

# Selecting a Subscription Agent

## A West Midlands View

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Paper presented to the workshop 'Medical School Libraries: An Inside View', run by the Medical Information Working Party, November 1988

### Introduction

My comments are drawn from my own experience in a large medical school library, which currently purchases some 950 serial titles a year at a cost of about £150,000, and from the results of a survey which I carried out in 1987 into the book and periodical suppliers used by NHS libraries, nurse education centre libraries and libraries serving NHS managers, as well as multidisciplinary libraries, which serve a range of health service professions. (From a tradition of separate, and hence often very small, libraries for doctors and nurses, the NHS has been moving steadily towards administrative and often physical centralisation of library provision in hospitals and even towards coordinated services for all the staff in a health district. The provision of periodicals in all the libraries on a hospital site or in a district may therefore be under the control of one librarian.)

The NHS libraries in the West Midlands have total budgets ranging from £1,000 to £40,000 a year for stock and services, and spend from £200 to £25,000 on serials. The number of titles purchased varies from 20 to over 300. Libraries serving doctors will spend more of their budget on serials than those serving other health service professions only.

Despite financial restrictions in the NHS over the past decade, health service libraries have increased in number and size. As their libraries grew, librarians have transferred subscriptions to specialist agents, since it is felt that only such firms have the necessary expertise, administrative procedures and hopefully influence with the periodical publishers. For convenience a single agent is generally used, rather than splitting the subscription list between several firms. Only the

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smallest libraries still purchase the majority of their journals from a general bookseller, local newsagent or directly from publishers.

During the same period the medical school library has gradually eliminated almost all direct subscriptions, and now uses a small number of agents, concentrating most orders with one firm.

### Selecting an agent

My survey showed that in a surprising number of cases the selection of the present agent had been made by the NHS district supplies department. Should a change be considered now, however, it is normally the librarian who selects the supplier. Unfortunately it still occasionally happens that a supplies department acts without consulting the librarian, even putting the subscriptions list out to tender and accepting the lowest quotation, regardless of the service offered!

Librarians usually base their choice of subscription agent on the recommendations of other librarians or on their own experience in previous jobs. Much stress is laid on the general reputation and standing of the agent and, since periodical subscriptions involve handing over money for goods not yet received, on the financial reliability of the firm.

### Criteria for selection

We look for service based on good communication - between agent and publisher as well as between agent and library.

We are under increasing pressure to run our libraries as economically as possible, while at the same time maintaining the level of service or, more likely, introducing new and increasingly sophisticated services, such as online searching and CD-ROM, to a growing clientele.

Using an agent should save us time, in particular reducing clerical tasks and releasing staff to serve library users directly - answering enquiries, carrying out mediated online searches, educating students in the use of the library and so on.

We look at the range of services offered by agents, the quality of these services and whether they are appropriate to our needs. Services which are attractive to larger libraries may be superfluous for the small organisation and hence appear a waste of money. Although many of the additional facilities which subscription agents now offer to customers are a by-product of the automation of the firms' procedures, librarians need to be assured that they are not paying, as part of their subscription costs, for 'extras' which they do not require.

### **Renewals**

Firstly we expect the agent to renew subscriptions with the publisher promptly and efficiently. This is the part of the serials acquisitions process which librarians generally find most difficult to handle themselves, particularly when foreign currency payments are involved.

We look for renewal arrangements which suit local practice - fairly straightforward in university libraries, which normally have standing orders, but often fraught with difficulty in the NHS, where orders are placed afresh each year by supplies departments.

NHS librarians realise that the agent requires an early decision concerning renewals for the coming year, if a break in the receipt of issues is to be avoided. Similarly those libraries like my own, which have standing orders, must notify cancellations well in advance in order to avoid receiving and paying for unwanted issues. Should we decide to cancel at a late stage or even during a subscription year, however, we hope the agent will attempt to recover any outstanding portion of the subscription for us.

We expect new orders for additional titles to be processed quickly, of course, and if we place an order mid way through a subscription year, we hope the agent will make every effort to secure issues already published, if required.

### **Claims**

A key service offered by the agent is claiming missing issues from the publisher on behalf of the customer. We look for prompt and effective handling of claims, with regular progress reports. Follow-up enquiries as to whether we have received missing issues are appreciated.

### **Subscription costs**

I have put pricing some way down my list because I feel that getting a journal regularly, with no issues missing, is more important to us since it

increases reader satisfaction, than securing the lowest price.

In the past librarians have often been rather reluctant to ask about handling charges. This attitude is unlikely to continue. We would like clearer statements from agents about their pricing policies.

We welcome the option of one-line invoices, with discount for early payment, which increases the funds available to the library. The discounts offered are fairly small, however, and I wonder how long it will be before finance officers decide that it would be more profitable to delay payment as long as possible, investing the money in the mean time.

### **Back issues and microforms**

NHS colleagues placed particular emphasis on a good back issues service, with parts supplied from stock if possible. Limited shelf space in hospital medical libraries means there is a growing interest in holding back runs in microform rather than hard copy. Librarians need information about the availability of journals in microform and non-print formats generally.

### **Good communications**

Good communication between agent and subscriber on a day to day basis by letter, fax and telephone is vital - particularly the ability to telephone the agent and be put through to someone who is well informed.

Regular reports on such matters as changes in the frequency of issues, delays in publication and mailing, and significant increases in subscription costs are valued. For those with manual record systems, it is handy if reports come on perforated stationery, which can be split up and the reports filed with relevant Kardex cards.

### **Professional expertise**

We look on the subscription agent as a professional in the field who knows more than we do about the practices of journal publishers. We look to the agent to act as an intermediary between publishers and ourselves, and hope that the agent will put pressure on the publishers regarding such problems as inadequate wrappers, mid-year charges for extra volumes or unannounced supplements, and use of inefficient fulfillment agencies or distributors.

### **Information services**

An agent should be able to respond promptly to requests for bibliographic information and current prices for new and established journals

from all countries. New title announcements and the provision of specimen copies are also valued.

Smaller libraries often cannot afford to purchase major guides such as *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory*, so the distribution of a regularly updated catalogue of serials currently available, with information about publisher, frequency and price is appreciated. The prices given, though soon out of date, provide an indication of the likely cost of a periodical and can be verified by letter or telephone.

#### Other contacts

A booklet giving information about the organisation of the company, services provided and guidance on claiming is welcomed. Some of the problems which occur between agent and customer are due, I believe, to librarians' ignorance of the way periodical publishers operate. More contact between agent and customer - through agents' representatives visiting libraries where possible and through informative brochures - would be beneficial to both parties. Liaison between agents and NHS supplies departments and treasurers, who are often more familiar with the purchase of items such as beds and drugs than buying books and periodicals, can also be helpful.

#### Automation

I have so far made little reference to automation. Computerisation of periodicals housekeeping in large libraries is often part of a package offered by a cooperative, such as BLCMP in the case of the University of Birmingham, or a major library software company.

Lack of funds for equipment has meant that NHS libraries in the West Midlands have been

relatively slow to adopt any form of computerisation. Some 30 of the libraries now have microcomputers, however, purchased for online searching of external bibliographic databases and the production of library catalogues, and the librarians wish to extend the use made of the micros.

Although automation may not be appropriate for some housekeeping routines in small libraries, there would appear to be a market for moderately priced serials control packages, running on microcomputers and suitable for libraries receiving less than 1,000 current titles. Hopefully subscription agents are better fitted than most to commission packages that will handle the complexities of serials control.

#### Conclusion

Although the age of the electronic journal and the information broker has arrived, hard copy journals will surely be with us for many years to come and medical libraries will continue to need the services of good subscription agents.

It would seem to me that medical librarians should be ideal customers. We purchase, with few exceptions, English language journals, usually the products of established British, North American and European publishing houses. There is also considerable overlap in the subscription lists of libraries of similar size and subject coverage.

We are generally very loyal to our chosen subscription agents and do not normally transfer our custom elsewhere unless very dissatisfied with the service received, or clear and proven improvements are offered.