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Making the Invisible Visible: What collection development needs to know about acquisitions

Acquisitions and collection development departments work in unison to obtain materials for library clientele. While sharing the same purpose, these units differ greatly in actual functions and procedures. These differences can lead to confusion about the processes used to acquire materials and to occasional misunderstandings as to the goals of each department. The following will explore aspects of the acquisition processes that may provide collection development librarians a better understanding of the functions and the often invisible extent of activities performed within acquisitions units.

In all libraries, procedures develop over years of accumulated experience in various acquisitions activities. Procedures may vary among libraries, but frequently include techniques for searching titles in both local, national, and vendor catalogs; locating appropriate vendors for a variety of formats and subjects; initiating orders through paper, fax, and electronic venues; receiving material; verifying that the correct materials were received; approving invoices for payment; working with financial systems; and developing or downloading bibliographic information into local systems. The procedures become second nature to acquisitions but frequently remain mysterious to collection development.

Collection development librarians often wonder why it takes acquisitions so long to order materials, why acquisitions wants so much information, why acquisitions sometimes gets the wrong item, what all those cryptic codes in the orders really mean, or why the entire process need to be so complicated. Tarot cards, crystal balls and voodoo dolls aside, Collection development librarians need to know that acquisitions personnel are not telepathic and not able to know everything about the items desired without specific information. Unfortunately, nor are acquisitions personnel able to teleport the items to the library from distant warehouses instantaneously.

When items are ordered, acquisitions staff needs to have clear bibliographic information such as a page from a publisher/vendor catalog or the catalog itself. Alternatives could be a printout from *Books in Print* or a printed record from an online source such as Amazon.com. Hand written and illegible notes with vague information will most likely end in disappointing results. The basic information needed includes author, title, publisher and date. If more information, such as the estimated cost, the edition (2nd, revised?), the format (paper, cloth, audio, CD, video, DVD, etc.), and the ISBN, can be provided so much the better. For journals, acquisitions needs the title, publisher, ISSN, starting date/volume, estimated cost, and format (print, electronic, microform). The more information that collection development provides, the faster acquisitions can process orders.

Inexperienced collection development librarians may ask why all this information is needed. The author and title should be obvious, but

some of the rest might seem redundant. It isn't. Books can have similar titles, and even similar authors; knowing the publisher will help acquisitions identify the correct item. Books often go through multiple editions; when a specific edition is needed, the information about the edition number and date becomes critical. Books are often published in both paper and cloth bound editions and sometimes electronic formats as well. The paper edition is usually considerably cheaper but may not withstand heavy use; selectors need to tell acquisitions which format is preferred. The paper and cloth versions usually have different ISBNs; that information helps get the right version. Many journals and publishers have similar names or abbreviations. Asking for the magazine published by the MLA could result in titles related to literature or to medicine, among other things. The specific title, author and publisher are critical if acquisitions is to obtain the desired item. The ISBN makes precise identification more certain. Many vendors will supply items based primarily upon the ISBN; if there is a discrepancy between the ISBN and the title, the vendor will supply the item with the matching ISBN. Collection development needs to provide acquisitions with as much accurate information as possible.

While acquisitions has a number of sources they use to identify publishers, there are always new publishers and societies being formed. When the publisher is a smaller company, the collection development librarian should supply whatever information they have about the address and contact information. Since many local and regional publishers are not listed in the various national databases, providing information about their addresses can be especially helpful and will avoid delays in the ordering process. Many university financial systems require that new companies provide information such as their street address or federal tax ID number in order to process payments. When collection development can supply information about how to contact new or local companies, acquisitions can set up records to facilitate the payments to the companies.

Ordering electronic resources has unique requirements. Each library and publisher/vendor handles electronics slightly differently, but there are some basic data that collection development must provide to acquisitions. Not only is the title and publisher information needed but a contact for the publisher is crucial because there will be questions. Especially important is the format: web, CD-ROM, or software. The method of access for web resources (IP access or password verification) needs to be identified. Also, is there is a limited number of simultaneous users? What, if any, consortium will be involved? Does the product have a license agreement that must be signed? Again, the more information provided, the smoother the ordering process will be. Electronic resources are frequently more complicated than traditional print resources. There are often contracts that must be negotiated and signed by the organization's legal office. The prices are rarely set, unlike the list price for books or journals, and may vary depending upon such factors as the type of library, the population served, and the number of simultaneous users. Even for print journals that have an electronic version which appears to be free with the print subscription, there are usually questions of access that need to be identified and negotiated. Collection development librarians must work closely with acquisitions to make sure that these materials are acquired successfully.

Ordering out-of-print materials also presents unique situations to acquisitions. Acquisitions know which out-of-print sources are most reliable for cost including shipping/handling, for condition of materials, and for actual availability. Some dealers do not remove items from their online catalogs until a long time after the items are sold. Some dealers do not describe the items accurately; when the materials arrive, acquisitions discovers that the items are not what were needed. If an item turns out to be physically damaged, or is the wrong edition, it must be returned and acquisitions must start over in its efforts to obtain the item. Ordering out-of-print materials usually takes longer than acquiring in print materials, and is frequently less successful. Collection development must know that out-of-print items cannot always be obtained, even in this age of easy internet access to out-of-print dealers.

Besides bibliographic and other relevant information related to the item or electronic resource being ordered, acquisitions also needs to know what will happen to the item once it arrives at the local library. This information is also entered into the ordering system at the time an item is ordered. Information would include the location, any special treatment for processing, notification for patrons, reserve information, and the fund being used to pay for the item.

Once acquisitions has the necessary information, it can work on searching local catalogs for duplicate holdings and, if not a duplicate, determine what vendor to use. Acquisitions personnel work with a variety of local, national, and, in some cases, international vendors and their systems during the ordering process. While librarians may recommend vendors, acquisitions knows which ones actually deliver materials promptly and which ones provide the best prices. Acquisitions personnel know which vendors are reliable, and which ones aren't. They have listened to the salespeople, monitored the actual performances and identified those companies that have the best prices and the best service. Some vendors offer discounts that vary depending upon the types of materials or the amount of business the library does with the vendor. Some vendors charge shipping, handling and service charges that also may vary with the types of materials or the amount of business the library does with the vendor. Some vendors deliver materials within a few weeks, others take much longer. Some vendors will offer deposit accounts and others will require prepayments. Some vendors may require use of a credit card to use their services. This option may be possible where the organization has created institutional accounts. However, fiscal oversight of credit cards in institutional environments can present financial management challenges to the organization. Acquisitions personnel have learned through experience which vendors offer the best combination of price and service.

Collection development librarians need to remember that most organizations have processes for ordering materials. Records may be put into online systems; purchase orders may be generated; orders may be placed in vendor systems. Acquisitions may also download temporary records either from the vendor or OCLC or using Z39.50 into the local online catalog. This lets colleagues and clientele know that a book has been ordered and is, hopefully, on its way. In large organizations, thousands of orders are created. The process is rarely instantaneous. There is substantial communication between acquisitions and various

vendors when placing orders. Acquisitions personnel are in the business of making the process work swiftly and smoothly. In some libraries, the institutional financial office may require that all funds be expended by specific deadlines. Other institutions may allow some funds to be carried over into a new fiscal year. Some organizations allow credit cards to be used throughout a fiscal year while others require that the use of the cards cease several weeks before the end of the fiscal year in order to reconcile the accounts. Acquisitions monitors such deadlines closely. These institutional deadlines determine when materials can be ordered, and collection development must respect these requirements that are not controlled by acquisitions.

Learning from acquisitions how to interpret the records and reports that are available will enhance a collection development librarian's ability to do his or her job. Many online order systems have a variety of codes that show the status of the orders. When collection development librarians know how to read these codes, they can see when items were ordered or received, and if any problems were reported by the vendors. Coding used in electronic ordering systems enable the system to generate different types of lists of materials being ordered. For example, a list of all the serials purchased on a specific fund could be requested and the system would compile the list. Online ordering systems also have financial management components that are used both by acquisitions and by collection development librarians. Financial reports provide collection development librarians timely information regarding the status of their funds.

Collection development needs to know that once the order leaves the library, the vendor/publisher is responsible for providing the material, not the acquisitions unit. When an order is submitted to acquisitions, acquisitions can check vendors' databases to determine if an item is in stock at that moment. Acquisitions can monitor the response and can identify alternate sources if the first source can't provide the item. But rarely can acquisitions get an item instantly.

The goal of acquisitions and collection development is to obtain materials for library patrons. The roles of personnel differ in the two areas, much as dialects can vary within languages. British English and American English have a common foundation, but also have major differences that can lead to confusion for unwary tourists. The acquisitions and collection management units have a common foundation of providing information, but differ considerably in the techniques. Collection development needs to learn more about acquisitions, and acquisitions needs to share information about its procedures. When collection development understands acquisitions, the library and the patrons benefit.

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