

April 1999

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Kenneth L. Kirkland

DePaul University Library, kkirklan@wppost.depaul.edu

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Recommended Citation

Kirkland, Kenneth L. (1999) "Looking for Approval? Changing Approval Plan Vendors," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 10.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3828>

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Looking for Approval? — Changing Approval Plan Vendors

by **Kenneth L. Kirkland** (Collection Development Coordinator,
DePaul University Library, Chicago, Illinois)
<kkirklan@wppost.depaul.edu>

Arlene Sievers hit the nail on the head: Changing vendors is a monumental undertaking! We're just starting up with **Academic Book Center** after 3.5 years with **Blackwell's** North America, and before that about 5 years with **Baker & Taylor**. The first approval shipment from ABC is expected by March 1, 1999.

Why did we change vendors this time? To get faster firm order service. (This was the main advantage); Administrative imperative. (A short-term lag in receiving approval shipments played a part.); To avoid having all our eggs in one basket (surmised). (When **Blackwell's** bought **Readmore**, that made **Blackwell's** our sole vendor). History.

Methodology:

This time there was a **Vendor Search Committee**, and lots of participation from bibliographers. Previously, the Head of Acquisitions & the Collection Development Coordinator, or The Head of Acquisitions and the Head of Technical Services (for Baker & Taylor) did all the interviewing and decision-making.

The **Vendor Search Committee** was chaired by the **Associate Director of Information and Research Services**, and consisted of: The Associate Director for Technical and Access Services; The Collection Development Coordinator; The Head of Technical Services; The Head of Reference at the Lincoln Park Campus; A Reference Librarian from the Loop Campus (Business bibliographer & specialist).

We involved all bibliographers at some point, especially in the interviews with the three vendors (**Academic Book Center**, **Blackwell's** North America, **Yankee Book Peddler**). Three non-committee bibliographers were asked to evaluate and compare the three vendors' automatic systems (**BookBag**, **Collection Manager**, and **Gobi**).

The Committee drafted the RFP, oral and written questions, and developed an evaluation or scoring system for the responses to the questions and performances at the interviews. The Business Bibliographer prepared a financial analysis of each vendor. The outcome of all this, with a weighted scoring system to compare each vendor, came out amazingly close. All three vendors were excellent. We did go with the top scorer.

This was a drastic change in the process of vendor selection. This process was educational for committee participants and bibliographers, and a good way to encourage buying into the new program. The downside? It took an awful lot of work and time.

Profiling:

A new focus came about in changing from a **Thesaurus Description Plan** to a **Library of Congress-based Classification Plan**, albeit for a **Dewey Decimal** classified library. This was the biggest change from previous profiling plans. The main question is, how will this affect profiles and fund allocations?

Every bibliographer had a copy of the ABC LC Profile book. 1. Each looked through the Profile Book to check off his/her subjects 2. Some used online LC shelflists, such as Melvyl. 3. Others (especially catalogers) consulted the LC Classification Tables directly. 4. Some used BookBag, ABC's online system, which lets you see what titles would fall under certain LC class ranges. 5. The Collection Development Coordinator skimmed through the whole LC plan looking for possible areas either (a) likely to be skipped or seemed perhaps tricky. Or (b) For every possible class number relevant to our NEH Ethnic/Multicultural grant funds.

All this means we did much more advance preparation for the profiling interview sessions than for previous vendors.

The next step after the interviews was the **A-Z Overlap Report**. Once ABC keyed in bibliographers' selected ranges, this report would show overlaps and gaps. We then had to reconcile which of the 48 profiles/funds would win the book if two or more had selected the same class of book. It took a few days to reconcile the overlaps. Bibliographers were amenable to giving up books as long as they could still see the forms in their chosen ranges. Once the overlaps were reconciled, the cost projection could be run. (We decided to wait until the costs were projected before we undertook to review the gaps.)

Cost Projections:

Here is where we saw the differences between **BNA thesaurus-based** projections and **ABC** projections using **LC Class numbers**. Over all, the ABC projections were only slightly less than the BNA totals, or at least the Grand Total was not extraordinarily lower.

There was variation, however, among individual guidelines.

The flexibility in ABC's profiling where we can have notes or special instructions for handling some profiles can lead to some ambiguity in cost projection. For example, the Humanities (general) profile/fund asks for broad overviews, no narrow specialized books, so there is no actual cost predicted for this fund. Once the profile was turned on, though, one could see pretty quickly the number of books being ordered under this profile, and could easily estimate an annual rate.

The greatest successes were the **NEH grant funds**, whose projections were increased by at least 10%. The **Economics** fund expanded as the bibliographer desired and planned, remedying a situation of long standing where very little had been allowed to come in on approval. The **Career Information Center** projection was up, happily, because ABC will handle more of the publishers in this field. The **General Social Sciences** and **Women's Studies** guidelines were pared down as desired, to fit the fund allocations available.

A few anomalous shortfalls occurred in **General Business** and in **Education**, each of which would bring in only five books a year! The classes bibliographers had chosen were too narrow or were areas where there is little publication activity. These two bibliographers will revisit the **LC Profiling Book** for more choices.

Physics was over-projected, but immediately fixed by lowering the price ceiling and limiting readership levels to undergraduates. The bibliographer had been playing with this one, just to see what would happen.

In conclusion, we've been quite happy with the new vendor's profiling process and outcome, though we're still refining the profiles. We know from previous experience that it takes at least a year before "everything" is relatively finely tuned. We look forward to our first approval shipments within the next few weeks. 🐼

NB: These comments are adapted from the Acquisitions Administrators Discussion Group. ALA. January 31, 1999.—KS

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