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

Michelle Flinchbaugh
University of Maryland, flinchba@umbc.edu

Rob Richards
University of Colorado Law Library, rrichard@stripe.colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3658

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
Biz of Acq — UMBC@BuyBooksFast.Com: Choosing and Using an Online Vendor to Improve Acquisitions Services

by Michelle Flinchbaugh (Acquisitions Librarian, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250) <flinchba@umbc.edu>

Column Editor: Rob Richards (Technical Services Librarian, University of Colorado Law Library, Federal Depository Library 0074-C, 402 UCB, Fleming Law Building, Rm. 190, 2405 Kittredge Loop Drive, Boulder, CO 80309-0402; Phone: 303-492-2706; Fax: 303-492-2707) <richard@stripe.colorado.edu> www.Colorado.EDU/Law/lawlib/rr.htm

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 (UMB) 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 significant need for better “on-demand” or “just-in-time” purchasing, and a generally higher level of customer service in acquisitions.

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, Dana Alessi, then with Baker & Taylor, identified the following newly high, 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 ourprocurement 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 these items were readily available online.

Although simply using Amazon.com was tempting, we wanted to ensure 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.

Using a meta-search site, http://www.bestbookbuys.com, student assistants searched an eclectic sample of 205 books that were ordered, and compared the following factors across eleven online vendors: availability, anticipated fill-time, and cost. The searching took place from August-September 2000. The sample was not scientifically random, and represented 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 unremarkable 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. If the item was 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 vendor was out of stock; or 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

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
At Majors, you'll experience the perfect combination of modern technology and the personalized customer service you've come to expect from the very best.

MAJORS ELECTRONIC DATA INTERFACE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM (MEDICS™) keeps your library current with file transfer functions that let your library system order from ours. With MEDICS™, orders are processed once each hour between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. everyday. Your system can also download management reports and other information you need to effectively run your medical library, such as order acknowledgments, new titles, price changes, database extracts, out-of-print titles, new editions pending, approval plan selections, and invoicing data.

MAJORS ONLINE RESOURCE (MORE™) is a user-friendly book acquisitions system that gives you immediate access to information about health science, scientific, and technical titles. With MORE™, you can search for titles by ISBN, author, keywords, Majors category, or a combination of these. Preview a book's table of contents using Majors TACO-Line® (Table of Contents Online). View in-stock quantities for all of Majors warehouses, find current book prices, and place your book orders directly online. You can even access the Majors Approval Plan through MORE™ and scan new titles, review and edit your selections, or view weekly new book receipts.

Majors . . . leading the way into the new millennium.

MAJORS SCIENTIFIC BOOKS, INC.
Since 1909
DALLAS 800-633-1851 ATLANTA 800-241-6551 HOUSTON 800-458-9077

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, 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.

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

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.

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

Against the Grain / December 2001 - January 2002
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 reorganization 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 resources. 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.

**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 Katrina. 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](http://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.