Library Profile: Erskine College and Theological Seminary

John Kennerly  
Erskine College, kennerly@erskine.edu

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tion of supplementing what — traditional electronic slips?). While the frequent and occasionally plaintive comments I receive are admittedly anecdotal, it is nevertheless instructive to note that it is common for other expensive supplemental online review media, such as Choice Online, to go begging in many libraries.

It is true that the elimination of returns, if viewed myopically, could save both the library and the vendor time and money. The library would not have to pay to return unwanted monographs to the vendor and the vendor could ship fewer books to the library. However, shipping fewer books will not necessarily gladden the hearts of vendors if they suspect it will reduce sales. In any case, the savings would be marginal when compared with library materials budgets or the cost to the vendor in the production or purchase of virtual notification slips. For the growing number of shelf-ready libraries (where books are supplied fully cataloged and end-processed) the question of returns has already been rendered moot. On the international side, the traditional approval plan with a large component of automatic books scarcely exists (the exceptions include, most notably, Hong Kong). Most profiles are confined to notification slips and consequently the return of rejected titles is not an issue.

Another sobering consideration for the vendor is the timeliness of the metadata supporting the virtual approval plan. From the callow debut of the modern approval plan in the golden age of the 1960s and 70s, one of its chief features (and biggest selling points) has been its timeliness — books are shipped or notification slips made available almost immediately upon publication. How swiftly can the metadata required be created, assembled, linked and made available? Who will pay for this process and who will do the work — the vendor, the publishers, the ILS vendors, the bibliographic utilities? Can it be created in time for the vendor to incorporate it in the buying or profiling processes?

The best argument for a virtual approval plan is not that it would save money, but that it would improve the quality of profiles for shelf-ready libraries. The best profiles are ever-changing organisms, surfacing crafted and under constant review. In the end, profiles are just sophisticated tools and tools must be kept sharp. Vendors are now capable of capturing an astonishing array of data on approval plan activity. Reports can be effortlessly produced that parse profile activity more ways than a Ronco Vegematic. However, the most useful information in evaluating a profile remains data on rejected titles. I vividly remember toling long and hard with a number of libraries to reduce return rates to an acceptable level in advance of shelf-ready implementation. As soon as implementation occurred and return privileges were eliminated, we were flying blind. Although urged to report what they would have rejected if they were able to do so, librarians, lacking an immediate incentive, have not been quick to take up the practice. Collecting data on titles not purchased (therefore rejected) could be accomplished rather simply in a virtual environment and would restore the primary analytical tool in amending profiles.

Finally, the idea of a virtual approval plan has some merit, some major drawbacks and a good deal of promise. Discussion and speculation should continue informed by four basic questions:

- Is it cost-effective?
- Is it timely?
- Does it support a viable professional activity?
- Will it be used?