E-Commerce-A Collection Development Perspective

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E-Commerce — A Collection Development Perspective - Parts 2 & 3

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Part 2 – Paying

The manner of payment is a collection-development concern primarily to the extent that it affects the price or availability of materials or funds available for development. The best examples of the latter are the pre-payment discounts offered by subscription agents or the “interest” increases offered by approval-plan vendors for advance deposits. To assess the value of these choices, one must consider the “time value of money.” Essentially, whichever organization (whether vendor, agent, or a library’s parent institution) has control of funds at a given time has the opportunity of gaining a return on such funds. I became acutely aware of the tension arising in such a situation when RoweCom offered the alternative of investing pre-payments in a short-term CD with Bank One. My institution’s finance office objected that it kept the money in such an instrument, and this would be lost to the institution if the library were to participate in the RoweCom program; however, my institution had fewer reservations about gaining a discount by early prepayment (even though the rate of return was substantially lower).

Electronic Funds Transfer

Even with prepayment, the mode of payment can affect the institution. Since prepayment arrangements generally vary according to duration by month a payment on August 31st earns the same discount as a payment on August 1st. As the institution can also invest the money, an electronic funds transfer (EFT) on the last day would be preferable, in terms of institutional benefit, to one on the first. And this is a case where electronic funds transfer can minimize the float (or period between when one institution pays and the recipient gains control of the funds).

RoweCom’s use of EFT as part of the EDI (Electronic Data Interchange) subscription transaction, at least in theory, also represents an important means of instantaneously effecting payment. In this case, however, I have learned that even some of the most sophisticated scholarly societies are ill-equipped to identify such a transaction. One society—whose journals are all in electronic format—informed me that electronic transfers were reconciled only at the end of the month and thus a payment in July would only provide for access in August (in contrast to a check, with which the society would immediately allow electronic access).

EDI and EFT are clearly the future, at least for substantial transactions; however, while EDI is becoming increasingly accepted in terms of orders and claims, EFT seems more distant. At the November 1998 Charleston Conference, both John Wiley (Eastern Book) and Roy Reinaida (Faxon Company) argued for EFT as preferred form of payment (over credit cards) based on the cost of such transactions.

Credit Cards

Strangely, given their long pervasiveness in consumer transactions, credit cards are just gaining widespread attention from libraries. Although the Acqnet surveys by Janet Flowers of the University of North Carolina (report in Acqnet Archives [http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/staes/a/acqnet/], Vol 8, No. 23; and Katrina Strauch (Vol. 8, No. 24) revealed that a majority of respondents were using credit cards, attendance at the credit card session at the 18th Charleston Conference and reactions following made it clear that the survey responses were not representative of the larger library community. That same evidence, however, demonstrated that libraries that are not using credit cards are increasingly looking to them as a means of facilitating electronic commerce. There can be little doubt that the 1998 explosion in Web commerce contributed significantly to this interest.

Obviously, credit cards can facilitate some transactions (as with online and foreign vendors), but—for cost reasons alone—they are unlikely to replace other forms of electronic payment. A major hindrance to credit card adoption are the fees imposed by financial institutions on vendors. For example, beyond the costs to a seller of purchasing/leasing terminals and/or software, there are transaction fees (20-50 cents) and a discount (often based on volume but in the 1.5-2.5% range). The importance of these costs was evident in the U.S. Internal Revenue Service announcement that it would accept credit card payments for taxes in 1999 but, under Congressional mandate, would add the processing charges (estimated at 2%-3%) to the bill of a taxpayer choosing the credit card option. Whether apparent in a specific library-vendor transaction or not, one can understand that a vendor can ill-afford to provide the same discounts to libraries willing to use credit cards compared with those that use less-costly means. In a retail environment, a seller usually has factored the cost into the price. Still, the cost is evident in gas-station transactions (or often when shopping abroad) wherein a discount is offered for cash.

Recognizing these limits, credit cards are especially advantageous to libraries (or their parent organizations) for occasional transactions (such as specialty vendors or used/book dealers, especially via the Web). An institution may be able to pay with one check for purchases that previously would have required one hundred. How this impacts a library’s operations is a function of reengineering. In purchasing materials from abroad, the savings can be more substantial. Traditionally, dealers in many parts of the world have offered dollar as well as local-currency prices (with an exchange rate that conservatively protects if not fattens a dealer’s profits). A credit card transaction can eliminate the need for dual pricing since the card issuer will pay in the local currency and the conversion is near the wholesale rate. For example, an Australian publisher recently offered a directory for 245 Australian dollars or 195 U.S. dollars. Checking conversion rates, we purchased at the Australian price by credit card at a cost of US$145.

In 1999, the benefits of such transactions eroded as financial institutions sought to increase income through higher fees. According to an Associated Press report in May, many credit card providers added surcharges of one to four percent on currency transactions (in addition to the traditional one percent currency-exchange fee). A standard caveat in e-commerce should be that the field and costs are constantly changing. Approaches to purchasing need be nimble to balance availability of materials with alternative costs of purchasing.

Micro-payments or Nanobucks

This is a form of e-payment that has been long awaited but remains in its infancy. In 1996, a Wired article asked: "Will nanobucks be the next big thing or are we just talking pocket change?" By 1998, an InfoWorld article continued on page 20.

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per-view using micropayments would permit real consideration of “just-in-time” versus “just-in-case” and confront issues such as the extent to which just-in-case is essential to just-in-time delivery. Is a subscription as much to preserve an archive for future generations as to meet immediate demand? The answers are not obvious; however, the questions offer new perspectives on present practices.

Part 3 – The Future

“Forecasting is difficult, especially if its about the future.” Martin Sandeline, Nokia

“One of the fascinating things about this [Internet] business and one of the things that makes it almost impossible to predict is that virtually any prediction you make is bound to come true.” Michael Wolff

During the planning of-and reflected in the RFP for the OhioLINK system, “real time” was as much a key concept as “distributed system.” Even in the late 1980s, library systems generally relied on batch processing to add, modify, index, and delete records and transactions. In a distributed system, however, where access to materials depends on records accurately reflecting the status of those materials, batch processing was unacceptable. If a user is to request an item from another institution, it is important that the potential lending institution’s system be able to advise whether the item were available or had been checked out earlier in the day.

Looking to the future, real time may be as unacceptable as “batch processing” was a decade ago. Eric Harslem of Dell Computer Corp., in an advertising supplement focusing on the future, emphasized that: “The notion of having to get your information in real time will go away.” Although his reference is limited (addressed to broadcast programming), in a world where WWW is likely to mean World Wide Web, the observation finds added currency.

“A standard caveat in e-commerce should be that the field and costs are constantly changing.”

“In fact, in many cases, we have continued to pay for ‘just in case’ even while, in many cases, foregoeing ownership.”

Wait, the observation finds added currency.

Agents in Anticite

In thinking of what may come after real time, I fail to find an accepted term. I would suggest “pre-time” or “anticite.” The principle is that the information is already at hand when asked for, not that a search is launched. An instrument to have gathered, sifted, and be ready to present this information when asked would be an “agent,” in the computer sense. The archetype for such an agent would be the Librarian daemon envisioned by Neal Stephenson in Snow Crash. Briefly, “all of the information in the Library of Congress” got converted into machine readable form. ... And as the number of media grew, the material became more up to date and the methods of searching the Library became more and more sophisticated. ... there was no substantive difference between the Library of Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency.” (p. 22) So they merged to form the Central Intelligence Corporation of Langley, Virginia. An interface, a virtual globe is “Earth” (which I interpret as the world of information) and the Librarian daemon “can move through the nearly infinite stacks of information in the Library with the agility of a spider dancing across a vast Web of cross-references.” (p. 107)

To put the Librarian daemon or agent at the service of collection development might begin with an approval-plan vendor’s database. Reversing the Amazon.com service that informs a buyer or browser of other books that persons who bought a particular book have bought, I see the agent informing me of titles of the same subject that haven’t been bought.

In OhioLINK, we seek to encourage breadth and heterogeneity and to discourage unnecessary redundancy among collections. As of April 1999, 35.9% of the more than 7.1 million master records held by 76 member institutions were unique records and 76.9% by three or fewer institutions. In this context, I especially want to know those titles that no other (or few other) OhioLINK institutions have bought.

Celia Scher-Wagner reported in ATG on titles that are listed by an approval plan vendor (the then Academic Book Center) but bought by no academic libraries. I see a Wagner agent that would inform me of such omissions and rejections at the time I was considering ordering a title. As noted in Part 1, the OhioLINK approval plan system with YBP already provides information on how a title has been treated by other OhioLINK institutions to be available during the consideration and ordering process. The Wagner agent would provide information on related titles. But one could expect more as well. It is helpful to know what has not been bought (or bought in small quantities); however, the important question is “why not.” The unbidden titles may be treasures or trash. One could well expect the daemon (or Wagner agent) to also provide tables of contents, full-text copies of reviews (not just a link), background on the author(s), information on citations or other allusions in the literature, and even assessment by OhioLINK colleagues knowledgeable about the subject. Of course, such an agent would begin with a knowledge

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base of local and state users, their courses and research interests. Then I would really be in a position to decide if we need a twelfth copy of a title or if the information needs of one's users and others in the state would be better off with a copy that others had not bought.

But that is only the beginning. Approval plans, covering 45-50,000 titles a year, account for only a fraction of the world of knowledge. Helpful as it would be to know what is not being bought on approval plans, it is more vital to know what is not even included in approval plans. One would like the agent to follow not only the information highways but also by-ways and cattle paths (successors to fidonets) to really identify what exists in whatever medium on a subject and is not being acquired to be available to current and future users. For these titles, published in Sandakan, Bontoko, or Zagreb, the enriched information identified for omitted titles in an approval plan would be even more important in making informed decisions. It would also bring information on sources and costs for the titles discovered.

Essentially, a CD agent would collect and offer all possible information needed by a selector. A book described as “intelligent agents” as “software programs designed to help human beings deal with the overwhelming information overload that is the most obvious drawback to the information age.” But too many collection-development decisions must be made based on little information, not too much. The agent foreseen here would not only deal with the information overload by filtering to only that relevant to the decision but also with ignorance. It would glean from the world of knowledge all that might be available on the decision. As elaborated below, it would not make decisions but provide a collection development officer or selector with what would be needed for an informed decision. And, having received the decision, it (or its cousin) would be able to complete the transaction through payment and delivery.

Agents Today

As far fetched as Stephenson's Librarian daemon or my CD agent may appear, they are actually nearer than you may suspect. Not long after Snow Crash, a company, General Magic, offered a product description not unrelated to Stephenson's daemon. The company's emphasis swung to "mobile agents," aimed at personal data assistants (Apple's Newton caught its attention). At about the same time, the field of artificial intelligence (AI) was turning to agents and bots. Indeed, Nicholas Negroponte has provided a similar vision.

Although I would distinguish between "agents" and "bots" (defining the latter as essentially a rules-based script with the former capable of greater autonomy), the latter have begun to replace the standard approaches to selection (such as contacting a single site, Amazon.com— or a single aggregator of sellers—Bookfinder) noted in Part 1 of this paper. Today, a shopbot (a software robot for shopping that aggregates offerings) can survey hundreds of offerings. The November 17, 1998, issue of PC Magazine reported on three shopbots (or searching agents) for books, with Aces (which in September 1999 changed its name to DealPilot, with a URL of www.dealpilot.com) preferred. Instead of searching a single site, you can set the number of "stores" in a search and the amount of time (defaults being 25 stores and 30 seconds). Test searches report results, sorted by total price (including shipping), for bookstore, book price, discount, shipping costs, shipping service and shipping time. With the defaults, I would receive 25 quotes (with several from a few stores for shipping alternatives) and reports on another 15-18 sites that could not be reported (because of no stock—using ISBN or timeouts). Included were Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble USA, Powells, and many others but not Borders. The report is hotlinked to actually place orders. In my testing, a Bookbot (with which I was unfamiliar) generally reported the best discount and net total price. Its logo carries the type of sign that reminds me of the amusing signs on stores in Houston: "Selling Books Online since 1995." Since, the literature on "bots" has multiplied.

To move from the AI (artificial intelligence) domain to the more mundane, the software BookWhere? 2000 demonstrates the use of the Z39.50 protocol to gather information (search the databases or online public access catalogs of multiple sites and report the results. The striking feature, and one that would expect an agent to take advantage of, is that one has to enter a search only once, rather than contacting each site. While less than antiseptic, it is at least a kind of batch job which can run in the background.

Up-To-Data

Rather than corrigida, this section title—borrowed from Daniel J. Boorstin and conceptually inverted—represents an effort to cope with one problem in writing on e-commerce and the Web (represented by Aces becoming DealPilot): that it is a river that cannot be steered into the same place twice. Two of the major resources identified in Part 1 of this article have changed their names and URLs. Interloc (a resource to identify out-of-print books for sale) is now Albris at www.2albris.com. Its homepage now describes it as "in association with Amazon.com" without reference to "Amazon.com" and its procedures now call for creating a password account for central processing of orders rather than the previous connections to individual dealers. It also maintains a bricks and mortar warehouse with 150,000 books and capacity for that many again in Sparks, Nevada. Company President Martin Manley has noted that many book store operators have now closed their shops and simply send the books to the Albris warehouse.

The other change has been that the site MXBF has simplified its name and URL to Bookfinder and www.bookfinder.com.