

CONSOLIDATION SERVICES: THE BRITISH LIBRARY EXPERIENCE

Andrew Davis

The British Library Document Supply Centre has subscribed to American journals using subscription agent consolidation services since January 1994. This article discusses the pros and cons of journal consolidation based on that experience. The costs, levels of service and speed of delivery are considered in an effort to determine the success or otherwise of this tailored service.

Andrew Davis is Manager of the Accessions Unit, British Library Document Supply Centre, Boston Spa, Wetherby, West Yorkshire LS23 7BQ

Background

Despite being around for many years, journal consolidation has, until fairly recently, failed to catch the imagination of the Library community. Indeed it was only in the latter part of 1993 that the British Library Document Supply Centre (DSC) management decided that the supply of journal titles which were included on the *Inside* database (BL Current Awareness Service) could potentially be hastened through the use of consolidation services. Therefore the main reason for exploring this particular avenue was the potential for journal issues to be made available within the Library sooner after publication than by the existing methods, to the benefit of DSC customers. The speed of delivery, coupled with the range of services which collectively form journal consolidation, convinced the BL that this was an option worthy of exploration.

Having decided to pursue this option, we identified a number of American titles, the vast majority of which had existing 'post direct' subscriptions placed through one subscription agent, whom we approached in an effort to establish consolidated supply for 1994. This approach followed presentations and subsequent evaluation of bids from other leading agents who had consolidation services in place at the time. The main agents showed they could provide comparable levels of service but we believed the transition to consolidation would prove easier with a subscription agent who had handled considerable BL business the previous year, was familiar with our accounts and the range of US titles for which the BL was the only overseas subscriber.

Consolidation in operation

In January 1994 supply of almost 3,500 American STM journals was transferred to consolidation. Some 500 journal issues per week were shipped to Boston Spa by air freight, initially into East Midlands Airport and with HM Customs completely satisfied, onto the British Library by road. Thrice-weekly delivery ensured a vast improvement in the currency of data on the *Inside* database and journal issues became more quickly available for customer use. Agent claims of quick, accurate check-in at local offices followed by fast, air-freight delivery have proved reliable in the three years that we have been using consolidation services.

Minor delivery problems have invariably been attributable to the airline, to HM Customs or to the haulage companies rather than to the subscription agent. On-line access to the agent's receipt and shipping data has enabled us to monitor the status of a particular issue as necessary. Despite Colin Harrison's assertions, in the November 1996 issue of *Serials* (9 (3) 311-315), that the agent makes timely claims on a customers behalf, we continue to generate claims from our own check-in system to enable us to perform quality control checks, again using information readily available through subscription agents on-line systems.

Whilst DSC has been using the consolidated supply, the British Library Science Reference and Information Service (SRIS), which until recently also held many of the US titles taken by DSC, has continued with 'post-direct' supply. This enabled us to conduct detailed analysis of receipt patterns at the two locations. A number of such surveys have been conducted over the three years that DSC has been using consolidation and the results have been unerringly consistent. In the latest survey conducted towards the end of 1996 (Table 1), the downloading of receipt data from the SRIS and DSC check-in systems into a Microsoft Access database allowed the receipt patterns for some 6714 journal issues published in the USA last year to be analysed.

Results showed that 68% of issues were received at Boston Spa more quickly through consolidation than by 'post direct'. In addition a further 8% were received on the same day through both methods of delivery. Since our primary objective when embarking on consolidated supply was to improve delivery times, the fact that 76% of issues arrive more quickly or on the same day as their "post direct" counterparts, in itself fully justifies our decision. The full results and more detailed breakdown are presented below.

Table 1

| Total survey Consolidation (DSC) Quicker (days) | Number of issues (6714) | Percentage of total |
|---|-------------------------|---------------------|
| | 4525 | 68% |
| >31 | 1432 | |
| 26-30 | 450 | |
| 21-25 | 429 | |
| 16-20 | 276 | |
| 11-15 | 287 | |
| 6-10 | 593 | |
| 1-5 | 1058 | |
| Same day | 540 | 8% |
| 1-5 | 725 | |
| 6-10 | 423 | |
| 11-15 | 204 | |
| 16-20 | 75 | |
| 21-25 | 41 | |
| 26-30 | 23 | |
| >31 | 158 | |
| Post-direct (SRIS) Quicker (days) | 1649 | 24% |

For the same survey I conducted further analysis into frequency of publication of the journals sampled (Table 2) and determined that consolidation was more effective across the range of frequencies, although obviously less so for weekly publications which tend to be air-mailed direct from publishers to libraries as a matter of course. Consolidation proved particularly successful for monthly publications where 79% of issues were received at Boston

Table 2

| Frequency of publication | Number of Issues surveyed | Consolidation quicker (%) | Same day (%) | Post-direct quicker (%) |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Weekly | 73 | 48% | 14% | 38% |
| Fortnightly | 298 | 67% | 10% | 23% |
| Monthly | 2519 | 72% | 7% | 21% |
| Bi-monthly | 1900 | 67% | 6% | 27% |
| Quarterly | 1771 | 66% | 10% | 24% |
| Thrice-yearly | 78 | 49% | 6% | 45% |
| Semi-annual | 55 | 64% | 9% | 27% |
| Annual, Irregular | 20 | 50% | 10% | 40% |

Spa on the same day or earlier than 'post-direct' supply.

Costs and savings

An increase in the *Inside* database to 21,000 titles saw the number of consolidation journal subscriptions rise to some 5,500 in 1996. Acquisition spending on American consolidation titles totalled approximately £699,000 at US domestic rate. The equivalent cost to overseas subscribers would have been £781,000. In paying this US domestic price for such a vast number of subscriptions, we realised a saving of some 11.73% over the cost to overseas subscribers. Of course, any such savings on the journal subscription price are largely offset by the service charges levied by the agent for processing the material locally and expenditure on air freight, but from the outset the British Library had always intended to accommodate such charges in order to improve delivery times of American serial issues. Handling in excess of 40,000 journal issues per annum specifically for the British Library, with guaranteed shipments in excess of 100kg three times per week, the agent is well placed to negotiate preferential terms with air-freight companies and hauliers.

These facts speak for themselves. There are substantial benefits to be gleaned through the use of consolidation, not least of which are financial ones and I would recommend any acquisition librarian, who is in a position to consider alternative methods of supply, to give subscription agents the opportunity to demonstrate their consolidation services, before renewing for 1998.

Service

A tender exercise for the supply of North American serials to all directorates of the British Library saw supply change to a single agent commencing with the subscription year 1996. Consolidation services and their associated costs and benefits formed an integral part of the tender exercise. The successful bidder levied a surcharge on the US domestic subscription price for the duration of the contract covering 1996 through to 1998. This service charge did however incorporate all air freight costs which

some agents levy as actuals in addition to their percentage service charge.

The transfer of so many subscriptions to a single agent, both "post-direct" and consolidated, has not been without its teething problems, however breakdown in the supply of consolidated titles has been minimal. We continue to work together with the UK offices of our chosen agent to rectify any problems, this regular dialogue has proved very useful in smoothing the path of such an exercise. The BL has received efficient service with particular regard to the following:

- swift, reliable automated check-in of journal issues in US offices;
- automatic claiming for missing or damaged issues;
- air-freight of consignments three times a week to Boston Spa as requested by BL Acquisitions Unit;
- online access to agent check-in and despatch data - something we can use as an effective means of quality control;
- clear, legible packing lists with each shipment;
- regular contact available in the UK to respond to any problems or queries.

Other services offered by agents such as security tagging, bar-code labelling and circulation control, have not yet been fully exploited. As the British Library Document Supply Centre subscribes on a "post-direct" basis to a further 40,000 serial titles world-wide we continue to check-in all issues using our in-house serials processing system. We retain control of our own circulation system and obtain usage data from our own bar-code labelling.

Conclusion

Journal consolidation offers fast, reliable delivery of serial issues, coupled with customer services tailored to individual library needs. In our experience consolidation has shown itself to be successful in the speedy provision of US journals with swift resolution of any problems. In light of these findings the BL is considering increasing the number of titles that it receives through consolidation services.