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# Biz of Acq — How to Select a Vendor for an Approval Plan: Through Friendship, Personality or an RFP?

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**Column Editor's Note:** *Anyone setting up an approval plan for the first time will have questions about choosing a vendor. The financial and collection management benefits of approval plans are well known. Selecting an experienced vendor with skilled, well-trained staff ensures the success of the plan. Using an RFP and obtaining references from other libraries are important parts of the selection process. — AF*

The selection of a vendor when starting a comprehensive approval plan<sup>1</sup> can appear to be a daunting task to many librarians unfamiliar with the process. Some choose a vendor whom they know and trust based mostly on familiarity and personal likes. Others have chosen the more objective and less familiar path of writing an RFP, which is more time consuming and demanding for both the librarians and the vendors that choose to respond. Both paths have their pros and cons and are not mutually exclusive. However, in this post-Enron world, librarians would do well to be more objective in the selection of a vendor who will play a critical role in the overall development of library collections, as well as partake in a substantial portion of our budget.

The benefits of an approval plan are well known. For example, it can significantly reduce the costs of acquiring books through dis-

counted prices. The timely arrival of new imprints as well as bibliographic notification slips enables selectors and other librarians to keep abreast of the latest publications. Approval plans automatically bring in a good selection of publications based on the subject areas you have pre-selected, allowing library selectors and acquisitions staff more time to spend on hard-to-find titles. Approval plans are also known to reduce labor costs: in an article published almost twenty years ago, **R. Charles Wittenberg** wrote, "Studies have demonstrated that the cost savings achieved simply by receiving books without incurring the expense of creating an order are at a minimum several dollars per volume."<sup>2</sup> That holds true even more today when librarians are asked to do more with less, and good library staff is not always easy to find. Additionally, many enlightened librarians are also taking advantage of book processing services offered by the larger vendors, such as "ready-to-shelve" books, which increases the cost savings of an approval plan.

The advantages of selecting a vendor through an RFP are many, though perhaps not as well known by librarians. An RFP or Request for Proposal is essentially a competitive procurement process, or bidding process, meant to ensure a fair and objective selection of a vendor. It is also a contract between parties, in this case between the library and the vendor. The

writing of this document gives the library the ability to determine what services it requires. "It allows libraries to consider all aspects of the vendor's service, operation and organization, not just the discount or service charge."<sup>3</sup> The RFP also "allows the library to evaluate competing firms against identical criteria."<sup>4</sup> It also "makes the likelihood that a vendor can renege on a signed contract very slight."<sup>5</sup>

So, why not let **Joe Q.**, who has been one of your favorite vendors for years and who tells you that his company can manage an approval plan for you, proceed without further scrutiny? For the simple reason that it takes years of experience to set up a company that can make the commitment to service that only serious, well-trained personnel can guarantee. It must also have good, established relationships with hundreds, even thousands of publishers, plus an excellent financial record. A vendor must have a highly trained and qualified staff to select and process books and notification slips, and provide them to clients in an accurate and timely manner. The participating library must also be willing to devote personnel time and work to this process until the day when the review shelf contains just the right quantity and quality of books desired for each discipline. Depending on the size of the plan, it may take a couple of years of close supervision of shipments to reduce the return rate of an approval plan to an acceptable level, by which time the profile or sub-profiles will have endured much "tweaking." In order to achieve this the librarian must rely for guidance upon the superior training and experience of the vendor's expert staff. Neither **Joe Q.** alone nor his little store can do this for you.

The writing of an RFP should be done either by a librarian with experience in this area, or a committee of librarians who represent both public and technical services. Consult with your purchasing department and ask for their help and participation, too. In the RFP there should be a section requiring financial statements from the vendor. These are very important. Usually these statements are confidential and are sent only to the purchasing department, where they will be evaluated.

Ask two or three vendors who are experienced with approval plans to come to the library and speak about their services. These presentations will provide an opportunity for initial evaluation and comparisons between vendors and their offerings. Does a vendor have a good interactive system that allows searching and selection by title, author, subject, or ISBN?

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## against the grain people profile

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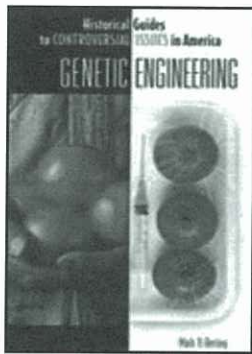
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Does this system permit online ordering? Does it allow you to "force" a forthcoming book into the approval shipment? Does it tell you when a book is out-of-print or out-of-stock? These are important services that most major vendors can offer, and they save staff time. You may want to invite teaching faculty, library staff and members of the administration to these presentations, to inform them of the changes that may take place. Make it clear that these changes will ensure greater objectivity in selection, and better balance in the library's collection.

For most college libraries and some mid-size university libraries, it may be a good idea to consolidate all purchases for U.S. imprints with one vendor. The more money committed to the RFP, the greater the discount will be. Some librarians also include standing orders in the RFP. Consolidation reduces staff time and labor, reduces the chance of duplication of books received, and gives greater influence with the vendor. A large, major vendor can supply almost everything required in terms of domestic imprints, and by virtue of the company's size, can offer more services.

A most important requirement to include in the RFP is that each vendor

must provide a list of three client references of an institution similar to yours in size and scope. Reference calls can be made after the vendor has submitted a response to the RFP, to verify the vendor's own information and to ask about services. Don't be afraid to ask questions about response time, ability to fill orders, and satisfaction with the vendor. If they had to do it over again, would they keep the same vendor? If not, why not?

After selecting a vendor, the most important point to remember is that the overall success of an approval plan depends largely on the quality of the plan's profile. A profile may be composed of two or more sub-profiles, one for each discipline. If carefully and thoughtfully developed, the profile should cover all those areas as thoroughly and accurately as possible. This is where the training and skill of the vendor's staff become critical. Not many librarians are trained to draw up an approval plan profile. A well-trained new titles coordinator can save you many hours of grief, and through their experience and guidance make suggestions that will lead to the creation of a successful approval plan. 

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#### Endnotes

1. By "comprehensive" I mean an approval plan that would cover all the disciplines in the curriculum of a college or mid-size university library, the type of library for which this article is intended. This is in contrast to an approval plan that covers only one specialized subject area or discipline, such as law or medicine. For this type of plan, it may be necessary to go to a vendor specializing in the subject area.
2. R. Charles Wittenberg, "Approval Plans for College Libraries: Strategies for Smaller Collections." *Against the Grain* 8:3 (1986): p. 22-24.
3. Wilkinson, Frances C., and Thorson, Connie Capers. *The RFP Process: Effective Management of the Acquisition of Library Materials*. Englewood, Colorado: *Libraries Unlimited*, 1998, p. 4. This is a worthwhile publication to consult, and many of its recommendations can be adapted to your library's RFP.
4. Diane J. Graves and Bob Schatz, "Request for Proposal: or Run for Protection? Some thoughts on RFPs from a Librarian and Book Seller." *Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory* 20:4 (1996): p. 428.
5. Wilkinson and Capers Thorson. 1998, p. 4.