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Rick Anderson
J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, rick.anderson@utah.edu

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Managing Multiple Models of Publishing in Library Acquisitions

by **Rick Anderson** (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources and Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

For purposes of this paper, I will use the following definition of the term *publishing model*: a publishing model is a structure of document production and sales, one which comprises the publisher's acquisition, production, and marketing strategies and is built on the publisher's expectations of customer behavior. In this context, it is worth pointing out that a format is not a model; the publishing models treated in this discussion may all be used to produce and distribute books, articles, and other publications in just about any physical or virtual format. Also, although the *structure of charges* (how many payments are required of customers, and how frequently) is part of a publishing model, *pricing structure* (which determines how high the charges are) is not. All of the publishing models under discussion can create products that may cost any amount of money, and may ultimately be paid for by readers, intermediary brokers (such as libraries), taxpayers, authors or any combination of them.

What I will instead focus on are the publication models themselves, and some of the ways in which librarians, in particular, deal with them. None of this is to say that format and cost do not matter or that they are irrelevant. On the contrary, both matter very much, and both have a powerful impact on both the production/distribution models chosen by publishers and the acquisition models implemented by librarians. But format and pricing, though relevant, are still separable from publishing models themselves, and to confuse the two is to risk becoming bogged down in irrelevant disputes that illuminate nothing about the relative merits, deficiencies, and sustainability of the models.

Publishing Models

It seems to me that there are five general categories of publishing model currently in operation:

The Unitary Chunk. This is the one-off publication, an item that is published once, distributed, and then left substantially alone. It may be reprinted so that additional copies may be sold, and its content may be updated at some point in the future; but it is intended as a stand-alone work and updates to the content are not meant to add substantially to it, but only to improve or correct the document without changing its fundamental nature. Most research monographs, novels, and biographies fall under this category. So might a static database, a collection of journal backfile content, or an eBook collection (when the collection is sold as a one-off compilation of books that are not intended to be added to or substantially updated, and is therefore expected to be used as a database). The customer typically pays once for a copy or for access to a copy, and does not pay again (though a small maintenance fee may be involved when access is provided remotely by the publisher or its agent).

The Pile-on. This is a cumulative collection, one which grows from year to year as new content is added. A journal subscription is the classic example of a Pile-on; books in series and research databases to which more and more content is added over time are other examples. The customer pays roughly the same amount of money repeatedly, often at annual intervals. The annual price rises as a function of inflation, and the amount of content produced each year is expected to remain roughly constant. Annual payments often (but not necessarily) result in permanent "ownership" — which usually actually means "a permanent right of access" to the content.

The Churning Constant. This is an aggregation of content (usually very large) to which specific pieces may be added or from which they may be taken away at unpredictable intervals. Its purpose is not to give the customer access to specific books or articles, but rather to provide a large and varied "bag of documents" among which end-users may always be certain to find something relevant to their interests or needs. An example of the Churning Constant would be **EBSCO's Academic Search Premier** database — no library would depend on that database for permanent ongoing access to, say *Annals of Human Biology*. However, a patron would always be assured of finding some good scholarly journal articles on biology at any given time, regardless of which specific journals are covered. What is constant is the general size and coverage of the database; what is "churning" is the exact makeup of the content. The customer pays an annual fee for access to the database, and the fee increases as a function of inflation while the amount of content offered is expected to remain roughly constant.

The Teenager. This describes a collection that is purchased initially at a certain size, but then grows steadily and becomes more expensive over time. As content is added, all of it is expected to remain as a permanent part of the collection, and the annual price rises both as a function of general inflation and, in some cases, in direct consequence of new content being added. Some journal packages (to which new titles are added each year), subject-specific article databases, and online reference works fall under this model. Payments may result either in permanent "ownership" of the content or in an ongoing right of access that disappears when payments stop.

The Big Deal. One of the most popular and also most controversial of the publishing models, under this one a journal publisher requires the customer to retain permanently a certain level of "spend," while offering in return full online access to everything else it publishes at a very low marginal price; multi-year commitments are usually rewarded with artificially-low inflation caps during the contract period. This model results in extremely favorable per-article pricing for the customer, but makes it impossible for the customer to reduce its annual expenditures on the publisher's content. If budget-cutting is required, it must come at the expense of other publishers' content — some of which may be of higher quality and relevance than the unsubscribed titles that were added as part of the Big Deal. More disturbingly, this model gives the publisher an incentive to "pad" title lists with new and lower-quality journals.

It is worth acknowledging that several of the models cited above are actually conglomerations of other models — for example, the Big Deal is really a way to market products produced under the Pile-on model, rather than a separate model unto itself. It is included in the list of models because it is, in fact, a new way of structuring and selling content that was previously available under the Pile-on model.

Library Strategies

How do libraries, specifically, deal with the wide variety of published documents that are, in turn, offered under a wide variety of publishing models? There are five general strategies that libraries typically follow:

The One-time Acquisition (cf. Unitary Chunk). One-time Purchases fall under three general strategic categories:

a) Firm orders (speculative) — in which library staff attempt to guess which individual documents their patrons will want and order accordingly;

b) Firm orders (targeted) — in which patrons make their desires for individual documents known to library staff, who order accordingly;

c) Acceptance of gifts — in which librarians accept donations of individual items and add them to the library collection.

The Accrual (cf. Pile-on). These purchases are programmatic and ongoing, and are designed to allow the library to build up particular

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areas of its collection with a minimum of effort. Accrual programs include:

a) Approval plans — whereby the library defines categories of books by topic and format, and the books are then shipped automatically;

b) Standing and blanket orders — whereby the library identifies series or publishers from which it would like to collect exhaustively;

c) Journal subscriptions — by which the library is able to accrue a large collection of articles.

The Spinning Plates (cf. Churning Constant). When a library subscribes to a product such as **Academic Search Premier**, its patrons get the benefit of a very large (if somewhat unstable) collection of content. Library staff get the benefit of paying a single invoice for a large and varied collection of articles; however, they also get the burden of keeping track of changes to the content and making sure they are reflected in the catalog and journal lists. Doing so is somewhat like keeping thousands of plates spinning simultaneously.

The Big Gulp (cf. Big Deal). Signing on to a Big Deal means purchasing a very large amount of content in a single transaction. For library customers, the difference between the Big Gulp and the Spinning Plates lies in the fact that when a Big Deal purchase is involved, the amount of churn in the content is expected to be relatively low; a journal that is part of the collection at point of purchase is generally expected to remain there. If the journal is sold to another publisher, the backfiles may remain in the Big Deal package or access to them may be granted by the receiving publisher, but such a transfer (while inevitable to some degree) is seen as a departure from the normal course of business — whereas it is very much a part of the Churning Constant model.

The Ladylike Sip (article-level purchasing). This is an alternative approach to the Pile-on publishing model; it is a One-time Acquisition strategy applied to a Pile-on publishing strategy. Instead of paying up front for everything that will be piled on in the future, the library holds back and purchases only those individual components (most often journal articles) that seem relevant and desirable, or that are specifically requested by patrons. This option does not have to be offered to customers by publishers, but it usually is. Inevitably, it results in a much higher per-article cost; in many cases, however, it results in a lower absolute cost.

Fundamental Problems

There are a number of fundamental problems currently hindering the ability of publishers to sell to libraries under these models. The first and most obvious is the chronic problem of insufficient library budgets. Even the most generously-supported library would like to purchase more than it can, and the vast majority of libraries must make annual purchasing decisions that become more and more difficult as prices continue to increase at triple or quintuple the rate of budget increases (when budgets increase at all). There are also the more acute problems of periodic budgetary shortfalls. In a given year, library budgets may be cut for specific reasons, undermining purchasing ability even further. Of course, libraries also experience budgetary windfalls, which offer both benefits and costs — the latter stemming from their unpredictability, combined with the frequent requirement that they be spent immediately and completely. Librarians will not usually complain about either of those costs, all things considered, but they are nevertheless real.

Obviously, budget questions are really questions about price, not actually questions about publishing model. In fact, all of the publishing models listed above are sustainable, as long as pricing is set at affordable levels and remains there over time. However, each of the publishing models also carries with it a set of indirect costs that are not related to price but still may have a powerful impact on customers' ability to purchase. The indirect costs are primarily centered in staff time: an individual journal subscription, for example, involves a much higher labor-to-article investment ratio than does a subscription to a large aggregated database. These costs are completely independent of price and in some cases they may almost seem to be inversely related — ask any librarian how expensive it is in reality to accept putatively "free" donations of gift materials.

At a more fundamental level lies a problem that is being thrown into sharper relief in the harsh glare of the current economic crisis: libraries continue to struggle with the problem of inaccurate prognostication. Library collections exist because for centuries, information was stored primarily (or entirely) in physical formats that were slow, difficult, and expensive to distribute. This meant that in order for libraries to serve their patrons well, the resources patrons wanted had to be waiting for them in the library when they arrived. This in turn required librarians not only to try to read their patrons' minds, but to do so well in advance of their patrons realizing what they themselves were going to want. Librarians have never anticipated patrons' needs with notably great accuracy, but until very recently they had no choice but to try. In the print era, if a patron arrived at the library and did not find the book she wanted, the librarian's only recourse was to try to get it, either by purchase or through interlibrary loan. Both processes tended to be labor-intensive and slow, requiring the patron to go away and return later.

Strategies for mitigating this problem have generally focused on trying to improve the library's prognostication, and include the approval plan (which attempts to anticipate patrons needs in the aggregate by means of collection profiling) and using circulation data and other measurements of patron behavior to shape future collecting. None of these strategies works particularly well.

Emerging Options

There is a better option, though it has emerged relatively quietly and libraries have generally been slow to recognize it. The publishing marketplace that once required large just-in-case collections, built entirely on speculation, has changed radically in recent years into one in which it is now possible to respond much more immediately to patrons' demonstrated needs.

The most obvious ways in which this can currently be done are in the realms of electronic journals and electronic books. Why build a collection — and thus artificially limit the range of materials available to library patrons — when it is now possible to place huge amounts of easily-searchable information in front of them, and let them pick what the library will buy themselves? eBook providers such as **netLibrary** and **MyiLibrary** already offer user-driven selection models, whereby the library loads many eBook records into its catalog and purchases only those that patrons actually use. By-the-drink article purchasing — rather than title-based subscriptions, which are to journal articles the same thing an approval plan is to books — has been available for years, and can also be patron-driven in an automated way. One objection to such arrangements is that they take control of the budget out of librarians' hands and run the risk of exhausting the budget quickly and frivolously. Controlled experimentation is in order.

Something similar for print materials should also be explored. Would it not be possible to load large numbers of monographic records into the catalog, each showing a simple annotation that tells the patron "We do not yet own this title; however, click <here> and we will acquire this book for you immediately and have it ready for you to check out in <X> days?" Add on-campus delivery to the service offer and it seems like a sure winner — with the tens (or even hundreds) of thousands of dollars not spent on books no one wants, one could underwrite quite a few expedited orders and local deliveries.

Even more exciting is the promise of print-on-demand book machines, some of which are already finding their way into larger American research libraries and campus bookstores. Such machines make it possible not only to purchase books immediately upon demand, but to offer the requesting patron a set of choices: for a price, the patron may keep the book; if the patron does not wish to purchase, she can check the book out and, upon its return, it will be added to the library collection. After all, we are now talking about a book that we know is of interest to at least one patron — this is rarely true of the vast majority of the books we buy in libraries.

It hardly needs to be said that the publishers who succeed in the future will be those who are flexible enough to adapt their models to a new world of nearly-instantaneous information distribution. It is probably worth emphasizing that this new world is in the process of effectively obviating the traditional library collection. Less speculative buying on the part of libraries will mean a very different sales terrain for publishers, and a completely new, and different set of tasks for many librarians.