

## THE ASSOCIATION OF SUBSCRIPTION AGENTS

*John B Merriman*

Founded in 1934 as the Association of Export Subscription Newsagents, the members were involved in the supply of magazines and newspapers to institutes, libraries and clubs overseas, mainly in the former British colonies. In the post war years, the situation changed, as new libraries were established in all parts of the world, all hungry for books and journals to fill their empty shelves - and the publishers were quick to oblige.

Increasingly agents were involved in serials and less and less in newspapers, so in 1982 the name was changed to the Association of Subscription Agents, but membership was still strictly limited to British companies. Had this rule still been in effect today there would be six members! Fortunately, a wise decision was made to go international and membership is open to any reputable agent who is able to comply with the standards of service set out in the guidelines for members.

The officers are elected annually, and two main meetings are held in the Spring and Autumn, to coincide with the UK Serials Group Conference and the Frankfurt Book Fair.

The Association is established for the discussion of all matters of common interest to those engaged as subscription agents in the supply of serial publications, although with the development of new technologies agents are increasingly taking on the role of information brokers. All members are in competition with each other and there is no question of there being a cartel.

Good service to libraries and publishers is paramount. One of the problems the Association faces is declining or non-existent discounts from publishers which inevitably means increased charges to libraries, and there can be few trades where so much is expected from the retail outlets for such a small return. One effect of this has been the decline in the number of agents, mainly through mergers and takeovers. There is little evidence of new subscription agencies starting up.

In spite of concern over terms, the Association works very closely with the publishers on various projects. Undoubtedly the greatest success so far has been the implementation of the International Standards for Exchange of Machine Readable Subscription Orders. This eliminated the mountains of paper in agents' and publishers' offices at renewal time, and provides a fast, efficient and cost-effective method of handling renewals.

Work on standards continues through ICEDIS - International Committee on Electronic Data Interchange for Serials (see *Serials* Vol. 7 No. 1 March 1994 pp. 77-78).

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The ASA has actively supported a number of joint seminars with ALPSP (Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers) and the Publishers Association - Serials Executive.

Many of our members are strong supporters of the various serial groups round the world. The Association has had a long term commitment to the growth and success of the UKSG, as evidenced most recently by our representation on and financial support of the Joint Working Group who have published *Serial Publications - Guidelines for Good Practice in Publishing Printed Journals and other Serial Publications*. The ASA is also represented on the Medical Information Working Party. Publications include a definitive paper on *The Work of Subscription Agents*, and *Meeting the Needs of Library Trade Exhibitors: a Handbook for Exhibition Organisers*, as well as a list of members.

The Association is a well established international organisation as is shown by the list of members below.

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