December 2010

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Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — How Goes the Book Approval Plan in the Days of the eBook?

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While the academic library where I am is in the thick of the eBook revolution and approaching patron-driven acquisitions, we have not yet abandoned traditional book selection via the time-tested book approval plan, although at times it seems like it is abandoning us. For the library selectors who still have the responsibility to build a print collection in their subject areas, the approval plan is a very useful tool.

The recent demise of a free-standing **Blackwell**, through its incorporation into **YBP**, leaves it and **Coutts** as the only complete academic approval plans in the country. There are still some smaller plans, but nothing absolutely suitable to large research libraries. So there are a lot of folks out there redoing profiles, reworking their workflows into those of new vendors, and working out a lot of technical details. Redoing profiles quickly is like translating a lot of complicated books, including poetry, from one language to another. It is bound to result in a lot of miscommunication.

When companies grow rapidly through the acquisition of other companies, or by the demise of competitors, or just by a growing market, it always results in Herculean efforts for any of them to keep pace with all those new customers. New staff may be hired quickly in anticipation, or soon afterwards, but it has always been my experience that new employees in this kind of work encounter a pretty significant learning curve. Sometimes companies cut corners by trying to do more with the same.

I worked for a subscription vendor many years ago, back in the days when print journals were the only medium for journals. The vendor hit at a time when business went through the roof. Libraries were still being built, money for higher education and library funding was growing, and STM publishing was growing too — as were the prices, I might say. The company hired me after they realized they had grown too big too fast, and the customers were complaining, some with their feet.

The work was divided geographically, and my area had been a sort of stepchild. I was given stacks of correspondence to answer, which required solving a lot of subscription problems — and I was new on the job. I spent some months working out complicated order, receipt, and invoicing problems with an in-house computer system we had, very cutting edge at the time, but nothing like what there is now with Web-based systems.

The work I did required a lot of interaction with other company employees, publishers, and of course, customers. The customer work was basically correspondence, since I worked for an international vendor, and my customers were overseas. Very little telephoning was done to customers. It was actually more important that I be where the publishers were and could telephone them. We also occasionally used an old-fashioned machine called a **Teletype**, which produced a long tape, as a record something had been sent. The first year I worked there I thought I must be doing a terrible job, since it took a long time to turn customers around, and I was just learning my way around. I would get lost in the building, and it took awhile to build up good working relationships with all the staff. Actually I was doing a good job, and very few customers left the fold after I came on board. Enough of this reminiscing. Back to approval plans.

Even those with standing plans with vendors are always working out wrinkles, but vendor time must be more limited when there is such an influx of new customers. This process combined with the rise of patron-driven acquisitions and eBook acquisitions as they are rocketing makes for very busy acquisitions librarians as well. It is all supposed to be getting easier and needing fewer people to get things done, but not yet where I am.

In a traditional approval plan, one is dealing with physical objects, and most of the elements of the process remain the same as they were at the beginning of all approval plans. Only now, in our case and many others, there is a lot more than just books. For us, **PromptCat** Marc records precede the arrival of the approval books. They all come preprocessed and ready to hit the approval shelves and shortly thereafter the library shelves with a check of the invoice and minor copy cataloging procedures. These, coupled with some **Edifact** ordering for firm orders, make for a lot of work on both sides, and a lot of time to get things right. It takes a lot of time and effort on both sides to get these services and the procedures changed to accomodate the new vendor's operation.

I know a lot of large libraries have given up on book approval plans, some unwillingly due to financial constraints, others because book buying has shrunk so much in a turn almost completely to digital material, that the activity is no longer viable. In a lot of libraries, however, such as ours, a book approval plan is part of the mix of acquisition of materials of all kinds. There are some subject areas which will be the slowest to march off into eBookland. Art History and Modern Languages and Literatures, areas 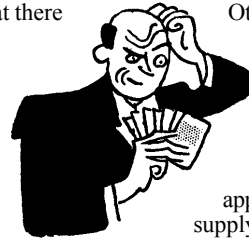for which I select, are two of these. Other areas where a lot of books are still bought are History and the Social Sciences. We still have a pretty comprehensive approval plan, both in books and slips.

Niche vendors who provide approval plans, such as those that supply exhibition catalogs for art libraries and foreign vendors which provide language specific books, along with music, and perhaps some other specialty areas I'm forgetting, may continue supplying academic libraries with books through approval plans. Art history books may be the last to go. The reproduction of images in books are still superior to what can be digitized, and perhaps as important is the fact that a lot of the rights to the images are difficult to trace, and that has to be done for them to be digitized and available.

The approval plan arose during the **Richard Abel** era when libraries were building large comprehensive library collections to support teaching and research in all disciplines. There were no digital resources, and most areas were still very book- and print serial-dependent. When approval plans started up, during that era of "forklift librarianship," they were considered quite revolutionary and were disdained by many who were given over to collection building through individual book selection and acquisition. However, it was very time- and work-intensive and slow as well. This was the selection entirely book-by-book based quite a lot on book reviews, some of which did not appear much later than the book. *The New York Times Book Review* was a main tool of selection, as were the listings in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. These sources are still heavily used, but they still are labor intensive. Approval plans often track these sources and they can be built into a plan. Personally, I still use book reviews for my area of Art History. I catch important titles that seem to appear nowhere but there.

One area where a book approval plan still seems to win out in acquiring hardcover books rather than wait for the eBook has to do with the rapidity of publication in that medium. Some eBooks simply don't come out immediately, and being current in many fields, including History is still important.

The eBook revolution will be nearly a total victory come too soon. I am not smart enough to know how soon that will be. Until then a well-functioning book approval plan continues as an excellent selection and acquisition tool, and one that accomplishes the job with great efficiency, especially when coupled with books cataloged with **PromptCat** and then preprocessed. 🐝

Endnote
1. **Anderson, Rick**. *EDUCAUSE Review* 45 (4) (July/August 2010): 10-11, *http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Review/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume45/IfIWereaScholarlyPublisher/209335* (accessed November 21, 2010).