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A GUIDE FOR BUYING ELECTRONIC RESOURCES IN A CONSORTIAL ENVIRONMENT: USING GEOREF AS AN EXAMPLE

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Abstract – Two cultural phenomena have greatly impacted library purchasing trends in the last few years. One, the Internet and its ability to provide instant access to electronic information, which in turn has created a huge demand for libraries to provide their information resources in electronic format; and two, the spiraling downward of library budgets from which to pay for these electronic resources. In other words, the "perfect storm" has struck libraries at hurricane force. In order to survive, libraries have formed consortia to increase their purchasing power while offsetting costs. This in turn creates a "one package fits all" purchasing environment with cost becoming the controlling factor, and in which every member of the consortium has the same resources regardless of their individual needs and users. This should not be the case and libraries need to enter consortial agreements carefully. Libraries need to evaluate the vendor licensing options, service, and stability as well as the cost and product itself. When looking at the product, pedagogical aspects, functionality, currency, and most importantly primary audience need to be considered.

This paper will discuss the pros and cons of consortial purchasing, create a checklist of what to consider when making a consortial agreement and, using GeoRef as an example, compare the different options under which this bibliographic database can be purchased.

INTRODUCTION

Electronic resources have become *the* item in terms of revenues for publishers and vendors. During the 2002 meeting of the National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services (NFAIS), Thomson Corporation, the parent company of Gale Group, publishers of aggregator databases such as Expanded Academic Index (ASAP), InfoTrac OneFile, and General Newspaper Index to mention a few, announced 50 percent of its revenues were based on its electronic products with a estimated growth rate of 15 percent. Chemical Abstracting Service (CAS) stated that 45 percent of its revenues are from their online resources with only 9 percent attributed to print sales (Kaser, 2002). These companies' customers – mostly research libraries – have had to shift huge amounts of their annual materials budgets to obtain these resources and thus, collective bargaining and resource sharing have become a way of life for research libraries.

Resource sharing agreements among American research libraries are not new. Cooperative agreements in terms of borrowing and cataloging have existed since the late 1800's. The University of California initiated an interlibrary loan program in 1898, and the American Library Association began publishing catalog cards around the same time period (Alexander, 1999). Cooperative collection development is another idea research libraries began exploring in the first part of the 20th century. The Triangle Research Libraries Network, one of the first consortia, was formed in 1933 between Duke University and the University of North Carolina (Bostick, 2001). The cost of two world wars and the end of America's period of isolation made it imperative for American research libraries to develop cost saving agreements. The Farmington Plan, developed by American research libraries in the wake of World War II, was formed for the purpose of developing a comprehensive international research collection. This collection would be available to American scholars through interlibrary loan. The plan began with cooperative agreements among the libraries to extensively collect and catalog publications from designated countries and regions. It existed from 1948 until the 1960's. Shared cataloging groups such as the Research Libraries Group (RLG), and the Ohio College Library Center (OCLC) formed in the 1970's (Thomas, 2002). Today most libraries also belong to consortia whose primary function is to help member libraries with the purchase and licensing of electronic resources.

Consortia vary in structure and in the benefits they provide to their members. Consortia function by pooling together funds and negotiating the "best deal" for an electronic resource. Their membership tends to follow political and geographic boundaries, such as a state or a region, and thus they are able to assert their clout while remaining within the legal framework of the licensing process. Libraries often belong to more than one consortium and membership can overlap. For example, all of the publicly funded libraries of a state may belong to one consortium while the academic libraries belong to another as well. Membership itself can be tiered, with full, affiliated and ad hoc options; each having different rights and privileges. Full members pay an annual fee and participate in the decision making process including the selection of the electronic resources and the negotiating of the licensing agreements. Affiliated members tend to be smaller libraries that choose to join in a consortial licensing agreement that has already been negotiated. They pay a per-license fee to the consortium, but have no voting privileges. Informal and ad hoc affiliations also abound. This type of membership is made up of libraries whose geographic area is served by more than one consortium. By not being formally affiliated with any single consortium, these libraries are able to "shop around" for the best price for an electronic resource. Again, as with the affiliated library membership, these libraries have no decision making rights and often pay a slightly higher fee per-license than full and affiliated member libraries.

Consortia provide other services in addition to their shared purchasing power. They also provide legal expertise in terms of copyright and contract law. Many have the technical capability to allow member libraries to develop union catalogs that enable patrons to borrow physical resources across libraries. Consortia may provide use statistics, develop digitization products, and construct archives for physical and electronic collections. In addition, they may provide a forum where members discuss and access information about trends in electronic services such as journal management systems, portals, and federated searching.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF CONSORTIA

As mentioned, consortia, due to their presence within a geographic area and their team of legal experts, can negotiate favorable contracts with the publishers or vendors of electronic resources. Whereas these contracts save time and money for individual libraries, the downside is that it becomes an environment of "one resource fits all." Quite often libraries that belong to more than one consortium end up having access to the same electronic resource from more than one vendor, and because of their membership agreements cannot opt out of the contract. In addition, libraries can also end up having a resource that is not suitable for their users.

When joining consortia, libraries need to carefully weigh membership options. As full members, libraries are part of the selection process, a seemingly good thing on the surface, but in reality the biggest, most prestigious library often tends to call the shots. As a consequence, the other full member libraries could end up with resources that don't serve their users or that they can't afford. In order not to get railroaded, full member libraries within a consortium should be similar in terms of budget and users. Otherwise, smaller libraries or those with a different user base should consider an affiliated or ad hoc relationship with the consortium. These two kinds of membership options often give members the ability to pick and choose which contracts they want to become part of.

Consortium members also need to be careful with the actual contract itself. Instability, both in terms of the product as well as the overall economic climate, can have a huge negative impact on libraries that are tied into long term agreements. Publishing is a very competitive business. The vendors, especially the full-text aggregators, are constantly adding and removing journals from their products. A recent example of this is the decision of Sage Publishers to remove their articles from full-text aggregator databases such as EBSCOHost. This left many libraries scrambling to find funds to purchase Sage journals from another vendor, while still being tied into their contracts with EBSCO. Libraries have known for a long time that the electronic format is not permanent, but as budgets continue to tighten, many have no choice but to cancel print in favor of the electronic version. The lesson here is if the vendor and the publisher don't have long term commitments, then the consortium shouldn't consider one either. Also, when times are bad, they are bad for everyone. Consortia representatives need to have business savvy and pay attention to what is going on in the publishing field in terms of stability, financial solvency and trends. Service, both in terms of the consortia as well as the vendors, should be evaluated before making decisions.

Consortia are like any other bureaucracy and the bigger they are the less efficient they become. They sometimes are perceived as "time wasters" even to the point that libraries may initiate their own negotiations for products related to an expiring contract in order to avoid a gap in service. The reasons for this "time wasting" perception can be many. Consortia representatives usually volunteer

their service and have full time jobs elsewhere. In poor economic times, the volunteers may have less time to devote to the consortium than in better times when there are plenty of staff members at their regular jobs to keep things going smoothly. Also, consortia can loose direction and stray from their original purpose. With the electronic resource world in constant flux, it is easy to get wrapped up in the next new technology instead of servicing what is in operation now. Adequate staffing, a clear mission statement, and a reputation for getting contracts negotiated on time should all be factors that libraries consider before joining a consortium.

Service expectations from vendors fall into two categories. One, expediency with contract negotiations and a commitment to honor the contract once it has been established; and two, good customer support, especially with technical problems. There is enough overlap of products available from the various vendors that libraries can well afford to shop around for the most reputable one.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF CONSORTIA

It is evident that consortia have served libraries well, especially in terms of shared electronic resources, from catalogs to full-text aggregators. In fact, consortia have become so successful in the last two decades that according to Thomas Peters, "In the United States the consortial frontier is closed, in that there are no areas left unserved by any academic library consortium" (Peters, 2003, p. 254). In addition, consortia are growing nationally and internationally. There are several national consortia such as The Network Alliance and international ones such as the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC). The primary function of consortia continues to be the joint purchase of electronic resources. The term "buying club" has often been used in the literature to define consortia and as Jane Subramanian sums up, "Negotiated group purchases many times result in significant price reductions for each participant, sometimes allowing the purchase of some electronic materials that might not other wise be possible especially for smaller institutions with more limited budgets" (Subramanian, 2002, p. 47).

A less recognized, but successful function of consortia is training for librarians, either through teleconferencing or workshops. The Bibliographical Center for Research (BCR), headquartered in Colorado, provides several workshops a year for its member libraries which include 1,065 voting members in 39 states and Canada (BCR, 2004). Their contents vary, but new technology is always popular.

As mentioned, consortia are also good at providing expert knowledge to their members. Their expertise during contract negotiations are well known, but many consortia also provide a forum where members can exchange ideas, discuss issues, and plan for new technology. Arnold Hirshon mentions the future of library consortia is to help with change management. He states that libraries all face the same key issues and by working on them together will save time and resources (Hirshon, 1999). There are several of these types of "think tank" arrangements, such as the Consortium for Educational Technology for University Systems (CETUS). Formed in 1995, it originally included California State University (CSU), City University of New York (CUNY), and State University of New York (SUNY). One of its objectives is to "explore and clarify issues related to the sharing of information resources and the protection of intellectual property" (CETUS, 2004).

Shared archives for physical collections, shared core collections, digitizing projects, portals, digital registries of databases and full-text article linkers such *Gold Rush* developed by the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries (CARL), are all examples of services that consortia have begun providing based on recent economic trends or new technology. It is too early to judge how successful these new ventures will be; however, there are several shared archives in operation such as the Orbis Cascade Alliance consortium's Regional Library Center, which give all indications of being successful (Orbis, 2004).

CHECKLIST FOR DATABASE PURCHASES IN A CONSORTIA ENVIRONMENT

Things to consider when joining a Consortium:

- ✓ Type of membership
  - Full membership includes voting rights and database selection as well as additional services.
  - Ad hoc or affiliated members join as part of a specific purchase, they have no voting rights and often pay a higher rate per licensing agreement.
- ✓ Mission of the consortium
  - Does its goals best serve your library's needs?
  - Does it have a good reputation for getting licensing negotiated in a timely manner?

Things to consider when choosing a vendor:

- ✓ How often are the records loaded or updated?
- ✓ Pricing
  - o Can be based on several variables: length of contract, size of user base, and number of simultaneous users.
- ✓ Technical support
  - o Consider time zone differences. Can you only contact them at 2 a.m.?
  - o Check their reputation with other libraries before choosing.
- ✓ Licensing agreements
  - o Are they flexible? Do you have a choice between single year and multi year contracts?
  - o Are they compatible with the laws in your state?
- ✓ Fiscal stability
  - o Is this company making money? If they go out of business their contracts are void; don't be left holding the bag.

Things to consider about the database itself:

- ✓ Primary Users
  - o Students, undergraduate or graduate
  - o Faculty
  - o Professional staff
- ✓ Interface of Webpage
  - o Intuitiveness
  - o Easy to navigate
  - o Uncluttered
- ✓ Compatibility with Hardware/Software
  - o Works well with your library's:
    - ▪ Computer operating system
    - ▪ Proxy server and other security software/hardware
    - ▪ Printing system
    - ▪ OPAC
    - ▪ Journal management system
    - ▪ Open URL linker
    - ▪ Document delivery system
- ✓ Pedagogy
  - o Ask librarians who do instruction for input on teaching aspects.
  - o Functionality in the classroom
  - o Easy to explain
- ✓ Coverage
  - o How many years of data are available?
  - o Are they adding back files?
  - o What is indexed? (Books, theses, journal articles etc.)
  - o Depth of coverage. Are they only covering the primary journals, or are they covering government reports, conference proceedings, etc.?
- ✓ Publisher
  - o How frequently do they provide the data to the vendor?
  - o How well known is their expertise in the subject area?
  - o Are they fiscally stable?
    - ▪ Can they support making full-text articles available to the aggregators, or will that be in competition with their own products?

GEOREF AS AN EXAMPLE

Using the categories in the checklist, the GeoRef bibliographic citation index scores high in terms of coverage and publisher. It is published by the American Geological Institute (AGI), a non profit organization founded in 1948 to provide information in the geosciences to its members consisting of over 100,000 geologists, geophysicists and other earth scientists. AGI began publishing GeoRef in 1966. Today it contains over 2.2 million bibliographic records covering all aspects of the geosciences from mineralogy to marine geology. The database indexes journal articles, books, maps, conference papers, reports and theses. Coverage is from 1785 to the present. Approximately 80,000 records are loaded per year, and a preview database and a new references alert service are also available.

GeoRef comes in several formats, including online, CD-ROM subscription and in print as *The Bibliography and Index of Geology*. The online version of GeoRef is available through the following vendors: Cambridge Scientific Abstracts, Community of Science, Inc., DIALOG, EBSCO, NERAC, OCLC, Ovid Information, Inc., and STN International (AGI, 2004).

The other four categories on the checklist under "database" vary among vendors and need closer inspection. Pedagogy, the interface, and compatibility are all important issues if the primary users are students in an academic library. Undergraduates are new to the research experience and are often intimidated by the variety of the electronic resources

available to them. The appeal of the "one stop shopping" that the full-text aggregator vendors provide makes their databases the most popular electronic resources. Soon their interface becomes the most familiar to the new students. Thus, it makes sense to purchase GeoRef from the same vendor that provides your libraries' full-text aggregation. Graduate students and faculty will use GeoRef differently than the undergraduate students, and additional factors such as how often the references are loaded, will also be a factor. For example, Cambridge Scientific Abstracts loads new references biweekly (CSA, 2004), and EBSCO loads theirs on an annual basis (EBSCO, 2004). Professionals in a corporate setting will have a different focus than the academics. Added services such as document delivery, consulting, and training will be important. Compatibility with other hardware and software is important in all settings.

Under the "vendor" category in the checklist, pricing will come into focus once the other criteria have been considered. AGI provides the same data and pricing structure to all the commercial vendors of GeoRef. The different rates customers pay for the database depend on the type of organization, the number of users, and any additional charges the vendor tacks on. Seemingly, since AGI sets the price, it shouldn't vary that much between vendors; however, vendors place great emphasis on their added services and charge accordingly. With GeoRef being available from so many different vendors, it is in the best interest of the prospective customer to "shop around" and negotiate the best licensing agreement available. In addition, potential customers should talk to other members of their consortia to discuss which of the available vendors of GeoRef have a good reputation in terms of technical support. Looking at the consortium the author's library is in, CARL, there is no clear favorite in terms of vendor. Of the eight academic libraries that have online access to GeoRef, the distribution was equal between Community of Science, SilverPlatter through Ovid, Cambridge Scientific Abstracts and EBSCO. In terms of financial stability, the mentioned vendors have good reputations, however, how long Ovid will continue to support the SilverPlatter platform remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

As budgets for libraries continue to shrink, consortia will have an ever increasing role in library management from the purchasing and storing of collections to the planning and training for new technology. In order to survive as individual institutions, libraries must always consider their user base, their mission and the focus of their collection before becoming involved in consortial agreements.

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