Against the Grain

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interfaces, lack of integration, and largely ambiguous purchase models.³

Two significant factors have contributed to alleviating the issue of availability: 1) innovations in production technology (which has led to lower costs) and 2) the rise of the aggregator. Since 2004, it has become incrementally less expensive to convert print production files to digital format, as well as implement format-neutral production workflows, that allow for output of content in multiple formats. Simultaneously, electronic aggregators have entered the market, and traditional print distributors have added “e” to their service offerings, creating competition and extending available content options. Publishers have begun to diversify their distribution strategies to include third parties, in addition to the support of their proprietary products. These two factors combined have grown the total number of available eBooks in health sciences to an estimated 100,000+ in 2008, with some publishers digitizing well into their back lists.

Discoverability

ATG reported in 2005 that a major barrier to eBook adoption was discovery. One descriptive response to a survey on this topic stated the following: “Users are often unaware that electronic books are available. We still need to do a better job of promoting their use”.⁴

As ejournal collections and acquisition models have stabilized, librarians have turned their attention to building eBook collections … and integrating these new resources into their patrons’ workflow. OCLC’s acquisition of NetLibrary in 2004 created the availability of thousands of eBook records, and catalogers began to integrate these resources into library holdings. Resources that were previously “undiscovered” are now a click away for many patrons.⁵

Some libraries have even adopted new technology to further extend their patrons’ reach into their collections. The use of commercially available federated search engines allows users to search across the entire collections — books, journals, databases — greatly enhancing the user experience and ensuring that all relevant resources are accessible.⁶

Usability

One of the more subjective factors in the adoption of eBooks in health sciences deals with functionality. For many academic disciplines, the ability to access full-text materials electronically is often adequate to support the research and education needs of patrons. Health sciences content and the manner in which users interact with the content differs significantly from standard academic disciplines.⁷ Learners do not typically read health sciences materials in a linear fashion. Unlike their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences, health sciences students and professionals are typically searching for an answer. Traditional eBook delivery platforms, driven largely by print artifacts, struggled to deliver improved value over the print experience. The result was a lack of adoption of the “e” format for books. As technology has evolved, innovations in user interfaces, content delivery, and overall user experience have improved greatly. It is no longer acceptable to have online access to previous print-only material; users have come to expect the ability to find what they need quickly and easily and interact with this material in meaningful ways.

So to paraphrase Dr. Maya Angelou, “what have we got for our journey now?” along the road to the adoption of health sciences eBooks? Since ATG first addressed this topic in 2001, we have certainly come a long way in terms of more meaningful ways.