
Subscription Agents' Catalogues: Goldmine or Minefield?

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This article gives a brief comparison of the value to serials librarians of the catalogues of the five subscription agents that are widely circulated in this country viz. Blackwell, Dawson, Ebsco, Faxon (print catalogue and more comprehensive microfiche one) and Swets. It also compares them where appropriate with the two commercially published Bowker publications, Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory and Irregular Serials and Annuals. Some pitfalls in interpreting the information are also highlighted.

In terms of comprehensiveness there are wide variations, with most agents specifying that their catalogues list only the titles most commonly in demand. Dawson lists about 13,000 titles (including those in a separate continuations catalogue), Blackwell lists over 20,000 (including those in a separate continuations section), Swets 25,000, Ebsco in excess of 70,000, with Faxon providing a print copy including over 40,000 titles and a microfiche version with about 86,000 titles (including "low activity" titles). Ulrichs lists about 71,000 titles and Irregular Serials and Annuals about 36,000.

Of course number of titles listed can only act as a rough guide to which publication may most likely contain an obscure title. Even if that title is listed in one catalogue, other information required by the librarian may not be given in it.

All five agent catalogues list titles alphabetically. Swets, Ebsco and Faxon list titles in one alphabetical sequence, Blackwell with separate sequences for periodicals and continuations, and Dawson with separate catalogues for periodicals and continuations. The Bowker publications have an alphabetical index to a subject arrangement of titles.

Blackwell does not provide a subject/classified sequence, nor does Swets (although subject headings are assigned in the alphabetical sequence). Dawson, Ebsco and Faxon (fiche edition only) do provide a separate subject approach.

All the catalogues provide details of frequency of publication and price. Volume numbering is given by all except Dawson and Ulrich. Country of publication is given by all except Faxon. All the agent catalogues with the notable exception of Swets omit the publisher. Ulrich gives this information.

None of the agent catalogues gives the address of the publisher, presumably on the not unreasonable grounds that they want to discourage potential customers from dealing direct with the publisher, although space and production costs must also be a major factor. Ulrich does give this information.

Swets, Blackwell and Faxon give the ISSN which Dawson and Ebsco omit. Ulrich again gives this information. Blackwell and Faxon give information about availability of title pages, contents and indexes. This can save librarians a great deal of time by cutting down on unnecessary claims (and binding holdups) and thus save the time of agents and publishers too. This information is not available from Swets, Dawson or Ebsco catalogues or from Ulrich.

The Faxon catalogue is the only agent catalogue which gives information on where titles are abstracted or indexed, a service also provided by Ulrich.

	<u>Blackwell</u>	<u>Dawson</u>	<u>Ebsco</u>	<u>Faxon</u>	<u>Swets</u>	<u>Bowker</u>
titles listed alphabetically	yes (2 sequen- ces)	yes (2 cata- logues)	yes	yes	yes	no
subject sequence	no	yes	yes	no : print copy yes : fiche copy	no	yes : main sequence
price	yes (in Sterling)	yes (in Sterling)	yes (in \$US, \$CAN, \$AUS)	yes (in \$US)	yes (in currency of origin)	yes (in currency of origin)
frequency	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
vol. no. cited	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no
country of pub.	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
publisher	no	no	no	no	yes	yes
publisher address	no	no	no	no	no	yes
ISSN	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes
TPCI info	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Abstracting info.	no	no	no	yes	no	yes

Subscription price is one of the vital elements of information that these catalogues hold. No one catalogue will give more up to date price information than another but the agent catalogues will usually give more up to date prices than the Bowker publications. However great care should be taken in interpreting the price given. All of them are rather shy when it comes to the question of agent handling charges and the inclusion or exclusion of them from the subscription price as it appears in the catalogue:

Blackwell lists all prices in sterling including agent handling charge, if any. The subscription price for UK libraries is given.

Dawson list all prices in sterling excluding agent handling charge. The subscription price for UK libraries is given.

Ebsco list prices in US dollars except Canadian publications (Canadian dollars) and Australian publications (Australian dollars).

The subscription price for UK libraries is given. This is in \$US even for British publications. Price excludes agent handling charge.

Faxon list all prices in US dollars. This is subscription price for US domestic customers only. It excludes agent handling charge.

Swets list price in currency of country of publication. The subscription price for UK libraries is given. It excludes agent handling charge.

Prices only act as a guide and cannot always be taken as a firm figure for the year ahead. Currency fluctuations, publisher repricing after notifying agents, extra issues (what we might call the 'Elsevier problem'), are three of the more obvious reasons why prices will change. Only Blackwell appear to include handling charge in their listed

price and this should be taken into account when checking price. From a British point of view the Faxon catalogue should only be used for price information as a last resort, Ebsco as second last.

The Swets catalogue should be the first choice if foreign publications are being considered for purchase direct.

Most of the catalogues could be made more useful, or at least easier to use. Dawson and Blackwell could start by integrating their continuations listing into the main sequence and thereby save the effort of checking for obscure titles in two sequences. This would oblige Dawson to abandon the rather odd way they list their continuations at present.

Faxon, with such an otherwise comprehensive catalogue, should start including prices for non-US customers. It is what we should expect from a leading international subscription agency.

Ebsco produces a most useful catalogue. It is only a pity that it is claimed by relatively infrequent users to be difficult to use because of dense and (perceived) confusing layout of information. In order to keep the catalogue a manageable size (it was an unwieldy two volumes but is one again) yet retain all the information that makes it valuable, there is probably only a limited amount that can be done. The first priority should be to improve the very inadequate guide to the catalogue which is, almost unbelievably, hidden away on the 30th (unnumbered) page. The vital information about

pricing in American, Canadian and Australian dollars only (on the face of it a rather odd decision) appears on page 3 amidst the summary of Ebsco services and completely divorced from the other information about the catalogue. It would appear that inadequate thought has been given to the finishing touches of this catalogue.

All five catalogues would benefit from having a fold-out key to the codes used inside. This would circumvent the problem of referring back and forward, which is irritating when numerous titles are being checked for different information in several catalogues.

More information on cessations and changes of title would also prove useful. The Bowker publications can be invaluable for this information.

Overall the Swets catalogue appears the ideal compromise between the somewhat daunting and transatlantic biased catalogues of Ebsco and Faxon and the smaller British catalogues of Dawson and Blackwell. Each catalogue has its own particular merits, but Swets provides the basic essentials for ordering: identifying existence of titles, identifying publisher and country of publication (to establish how to obtain them) and accurate price. But even it is not perfect. We have no idea whether the publisher price will be the Swets price. We also lack useful information given by some other catalogues, notably information on the availability of indexes for which we have to consult the catalogues of Blackwell and Faxon.