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Purchasing E-books:

Considerations and Models for the Smaller Academic Library



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ABSTRACT

There are many decisions to consider when acquiring e-books for the small academic library. This article lists some preparatory questions to be settled regarding format, vendor, and type of acquisition, and describes the main purchase models currently being used to acquire e-books. Cataloging issues are also discussed.

Smaller academic libraries are often a little bit behind the curve when it comes to implementing new technology, but e-books are no longer really new, and even many of the smallest of the ACL libraries have now ventured into e-book territory. There are numerous decisions to be made when purchasing e-books; this article will attempt to survey some of these considerations to allow for better decision-making for local sites. As librarians in Christian institutions are making these decisions, they are also working to educate administrators and others about the current state of e-book publishing. As Foote writes, “Everyone from journalists to administrators to architects has this notion that e-books can currently replace an entire library’s holdings and that there is one ‘magic bullet’ that will fit the bill for their particular school’s needs” (2013, p. 26). This article also provides some information that can be shared with administrators to justify the e-book purchase decisions that have already been made or may be made in the near future.

Some big-picture questions need to be decided by local librarians before the more specific decisions of platform and vendor are made. Does the library have a policy on multiple copies? Does this multiple copy policy cover different formats? How will you decide whether a book will be purchased as an e-book, a print book, or in both formats? How much weight will be allowed for personal preferences (faculty, librarian, and student) for a given format? Many small libraries already have a policy not to collect multiple copies, so the question of whether the same content in a different format is a “duplicate copy” or not will have to be clarified. When there are many online students or distance sites, the availability and convenience of the material for these students will need to be taken into account. Sometimes this

creates a conflict between faculty's (or students') personal preferences for print and what the librarians believe to be best for the most students.

How will patrons discover the titles? Will the titles (sometimes hundreds or thousands of them) be cataloged individually, or will they be dumped from a MARC-record provider? Do MARC records come with the e-book(s) or at separate cost? If the vendor does not provide MARC records, have the e-books been cataloged elsewhere, or will original cataloging be needed? What is the quality of available MARC records? If the catalog is shared, what is the agreement (or does one need to be reached) about the cataloging of e-books? How will the books be accessed from the catalog? Will students be able to easily identify them as e-books and determine how to access them without a burdensome number of extra clicks? Will both on- and off-campus students have easy accessibility?

Then there are the vendor considerations. Is the e-book available at the same time as the print, or is it delayed in a publisher process similar to periodical embargos? From what vendor(s) are the e-book(s) available? Is the vendor one the library has used before, or do you need to investigate possible vendor requirements such as hosting fees and license stipulations? Some e-book vendors limit use via contract, and any contract limits override general copyright law, according to Simon (2014). This may affect sharing via classroom management system, for example. Emery and Stone (2013a) offer a good overview of the e-book licensing process, including a list of the top deal-breakers for libraries, such as not allowing IP authentication or not allowing walk-up users to access the material. Roncevic (2013) provides a checklist of considerations when considering which vendor(s) to patronize for e-book purchases; Emery and Stone also provide a worksheet for evaluating e-book vendors (2013b, pp. 15–16).

How will the patron access the e-book: can it be downloaded to a personal device, or is it available only online? Early e-books for the academic library were generally available only online, but with the proliferation of tablets and smartphones, even academic users enjoy the convenience of portability as they do their research. Buckley and Johnson (2013) give an overview of the shift from computer access only to downloadable e-books in the academic market, while Ashcroft (2011) reports on surveys of user preferences in the United Kingdom. Does the purchase come with multiple-user access, or might one viewer block the item from being accessed by others? Are there alternative purchase models available such as short-term loans or single access fees, and does the library wish to use these as alternatives to purchase? Finally, how are usage statistics measured? Do the statistics compare with e-book and print circulation statistics the library is already receiving (or that may be needed by outside agencies)? How will e-book use be assessed, and what will happen to e-books that are “weeded”?

Purchase Models

After thinking through the above considerations, the librarians must decide which purchase model to use. While the decision-making process may be easier if the same model is used for all e-book acquisitions, most libraries will probably combine purchase models to meet immediate or long-term needs. If one multiplies the number of purchase models by the number of active vendors and platforms, it is easy to see why the purchase process can be so confusing. Besen and Kirby (2014) provide an overview of e-book pricing decisions from a publisher's point of view; publishers have become accustomed to libraries as a certain type of print customer, and they have not yet settled the question of balancing availability of e-formats with profitability. If publishers attempt to use libraries to increase their profits, they run the risk of alienating this customer base and even of going out of business, but librarians also need to recognize that there are still costs associated with producing e-books, even when paper and binding are no longer a consideration.

One purchase model that has historically had more traction in the public library sector than with academic libraries is the proprietary format device model. Using this model, librarians would first purchase an e-reader such as a Kindle or a Nook. They would then either download titles to the reader, or allow a patron to choose titles to download (which would then stay on the reader). With the ability to load kindle apps on tablets and cell phones, the popularity of dedicated e-readers is already waning. Most patrons have plenty of devices already and would prefer not to carry around another one, especially one that might be expensive if damaged or lost. A good overview of the market can be found in "Ebooks and Libraries" (McDermott, 2011), though it is written from a public library perspective.

E-books can also be selected and purchased one title at a time, following nearly the same model that librarians have always used for print books. This allows for the librarian to develop a collection in the traditional method, but gives the access advantages of the e-book. Unfortunately, there are no economies of scale with this method, and purchasing single titles can often be expensive – at least the same price as a print book and probably a good deal more if multiple users are allowed. Single title purchase can be a convenient method if one already has a relationship with a vendor and a familiar book-purchasing process. The multiplicity of vendors can be a problem with this model, however. Especially if a vendor charges a platform or access fee (generally a yearly cost for hosting independent of number of titles), purchasing only a few titles from a given vendor can ultimately cost much more than the list price of the book. Some vendors also allow libraries to pay slightly less to "borrow" the book via short-term loan.

A purchase model mentioned in the literature, but probably not used too frequently in smaller academic libraries, is the approval plan. This type of purchase seems to be mainly a holdover from the more popular print approval plan, in which a library received regular shipments of books for examination and returned the books that were not wanted. This type of purchase model can be time-consuming; someone would have to take responsibility to examine each title thoroughly on a regular basis. Although this model does allow librarians to tailor purchases to their local curriculum and to pay only for what they believe will be used, it may be an attempt to make new technologies fit old workflows and may not be around for much longer, especially as patron- and demand-driven acquisitions plans become more popular and accessible to libraries of all sizes. For a detailed case study of a large library's use of e-approval, see "E-approval Plans in Research Libraries" (Pickett, Tabacaru, & Harrell, 2014).

Probably the most popular e-book purchase model until now has been the collection purchase. Early collections were put together by regional systems such as Solinet and were generic in nature, appealing to both academic and public libraries. As the e-book market expanded, collections became more focused, first by library type, and then by subject. Now a purchasing librarian can find e-book collections ranging from only a few titles to many thousands, both general and very specific. This type of purchase offers great economy; the books may cost less than a dollar per title in the large collections. The titles are often older and/or less-popular; the publisher thus earns a little more profit from them, and the library in turn gets many titles at a very reasonable price. Some librarians object quite strongly to the "big deal" (Proctor, 2013), but for the small library, it can be a tool (to be used with other tools) for quickly building the collection, especially for online students. This model does not allow for collection development at a title level (with the exception of some smaller subject collections); the library trades collection specificity for quantity of titles.

Many of these collections are offered by consortia, offering even more value. They can be offered as purchases or subscriptions. For the library's budget officer, this can make a big difference; a book purchase will often come from the capital budget (as it does in the author's library), while the price of a subscription comes from the expense budget, because the library is not acquiring an asset. While a capital books budget can be expended on new books (print or e-book) every year, an expense budget is usually already committed to renewing databases and other services that are paid from that same budget line. It may be impossible to add a subscription collection without either dropping another database or increasing that line item (often difficult to accomplish). Although there may be hosting fees with collections, the per-title fee is generally only pennies. Consortia not only offer price savings to member schools; sometimes they actually acquire titles on behalf of the consortium, which are then jointly-owned by member libraries. Specific experiences with consortial purchases

and common ownership are described by Horava (2013) and Van Rennes (2014). If a library is involved with a consortial catalog or collection development plan, other complications are introduced: payment models and weeding decisions have to be coordinated among several libraries (Stern, 2010).

Patron-driven acquisition (PDA) or demand-driven acquisition (DDA) is a newer model that is rapidly increasing in popularity. With this model, library patrons are shown e-books in the catalog that are not owned by the library. When a patron uses the title at a certain trigger level (for example, reading for a given number of minutes or printing pages), the title is automatically purchased. For example, EBL, one e-book vendor, offers a model of three short-term loans (each of which costs the library a small amount) followed by purchase. A specified number of days on loan per calendar year would trigger a second purchase. With this model, no user is ever denied access to the book (Rapp, 2012). When PDA was new, large deposit amounts (up to \$25,000) were required, thus putting it out of reach for most small libraries. This has largely changed, though; smaller deposits are now required, or the library may be billed after the purchase. This model allows the library to purchase only what is actually used and offers patrons wide selection. It is important to attempt to gauge potential patron activity and spending in order to budget correctly, perhaps by initially loading a subset of records and monitoring expenditures (Fischer, Wright, Clatanoff, Barton, & Shreeves, 2012). The main disadvantages to PDA/DDA are lack of librarian control over purchases (though budget limits can be set, and librarians can control which titles are shown to patrons initially); the other disadvantage is difficulty with cataloging which will be addressed in the next section. Cautious deployment and vigilant analysis appear to be the keys to successful implementation of patron-driven acquisition (Dinkins, 2012). Downey, Zhang, Urbano, and Klinger (2014) provide a study comparing DDA with traditional purchase.

Cataloging Questions

Cataloging e-books can be a challenge and is something that will need to be discussed with technical services staff before a commitment is made to purchase from a given vendor. It is very likely that the cataloging workflow will be different with e-books, as most e-books now come with free MARC records, but this should be confirmed before ordering; determine a source for the MARC records if they are not supplied by the vendor. Vasieliou, Rowley, and Hartley (2013) provide a thorough review of e-book cataloging issues in their recent article.

E-book collections with thousands of titles can present additional difficulties, even when the MARC records come with the collection. At the very least, proxy information normally needs to be added to the supplied record. While this is a quick process, repeating it 100,000 times is wearying. Another question cataloging staff

may have is how to differentiate between purchased and PDA titles. Some libraries have solved this problem by using a second location code for PDA titles (J. Hopkins, personal communication, July 18, 2014). If the title is purchased, the cataloger only has to change the location code. Downey's (2014) article gives another model for technical services workflow with DDA records. Finally, libraries that share catalogs with consortia (especially those with centralized cataloging functions) can run into difficulty with different holdings for different libraries and central staff lacking the time to add the catalog records for large collections. Knowledge base products present an ideal solution for this problem, since entire collections can be turned on and off with a click, but many e-book collections are not yet entered into various knowledge bases.

Conclusion

All we really know for sure right now is that libraries – even small ones – cannot stand still or ignore technological changes that face us. Based on format migrations from the past (videotapes, video discs, cassette tapes, etc.), we know that early format confusion does eventually resolve, but that even standard formats such as the VHS tape may become obsolete with time. We must combine excellent service to today's users with fiscal responsibility, while making our best guess at the future. †

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