

CONSOLIDATION OF JOURNALS BY AGENTS: WHO BENEFITS?

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This article questions the benefits of consolidation, particularly whether delays in delivery and increased costs incurred by subscription agents and publishers, justify the anticipated reduction in library management time.

Consolidation is on the increase. It began as a service to libraries in developing countries which had money to spend on books and journals but did not have the infrastructure for postal delivery or library management. To meet this need a number of the larger international subscription agents set up consolidation units and provided despatch in bulk at regular intervals, usually with a detailed packing list, and sometimes with additional services such as claiming the missing issues and updating the library stock records for the journal issues being delivered. These services have, however, now spread to some libraries in North America and Western Europe, in countries where one would suppose that well organised libraries and established postal distribution systems made this superfluous. If the libraries concerned benefit from outsourcing of tasks which can be more efficiently and more cheaply accomplished by subscription agents, there is perhaps a gain. There is, however, a larger additional cost both to library subscribers and to publishers than is often realized, since much of the perceived value added service is also made available free by many publishers, via regular methods of despatch. Whereas the extra cost of consolidation may sometimes be off-set by the lower domestic subscription rates available in the country from which the journals are imported, many academic journal publishers now sell at one worldwide price and provide an air service at no extra charge. Consequently, consolidation often burdens the end subscriber with both additional cost and delays in delivery because drop-shipments of journal issues will take longer to arrive than publications despatched direct to the library subscriber from the publisher.

Subscription agents, who fulfil a most useful function in our industry, do not, however, market products and publishers need the addresses of their subscribers in order to promote their wares. Consolidation hampers marketing by depriving the publishers of the address material of some of their more important institutional customers, and sometimes small countries, which are nevertheless significant markets, disappear from their mailing records altogether. Most agents are very helpful in providing additional data about the end subscribers using their consolidation services,

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but publishers need to incur further expense to develop IT procedures to store the addresses so that they are in a position to inform their subscribers about other books, journals and electronic products in their field, but to follow-up for renewal only if the agent discontinues his consolidation service or ceases to trade. The IT systems and programming work, necessary to accommodate this, are time consuming and expensive for the publishers' staff.

Consolidation also causes additional claims for missing copies as library subscribers move in and out of consolidation services. The situation is further exacerbated by the increased number of claims for recent issues which results from some forms of library automation. Software used in some large libraries tends to generate a claim on the same date in the current month as the publication date in the previous month. Although magazines containing high levels of advertising are published in this way, academic journals are often published ahead or behind schedule depending on the flow of papers accepted for publication by the editor. Usually the missing issue arrives shortly after the claim, perhaps confirming the librarian in the effectiveness of the libraries' software, although it was not a factor in the process, or date of delivery.

Surveys undertaken by our Fulfilment and Distribution Department indicate that 60-65% of claims for missing issues of journals represent issues which have just been published or will be mailed in the course of the next few days. I understand the fear in the library community that if they do not claim issues, the publisher will have sold the stock or allowed it to go out of print, but this is not usually the case with the leading publishers of academic journals who retain stocks and will normally replace copies free of charge. Claims for missing issues of Elsevier Science journals are met free of charge if made within six months of the date of despatch. In the year following publication, institutional subscribers may order replacement

copies at 50% of the published price through their agent or directly from the publisher, by simply indicating their status as a current subscriber. If an issue is imperfect, delayed or lost in the post the publisher must expect to receive a claim and will wish to take remedial action. More importantly, he wants to correct any mistake or omission in his records which may be brought to light by a claim, but this is difficult to do expeditiously if a large number of unnecessary claims are received as a matter of course. Many publishers now supply despatch data daily to international agents by EDI, publish monthly lists of issues published and also provide this information over the Internet¹. A glance at the despatch records of many monthly journals indicates that they are published each month but seldom on the same date. Publishers very much want their subscribers to receive their journals but I suspect that many of the procedures for consolidating and claiming journal issues simply add to the work of the librarian, the agent and the publisher, resulting in higher costs of perhaps 10% without any improvement in service.

I would welcome an experimental project between two groups of libraries working with a selected number of journal publishers; one group claiming every issue immediately and the other claiming nothing for a 3 month period, providing the publishers guaranteed to replace all missing issues at the end of the survey. It would be interesting to see whether the collections of the libraries issuing no claims were any less complete than those of the libraries generating regular claims.

References

- 1 Elsevier Science journals: Issue despatch dates now available on the Internet. *Elsevier Science Information* No 6 (Winter/Spring 1997) ISSN: 1359-8589. Also available at www.elsevier.nl/locate/esi