VISTA Journal Subscription Management and Fulfillment System

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In recent years the VISTA system has been adopted by a number of publishers to handle subscription management and fulfillment. We asked VISTA to send us a summary for inclusion on Serials and are grateful to Anne Byerley of VISTA for the following:

Last Autumn, a major UK publisher started work on the implementation of a computer system which, by the end of this year, will provide vital administrative support for the company's entire range of book and journal publishing activities.

The project started when the time came to upgrade the existing mainframe computer, raising the inevitable question - "which way now?" The choice was to stay with the current manufacturer, install new hardware and re-write all the software - or adopt a completely different approach by going for a packaged solution. While the first option would provide a tailor-made solution - how long would it take? And while the second might offer a faster, more efficient route - how well would it fit?

The company went for sound compromise. A packaged solution with opportunities to make the changes needed to mould the package around the business.

Based around a DEC VAX computer and supporting more than 100 terminals, the Company installed the VISTA Publishing System, of which a major component is the Journal Subscription Management and Fulfillment System.

As well as publishing and distributing thousands of book titles throughout the U.K., the group also publishes more than 200 learned journals through its subsidiary companies.

The VISTA Subscriptions System is a complete management information system designed to address the particular problems associated with the regular despatch of magazines, journals, periodicals, encyclopaedias and editions. As well as handling regular subscriptions, the system also includes facilities to deal with single issue orders.

Names and addresses, title information, prices, stock levels, subscriptions and single issue/one off orders are held in separate information files. Depending on subscription cycles, renewal notices are produced as and when required, or just once a year - and any number of reminders can be produced. If a subscriber neglects to pay a subscription before the first issue of the renewal period is despatched, a specified number of grace copies may be sent before the subscription lapses.

The system produces labels for subscriptions and single issues. Late paid subscriptions, as well as those that have re-started after being suspended, are automatically calculated and appropriate labels produced.

According to the complexity of each application, over 50 different reports can be generated, ranging from audit trails and picking lists to sample copy summaries and other management information.

A related costing system helps to keep track of all the costs associated with journal production and to administer sales of advertising space. A subsidiary billing system deals with advertising, offprints, reprints, page changes, colour plates, fold-outs, translations, authors' alterations and miscellaneous charges.

Two further applications available for integration with the system, promotional mailing and catalogues - offer facilities to provide well-targeted advance information on forthcoming publications.

Though self-contained, the entire system can, if required, be linked to the VISTA Publishing System using the sales ledger as a joint subscription and book sales ledger, and consolidating information for promotional activities.

So far, a number of leading publishers have implemented VISTA's journals system, among them Oxford Unviersity Press, Associated Book Publishers, Butterworths, Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, Longmans and Elsevier Sequoia.

Some useful pointers to those presently involved in the inevitably complex business of evaluating a number of different computer solutions are:

* How easily can subscriber information be accessed?

* Can subscriptions be paid easily and can labels be produced accurately?

* How well does the system handle subscription renewals?

* Can the system accept renewals from magnetic tapes received from subscription agents?

* Can the system produce accurate and informative reports on demand?

* Can the system produce letters, reminders or catch-up letters as a by-product of the system?

* Does the system cater for single and back-issues, as well as advertising, reprinting, offprints and any other sources of income which are relevant to a journals publishing business?

* Is a good range of documentation created - such as audit lists on a daily basis?

One very important point about the VISTA Subscriptions System is the way in which renewals are handled, which ensures that static data does not have to be re-entered each year, giving the ability to handle renewals received on magnetic tape from subscription agents.

Another aspect of the system is the way in which labels can be requested and left to run in the "background", leaving the VDU terminals free for other work. Screen layouts also are designed for clarity and ease of use making sure that all required information is presented.

Perhaps the single most important feature is the way subscriber details are accessed. Many subscription systems do not provide quick and easy access to subscriber names and addresses. VISTA system offers an alpha matching facility which gives immediate access to the subscriber, without having to search through files indexed solely by specific journals or titles. Alpha matching allows users to locate any master file record just by entering one or more character strings of data, taken from, for example, the journal title, or other subscribers name/address.

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