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Electronic Resources: Order Out of Chaos?

by Greg Doyle
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Imagine you are returning from your favorite vacation spot. You have just landed in Chicago and are on your way to the gate to finish the final leg of your trip. You are tired from the 12-hour flight, but you're happy and relieved that the monitors indicate the gate is not far away, and the plane is scheduled to leave on time. But as you approach the gate, a large crowd is milling around, and a line extends out into the hallway. The sign behind the counter simply says "delayed," and an announcement comes over the air that says your plane is out of service. Worse, the agent tells you that you'll be waiting a minimum of three hours, and that's an optimistic guess because they have to find a spare plane. You have her check for other flights on other

airlines, but all she can tell you is that everything is booked. If you want to chance being waitlisted and if you don't mind finding your way to the other terminal within 10 minutes, maybe, just maybe, you'll get home with as few surprises as necessary.

Just as the unexpected and often unpleasant can turn an ordinary trip into an exciting adventure, the Multnomah County Library (MCL) has experienced a few delays, some false starts, and many successes on its trip from the land of print to a place where electronic resources integrate nicely into reference services. Providing access to electronic resources has been a challenge in our system of a large research-oriented Central Library and 14 branches, with more branches planned in the next few years. We currently provide access to approximately 40 databases on CD-ROM at Central, most networked; 12 Internet-accessible databases available from any library; and seven networked and 28 stand-alone titles at the Midland Library. These numbers don't include CD-ROM titles for children, which are loaded on stand-alone computers in each library.

THE TECHNOLOGY

You already know how quickly technology changes, which makes the decision about how to deliver a particular resource more complicated. Here at MCL, we've had to manage expectations based on the technology available to us. When the number of titles available on CD-ROM exploded in the early 1990s, we always expected that we would load CD-ROMs at the Central Library and provide access from any MCL site through a wide-area network. Networking certain titles within Central proved a challenge, and we still haven't provided access to these titles outside the building, although we may soon. Our computer staff is experimenting with Citrix Win-Frame software and the ICA network protocol to speed up processing time, which has always been a problem. If this proves feasible, we will have yet another option to consider when we try to decide the best way to deliver an electronic resource.

The growth of the World Wide Web and Internet offers another way to deliver databases to multiple locations. Services such as OCLC FirstSearch, or IAC's SearchBank offered a number of reference resources considered valuable by staff. As we increased the number of Internet-ready public search stations at Central and the branches, and as vendors offered IP address recognition in lieu of passwords, our options increased. These days more vendors are making their databases available via the Web directly from their Web sites, as well as through third parties such as EBSCO and OCLC. More options, are great but also confusing. Just how do you make decisions?

Our bias now is for Internet-accessible databases over CD-ROM. In the past year we have moved Novelist, Computer Select, F&S Index, and Marcive GPO/PCAT Plus from CD-ROM access in favor of Internet access. These were easy decisions, as we gave up very little in searching functionality, for the same cost or less in all cases. At the same time, we increased access from a single location to every branch library. Other titles take more negotiation with staff. Selectors in the Central Library don't want to give up BIP+ on CD-ROM because of the searching capabilities, speed, and record display. Technical services staff use BIP+ with Ingram's stock information and don't want to give that up. Our branch staff is waiting for any kind of access, but don't have the capability to run local copies of the CD-ROM. In the end, we will probably have a combination of formats for this resource.

SELECTING ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

In 1993 MCL found itself flailing around trying to make decisions about electronic resources. While it was easy to evaluate a resource for its content, other aspects had to be considered: interface, searching capabilities, sorting/printing/downloading functionality, operating systems and platforms. Much of this was new to librarians who had been exposed only to personal computers at that time. In an attempt to bring order from chaos and to create a process to identify, order, evaluate, purchase, and load, the Database Access Review Committee (DARC) was created. DARC also had a role in producing documentation and training for new products. The committee consisted of nine staff: one member from each of the six sections in Central, three members from the branches, and one person from computer support. DARC met quarterly, with emergency meetings held when necessary.

WHAT DARC WAS ABLE TO DO:

- Develop an acquisition policy for electronic resources,
- Establish procedures for requesting, reviewing, evaluating and approving products for purchase,
- Monitor budget for new products.

WHAT DARC WAS UNABLE TO DO:

- Remain current about the number of vendors offering CD-ROMS,
- Identify and evaluate the growing number of databases available via the Internet,
- Establish and manage communication between public service staff and computer support staff,
- Fully integrate electronic resources into reference services, including branch services.

In 1997 DARC realized it could not effectively manage electronic resources and recommended the creation of a new position, electronic resources librarian (ERL), to coordinate electronic resources. The major initiatives of the ERL were as follows:

- Prioritize work on problem CD-ROM titles and either get them installed on the network or return them to the vendor,
- Identify titles on the CD-ROM network that are Internet accessible and evaluate for replacement,
- Work with vendors to set up trials of products and solicit feedback from staff,
- Represent MCL on the Portland Area Library System (PORTALS) and ORBIS Library Consortium database committees.

The advantage of this position is that staff do not duplicate each other's work and vendors have one point of contact. The disadvantage is that staff are not as involved in the selection and evaluation as they once had been. In the coming year, the ERL plans to formalize the evaluation of products by assigning staff the responsibility of evaluating and recommending whether to purchase.

BUDGETING

This is the first year we have consolidated all electronic reference products into a single line item on the budget. In the past, electronic resources might have been charged to individual sections, grants, etc. We'll now be able to track exactly how much of our materials budget is devoted to electronic resources (approximately 6%). This figure does not include CD-ROMs purchased for the circulating collection. We don't really expect electronic resources to save the library money. In a few cases we can cancel print subscriptions and rely on the electronic version. *Books in Print* and *Encyclopedia of Associations* come to mind. Rather, we are able to increase the availability of a particular resource at a marginal increase in costs and boost service levels for our patrons. Instead of traveling to Central to use Computer Select on CD-ROM, a Gresham branch patron can use the product at the Gresham Library, or better yet, dial it up from home or office. The result is much greater access with marginal cost increases.

We also look at the entire cost of a particular resource. How much does it cost us to purchase, process, and store on the shelves 15 sets of *Books in Print*? How does that compare to the cost of the CD-ROM, plus the hardware to store and run it, plus staff to support it? And finally, what's the cost of accessing the database through a service like SearchBank or FirstSearch?

INTEGRATING AND UTILIZING

ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

Integrating electronic resources into reference services is a topic that can't be ignored. Just as buying a book and putting it on the shelf doesn't ensure usage, neither does buying a resource and making a link to it. Training of staff and the public is necessary to see effective and frequent use of the resource.

Training adds to the overall cost of the resource. Finding time for staff to become expert enough with the product to teach others is often difficult. And it can be even more difficult to schedule staff off the reference desk to attend training sessions. We try different ways to introduce resources to staff: traditional stand-up classroom training, small demonstration sessions to demonstrate important features and peculiarities in the product; and intranet access to product documentation created by staff. We still have a long way to go with this, especially in getting the training out to our branch staff.

We're also finding that electronic resources are having an effect on traditional reference service. Reference transactions are lasting longer, often due to the need to provide on-the-spot instruction in the use of the computer and the various services available. We're also seeing a drop in the number of transactions, which can be explained in part by the fact that patrons are better able to find information on their own using the various electronic resources we've provided and taught them to use.

TRACKING USAGE

Tracking usage is one of the areas in which we are most "in the dark." Some vendors, such as OCLC and IAC, provide regular and useful statistics about use. We can use statistics to make decisions regarding database renewal or to increase or reduce simultaneous users. Some vendors either don't provide the statistics or only do so upon request and take awhile to provide them. And so far, we have not been able to track any use of our CD-ROM titles. Of course, statistics don't tell us how useful the resource was and whether it provided the information to our patrons, but they do give us some idea of how often the product is used.

CONSORTIA

Consortia are both a blessing and curse. As a member of PORTALS, we benefit from the access to databases PORTALS negotiates and pays for. Most of the databases available are ones we don't use frequently enough to subscribe to on our own but love to have

access to. Others, like Worldcat, we've grown to rely on and would probably purchase on our own.

As a PORTALS member, we can participate in the ORBIS consortia and take advantage of any discounts vendors provide to large groups. But because of the nature of ORBIS—each library decides whether or not to purchase each database—beginning a service can take a much longer time than if we were to subscribe on our own. On the other hand, we benefit from all the work an ORBIS member does by tracking down a vendor, setting up trials, following up on price quotes, and coordinating the purchase by multiple libraries.

SUMMARY

In this article I've tried to highlight the issues involved in selecting and integrating electronic

resources here at the MCL. It seems clear that just as we get a handle on one aspect of this process another pops up. We try to remain flexible and find new ways to streamline the process of purchasing and installing products. As our technology base increases throughout our system, we'll need to closely examine the role of electronic and print reference in our branches and provide a suite of resources to support that role. Finally, we need to examine whether to continue centralizing the selection of electronic resources or distribute that responsibility to multiple selectors. **Q**

*Multnomah County Library Web site:
www.multnomah.lib.or.us/lib/*

Changing Dimensions

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systems than the librarian who has not seen or used it, the chances for perceived "bad service" are real.

At the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, we have tried developing a baseline of knowledge in each program available to patrons, for which every reference librarian is responsible. This has been necessary for two reasons: First, it will prevent (to some degree) inequity of service in assisting patrons. On the other side of this coin, a reference librarian can also feel comfortable in saying, "I am unable to help you with this; please try a help screen or refer to a book." Second, it becomes a basis for expectations of candidates seeking reference positions. The baseline first deals with hardware troubleshooting, all the "tricks" of checking connections and rebooting that one tries before contacting computer support personnel. The remainder addresses levels of proficiency in the software programs offered to the public. These will at least get a patron started and through the simpler tasks that can be performed with each program.

The public relations aspect of reference service remains vitally important for the future of our libraries. Only the satisfied patron/taxpayer will lobby to continue support of services at the levels at which their needs have been met. Measuring this satisfaction may be elusive. It is, however, to our advantage to take on the added instructional and assistance queries regarding electronic resources. Making electronic resources available only to those

who know how to use them goes against the grain of what public libraries in our country have long stood for: access for all. Denial of this teaching role may quickly diminish the support necessary to upgrade hardware and software in the future. Assisting patrons as their needs require assures that these resources — and resources of the future — will continue to be available for our work, as well as for public use.

The measures and standards for traditional public library service appear to be failing us at this time, and new ones should be worked out for some of the situations this article refers to. With electronic resources, we must take into account that not all "transactions" will be informational. The old dichotomy of informational and directional should be supplemented with instructional. Reference (informational) statistics may drop, but the reference librarian may be busier than ever assisting people in using the electronic resources.

In another generation, as more library patrons are comfortable with computers because they have used them in school, at work, and probably at home, the need for the instructional/technical assistance that reference librarians must now give may decrease. By that time information storage, retrieval, and delivery, will have changed further, as will have expectations from our public. Again, reference librarians will find their role changing, as we find it changing now. **Q**