to the prices we would have paid our regular vendor, but getting that information would have required additional searching and substantially increased the labor needed to evaluate. Instead we measured cost as the dollar amount over the best price we could get from an online vendor. This did not tell us how much more we would be paying for the books than we would pay our regular vendor, but we are able to get the average price we pay per book from our library system.

We expected to see increased costs reflected in that statistic, but in our first year using online vendors, our price per volume actually decreased slightly. While this might have been caused by trivial variation in the kinds of materials we order, we know that we are actually paying online vendors less for some materials, such as popular videos, than we would pay traditional library vendors.

but still a concern, since we did not want the orders to languish again.

Student assistants used the following method to calculate the "dollar amount over the best price" we could get from an online vendor. First, the students entered the vendors' listed price for all items that qualified as available. They then found the lowest price and entered it into a "best price" cell in the spreadsheet. Next, they subtracted the "best price" from the vendor's listed price, and obtained the dollar amount over the best-listed price. No vendor consistently had the best price, so we averaged the "amount over best price" across the items, resulting in the average amount we would pay above the best price we could get online.

Results ranged from \$1.62-\$13.52 over best price. Interestingly, the highest priced vendors were not the fastest. The prices, in fact, did not seem to bear any relationship whatsoever to the other factors measured.

Vendor	Vendor Availability (percent of items searched that are available)	Cost (average dollar amount over "best price")	Anticipated fill-time (average in days)
1BookStreet	19.02%	\$9.29	2.95
Amazon	26.83%	\$11.46	1.98
Barnes & Noble	47.80%	\$9.45	1.72
Borders	31.22%	\$7.55	2.61
Buy.com	12.20%	\$8.68	1.00
Classbooks	50.24%	\$9.85	1.00
eCampus	28.29%	\$1.62	5.52
FatBrain	42.44%	\$8.01	10.09
Spree.com	10.73%	\$11.37	1.27
Textbooksatcost	16.59%	\$12.40	4.00
Textbooksource	17.07%	\$13.52	4.00

Since the sample used for this study was not randomly selected and not statistically significant, the results are valid only for the sample titles during the data collection period. Results should not be interpreted to represent overall vendor performance.

continued on page 72

Based on the criterion of availability, only six of the original eleven vendors were deemed suitable, and of those six, only four have stated anticipated fill times quick enough for rush orders. So far, **UMBC Library Acquisitions Department** has tried three vendors and found two suitable. We will continue trying out vendors as time allows.

Along with changing to online vendors for rush and unfilled orders, our service improvements required significant departmental re-organization and re-tooling. The Acquisitions Account Clerk, who also holds the Acquisitions Department's campus VISA procurement card, was trained to search Websites and to place VISA orders via the Web. Some of her duties were shifted to the library's Accounting & Receiving Department; this freed her to handle a greater volume of VISA orders, and also increased our audit compliance by separating some key responsibilities. A low-level library technician who previously spent half of her time searching and inputting orders, and the other half processing government documents, was assigned completely to acquisitions and re-classified to a higher level to manage the routine Acquisitions workflow. The other library technician, who had managed the routine workflow as well as special ordering, was freed to spend all of her time on rush and other special orders. A number of Acquisitions student assistants were given Lead Student status (with a higher pay rate), and assigned more complex work with greater responsibility. Rush procedures were re-written to allow placing rush orders before documentation is fully prepared, and to include regular back up for all tasks necessary for rush ordering. Acquisitions staff, who had all participated in the planning from the beginning, enthusiastically accepted the significant changes to their jobs, and have been invaluable in making the overall improvement effort a success.

We also put forth greater effort to find out faculty members' priorities and to better align our priorities with theirs. On our order form, we began allowing faculty to designate orders as "Priority" or "Collection Building" in addition to "Rush." Since our selectors are almost all faculty, these designations are helping us to distinguish what faculty really need from what they just think would be nice to have in the collection. On the order form a chart clearly explains the differences between the order types. This online book request form can be viewed at <http://aok.lib.umbc.edu/cgi-bin/bookreq.pl>.

Priority of this order

- **Rush** — Usually arrives within a month. Use this for times you need in 1-2 months.
- **Priority** — Usually arrives within 3 months. Use this for items you need in 3-6 months.

- **Collection Building** — Arrival times vary. Use this for quality items for the library collection.

Moreover, faculty notification procedures were established for all delayed orders, and follow-up procedures were put in place for all orders. Rush orders remaining unfilled after two weeks go through a follow-up procedure each week while the order remains open, and, if necessary, we cancel the order with the original vendor and re-order from one who can supply. "Priority" orders remaining unfilled after two months go through the same follow-up procedure each month. "Collection Building" orders remaining open after four months go through the follow-up procedure once every three to six weeks, but less often if time does not allow. Faculty notification procedures allow the faculty to upgrade the status of their order whenever they want to speed up an order that has been delayed.

Departmental reorganization, improved procedures, and the use of online vendors have allowed the **UMBC Library Acquisitions Department** to achieve significant improvements in fill-time. Rush orders are now filling, on average, in less than ten days, and other orders no longer languish for extended periods of time. As we had anticipated, demand has grown: the number of rush orders has risen almost 250% since we publicized our faster service. Further, the average price we paid for a book last year did not increase at all. Most importantly, our faculty no longer ask why it takes us so long to get books that they could get in a week from **Amazon.com**. Instead, they compliment our service and thank us.

Significant questions arise regarding the future of library acquisitions, traditional library vendors, and online vendors. **Amazon** has started marketing to libraries via direct mail, and both **Amazon** and **Barnes & Noble** now offer corporate accounts and accept purchase orders from libraries. Will traditional vendors improve services to match the speed with which online vendors provide books? Or will the online vendors take over the library rush order business, with traditional vendors supplying the bulk of our materials along with

the special services we require? How will the traditional vendors compete if the online vendors start offering us the kinds of discounts and services we get from the traditionals?

For more information on these questions from the vendors' perspective, see **Dana Alessi's** informative article, "Raising the bar: book vendors and the new realities of service," in the 1999 *Journal of Library Administration*, pages 68-69. (Ms. Alessi worked with **Baker & Taylor** when her article was published.) Not only does **Alessi** point out the need for library vendors to provide materials more quickly, but she describes difficulties and pitfalls they face in trying to do so, such as the limitation of library vendors' stocks.⁵ **Barry Fast**, then writing as an employee of **Academic Book Center**, also provides useful information from the vendors' perspective in his 1996 article "Excuses, excuses - shipping books on time." **Fast** notes the difficulties vendors face with many publishers who take outrageously long periods of time to fill orders.⁶

Are **Amazon.com** or other online vendors a public relations problem for you? If so, email me at <flinchba@umbc.edu>, and tell me what you are doing, or planning to do, about it. Responses from all types of vendors and libraries are welcome.

Endnotes

1. Fast, Barry. "Excuses, excuses - shipping books on time." *Against the Grain*, vol. 8 (Dec. '96/Jan.'97), p. 68-69.
2. Alessi, Dana L. "Raising the bar: book vendors and the new realities of service." *Journal of Library Administration*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1999), p. 25-40.
3. Black, Graham. "Why do evaluation?" *Library Acquisitions*, vol. 18, spring (1994), p. 57-60.
4. The eleven vendors were: 1BookStreet (<http://www.1bookstreet.com>), Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com>), Barnes & Noble (<http://www.bn.com>), Borders (<http://www.borders.com>), Buy.com (<http://www.buy.com>), Classbook (<http://www.classbook.com>), eCampus (<http://www.ecampus.com>), FatBrain (<http://www.fatbrain.com>), Spree (<http://www.spree.com>), Textbooksatcost (now TextbookX, <http://www.textbooks-atcost.com>), and Textbook Source (<http://www.textbooksource.com>).
5. Alessi, p. 26.
6. Fast, p. 69-70.

Rumors from page 46

stuffed the packets in Charleston in 2000! And, Nancy spoke in Charleston in November, 2001, and also has an article in this issue of **ATG**, see page 22!

Second installment on running for ALA President by Katina. It's nearly two months later and I have talked to a lot of people, made a lot of statements, and learned a lot. **Sandy Paul** is my campaign manager and A TON of you are working with me! Thank you. For those of you who I haven't talked to, please

send me your ideas for what are the issues that you think **ALA** needs to focus on and whatever you think I need to hear, okay? **The Katina for President Website is at www.katina.info!** And, best of all, there will be a champagne and dessert reception at **Katina's suite in the Marriott on Friday, January 18 from 8-11 p.m. in New Orleans.** You are all invited! See you there!

In the meantime, **Happy Holidays** to all of you and may you have absolutely the best **NEW YEAR** ever! From Yr. (Loving) Ed.