

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE SUBSCRIPTION AGENT

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The implication in the title is that there is a clear understanding and consensus of opinion of how the role has been defined up until today. I am confident that those of you present today would not differ radically in opinion about the role, and yet my daily contacts with publishers and library clients old and new very often reveal differences in perception.

The role of the subscription agent is to:

1. buy and sell serials,
2. be a distribution channel for publishers to the library community,
3. provide one stop shopping for serial publications,
4. provide ordering and payment consolidation services to both libraries and publishers,
5. help manage a world of knowledge,
6. add value to the information flow.

1. Buy and sell serials

We do buy and sell serials but the fundamental difference between us and brokers or wholesalers in other industries is that we have no choice as to which serials to purchase. As you know, it is mainly the faculty and researchers working with the acquisitions group in the library which decides which titles should be ordered. Whilst there would seem to be a considerable element of choice from the ever increasing hundreds of thousands of serials published, in fact in many fields of study there is almost a monopoly position held by certain journals.

2. A distribution channel for publishers to the library community

I use the term "distribution channel" as a marketing concept rather than in terms of physical handling of the journal. That is to say it is the agent that knows the library clients not only in person but also the cultural background and circumstances in which they are working. I included this definition as I hope more and more publishers are realising what a tremendous resource we are when serving their largest market.

3. Provide one stop shopping for serial publications

This is certainly true, emphasising the advantage for the library of having one source instead of several hundred with all that means for simplified communication, ordering, claiming and invoicing. The type of publication, be it published on paper, micro-form or CD-ROM is irrelevant in this context.

4. Provide ordering and payment consolidation services to both libraries and publishers

This in fact repeats the previous definition but also includes the publishers. Currently the 80-20 rule applies in that the largest proportion of orders received by publishers comes from a handful of major agents. However efficient a publisher may be it would increase their operating costs significantly and service standards would suffer dramatically should they have to process the orders and payments with all the individual subscribers. Every year Faxon makes a cost benefit analysis for each of the top 100 publishers we are trading with. In general terms for the leading STM publishers we calculate the financial benefit is in the area of 15% to 22% of the publishers list price. As we all know the general

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level of compensation from the publisher in the form of agent discount is way below this.

5. Help manage a world of knowledge

Whilst this definition seems abstract it does in fact cover all the above and can encompass more hi-tech services either existing or in development. The word "manage" is crucial in that for agents, for example, to produce bigger and bigger databases of the number of published titles does not in itself assist librarians in the dissemination of that information but providing systems to create pathways through that data does.

6. Add value to the flow of knowledge

Very basic examples of added value are for the library : consolidated invoicing in currency of choice, and for the publisher : providing consolidated renewal confirmations in machine readable form. This also may seem too theoretical, but in fact it simply confirms that, unless we as agents do not continue to add additional benefits to the process of the information flow, there is no reason for our existence.

Hopefully you have already anticipated my train of thought in that I propose the last two definitions as being the most comprehensive ones - *Helping you manage a world of knowledge*, and *Adding value to the flow of knowledge*. That being said my conclusion is that the agents role is not changing but the ways in which that role is fulfilled is changing.

Ways in which role is fulfilled

Or in other words the types of services offered. I do not want to dwell too long on the traditional services as these are I trust familiar to you.

So skipping over our current daily bread and butter of consolidated ordering, invoicing, payments and claiming we come to current services which are more often only available from the larger agents :

Source of information

Title related information is available both in a publishing form or on-line. In a more general sense certainly Faxon views it as part of its role to support the exchange of industry information for

instance in the form of our yearly Faxon Planning Report. This report is based on surveys sent to 4,000 library clients and 550 publishers throughout the world. The purpose is to assist librarians in their collection development plans, as well as to assist both librarians and publishers in developing their budgets.

Management reports

These can include bibliographic, utilization, financial and for publishers marketing information.

Consolidated shipment and check-in

In normal circumstances delivery of the journal is directly from the publisher to the library. Consolidated shipment and check-in service is designed for clients in countries with unreliable postal services and or for those who for economic reasons wish to pay an agent to do the check-in and claiming.

Provider of serials management systems

Examples are Swets' SAILS, Blackwell's ISIS and Faxon's MicroLinx. These can be either on-line or stand alone, with functionality for collection management, check-in, routing, reporting and binding. These kind of services have been available for a number of years and are clear examples of ways in which agents provide services supplemental to the ordering process and clearly helping manage the process. With advances in technology the functionality of these systems are changing, not only in the detailed operations but also the way they can relate to other databases either through EDI with external trading partners or with other internal related systems.

Just in time services

The enormous explosion in the publication of information in serials, coupled with reduced budgets for the purchase of periodicals has created an imperative and immediate need for new ways to deliver specific information. Today agents are making investments to develop JUST IN TIME information services for all types of libraries and individual users.

The traditional role of the library supported by agents is to store serials JUST IN CASE they are needed. Librarians here today who have investigated article usage from their current serial collections I am sure would confirm that a large percentage of the articles are never even consulted.

What specific services are being currently developed? Comprehensive table of contents databases and other serial literature and document delivery services.

Current awareness database - main feature and benefit

Feature: Breadth of coverage - Includes titles across science and technology, health sciences, business, fine arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Benefit: Library and user need access only ONE database, not subscribe to many.

Document delivery - Main features and benefits

Feature: Documents are delivered via facsimile within 24 hours of the order.

Benefit: the user is given very quick turn around on orders.

Feature: All copyright payments are collected and paid either directly to the publisher or to the Copyright Clearing Centre.

Benefit: In this age of increasing awareness of the potential liability of not enforcing copyright, the user is totally protected.

Why is an agent in a unique position to develop such a service?

Our traditional role is linking the publisher and library communities, so who is better placed to ensure quality standards and comprehensive data both of the individual article and the number of articles, without being influenced by external partisan factors?

The processing and disseminating to publishers and libraries of enormous amounts of financial and statistical data is precisely what we are doing now for the ordering of serials. To fulfil this task in tracking document delivery would enable true usage data to be available and bring clarity to the discussion on copyright. The message to the publishers being that better an ordered structure to document delivery rather than the current suspicion and conflict on breach of copyright.

Ease of payment in whatever currency, again a classic service, can also be applied to document delivery with for example the acceptance of credit card payments opening up new avenues of funding.

Why should we develop these services?

Under the assumption that you are convinced that an agent is the most logical party to develop such services, there is an obvious question. Is there a need?

Researcher Behaviour

The accumulative wealth of experience in an agent and its close relationship with librarians one would hope to be a reasonably sound base on which to make strategic policy decisions. The aim of all of us is to eventually serve the needs of the researcher, and it is to this group that Faxon looked for signs if our thinking was on the right path.

The Faxon Institute for Advanced Studies in Scholarly and Scientific Communication commissioned from Dr. Eric Almquist a pioneering study of the information acquisition and usage behaviour of scientific professionals, focusing on work-related information acquisition and usage of all kinds: published, verbal and electronic. For the field of interest two hard sciences, chemistry and genetics and a technical discipline, computer science were chosen, across three types of institutions: academic, private research and development, and government. The sample of researchers ranged from graduate students to full professors and senior researchers.

Let's very briefly look at some of the results:

Content sources in 1,161 Work-Related Information Encounters (multiple responses were accepted).

Journals	39
Colleagues/associates	34
Books	25
Company/vendor	10
Abstracts	10
Magazines	9
Experts in related fields	9
On-line databases	7
Current Contents	6
Professional meeting	5
Governmental sources	4
Newsletters	4
Newspapers	3
Other	3

As you see the major source is the article which has undergone the peer review process, and when weighted for usefulness, the refereed article is rated the most useful and most frequently used.

Acquisition Modes used in 1,161 Information Encounters

Personal library/files	45
Library	31
Face-to-face discussion	29
Telephone	15
Written communication	7
On-Line database	6
Electronic mail	5
Fax	4
CD-ROM	2
Videotape	0.5
Computer bulletin boards	0.3

We see here a big reliance on the personal library.

Self-perception of information "competence"

"Overall, think of all the work-related information you should read in order to do your job well. What percentage of that information do you actually read?"

33% of sample read	0 - 20%
38% of sample read	21 - 50%
27% of sample read	51% or more

Information acquisition comfort and discomfort

"Generally speaking, how comfortable are you with this level of work-related information?"

Very uncomfortable	5
Somewhat uncomfortable	28
Somewhat comfortable	46
Very comfortable	20

So the conclusion is that the researcher sees a need to considerably improve the relevant amount of information he has access to.

In the subsequent 1992 Faxon Institute study the overall goal was to examine the impact of new electronic media on:

- Scientific research
- Scholarly communication
- Collaboration among professionals

In the two new fields studied, radio astronomy and biology, the objective was to examine attitudes, behaviours, and opinions in greater depth, less statistically.

Among the more important information-related needs uncovered in the research are:

- Better organisation of personal libraries.
- "If I file by author I forget the name. Topics are not always clear. The best solution is a pile on the floor."
- Better search and filtering procedures for on-line databases and bulletin boards.
- "I am always worried about what I am missing."
- More remote access to specialised libraries.

Unfortunately, time constraints do not permit me to go into more details of the findings except to add that there is a clear presumably welcome trend to group collaboration supported by the significant increase in E-mail as a means to communicate with peers.

Survey of subscription agents

In preparation for this paper I wrote to 27 members of the Association of Subscription Agents asking them "do you agree in the first place the role of the subscription agent is changing and if so briefly in what way your role is changing with perhaps examples of new products

or services?". I received responses from 17 members.

The overwhelming majority agreed that the role was changing, four agents whilst charmingly acknowledging my letter refrained from further comment.

Various comments I would like to highlight are:

- one agent purposely used the term "manage"
- two agents confirmed they had spoken to exactly the same topic at recent conferences
- one agent commented on "electronic development"
- one agent described service fulfilment problems with publishers in the particular country and how they are doing more fulfilment for publishers
- one agent emphasised the role the agent has in the development of standards
- one agent emphasised the different rate of change between developed and lesser developed countries
- one reported a growth in check-in activity by the agent on behalf of the library and went on to say "I believe the major influence will be the changing role of the libraries. They will become convinced in the next few years that they must change their emphasis from ownership to access.

I can only agree with this sound observation from an Australian agent.

Commercial forces

Maybe I am skating on thin ice in touching on the financial factors but I believe we should be conscious of the vested interests in the information world so that as we progress together we are realistic in our expectations both from commercial and so called non-commercial bodies.

Publishers

The often painted picture is that commercial STM publishers are greedy capitalists only interested in profits and society publishers are all saints kneeling at the altar of knowledge. I don't believe these extremes are true. Of course, commercial publishers have to provide a return on investment to their shareholders and we must accept that just as we accept we live in a capitalist world. We do not expect farmers to give us free food because we

need to eat so why should we expect publishers to publish for nothing because we must learn? From my contacts with society publishers I can only comment that several can match any day the commercial expertise and lust for financial return of the commercial publishers and the value of real-estate owned by learned societies in central London for example would go a long way to fund the information nirvana we are all working for.

Copyright seems to be like income tax.

Everyone agrees with the principle until they have to pay themselves. Recently a Dutch university was taken to court for not paying specifically agreed fees for the duplication of course readers, or compilations of published literature. Is this really the example that such pillars of society as universities should set to students? I don't think so.

Agents

Over the last few years many local agents have been amalgamated with the larger international agents. Why? An agent has to employ and train highly skilled staff to provide personal quality service, to continually invest in technology both for existing services and to develop new ones. It is only by economies of scale that agents can possibly generate funds for this level of investment. Most commercial publishers who have in the past owned subscription agencies sold them as the return on investment is far lower than their core publishing activity. Almost all agencies are private companies often with a family tradition of several generations. As we have seen earlier we perform services for publishers and libraries, our service fee to the publisher in the form of discount from the serial list price has to be constantly defended. When a publisher undervalues the service by reducing the discount this merely inflates the service fee to the library. For publishers to react to a changing market place by reducing discounts can only be seen as short sighted. We should be deciding together on the focus of investment for the future rather than haggling about sharing today's cake.

Libraries

You do not need me to remind you of the shrinking library budgets which in no way match the increase in the number and price of published

serials. Believe it or not I think there is a very positive side to this trend as librarians have been forced to radically review the way they provide services and some either individually, for example the University of Brabant, or in groups, for example BIDS/CHEST have forged ahead in exploring new services. The Harvard Business Library has recently changed from a cost-centre to a profit-centre in that instead of putting a hand out every year for a share of the budget it now charges faculties and individual users for the services it provides. This has not only increased the funding available but also increased usage. Food for thought I think.

Conclusion

So yes, the way the agent is fulfilling its role is definitely changing, but so are those of the publisher and librarian. The services I have

mentioned to date including document delivery are by no means the end of the line as agents continue to explore new ground, be it information gateways or perhaps providing navigating tools through the maze of electronic media.

As a society we have a long way to go in addressing the social issue of education and the exchange of global information to foster research.

As knowledge workers today the only way forward is to work in collaboration. That means not only working together on providing easier and quicker access to information but also acting as a body to pressure the rest of society that it will be a grim future for us all unless we invest in education and learning for future generations. We should not be lobbying to prop up the status quo but building a case based on a sound strategy of making optimum use of resources.

NEW PLENUM JOURNALS FOR 1993

1993 sees Plenum Publishing adding to its already comprehensive list of journals. In particular, Plenum's presence in the communications field will be strengthened by the publication of three new titles. Other new journals cover topic areas such as Archaeology, Evolution, and Materials Science. All subscription orders should be addressed to Plenum's New York office; enquiries and sample journals requests to the same or Plenum's London office.

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Vol 1, 6 issues US\$195/Elsewhere\$225

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Vol 1, 4 issues US\$95/Elsewhere\$110

Journal of Environmental Polymer Degradation

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Journal of Mammalian Evolution

Vol 1, 4 issues US\$135/Elsewhere\$160

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