

CONSOLIDATION SERVICES - A VIEW FROM THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

Stephen Lacey and Jasmine Cameron

After initially rejecting the idea of consolidation services, the National Library of Australia came to recognise sound operational and financial reasons for consolidation to be used in the acquisition of overseas serials. A comparative trial was undertaken and as a result of the successful outcome, consolidation has been extended to several areas of the serials collection

*Stephen Lacey is Manager, Serial Orders, National Library of Australia
Jasmine Cameron is Senior Manager, Selection, Acquisitions and Serials, National Library of Australia*

Background

During the late 1980's two major US subscription agents began promoting their serial consolidation services in Australia through visits from overseas and local representatives. Prior to this, acquisitions staff at the National Library of Australia had viewed consolidation in terms of rationalising the management of overseas serial titles by moving towards the use of a small core of agents, or even a single agent. Serial consolidation as a service encompassing the receipt and claiming of serial issues at the point of purchase was a new concept.

Initially the Library did not consider the use of these consolidation services as a viable option. Staff were coping with issues such as declining acquisitions budgets, serial price rises and shrinking staff resources. In retrospect, we did not immediately appreciate that the serial consolidation services on offer could assist us in finding a solution to some of these issues. However, after closer analysis of the consolidation services we began to appreciate that these services may provide a solution to many of the problems inherent in the acquisition and management of overseas serial titles.

Benefits of consolidation

In 1990 the Library decided to trial the consolidation services on offer from our two major US agents. What influenced this decision? The need for an effective mechanism for claiming missing issues, and the requirement for prompt, reliable supply of priority titles from overseas were the key factors.

Claiming missing issues of overseas titles was an ongoing problem. In Australia libraries have always experienced problems in claiming missing issues for titles received via surface mail which can take up to three to six months to arrive. Many overseas publishers have imposed tight claim deadlines of anywhere between one to three months from the date of publication. Under these circumstances it is impossible to successfully claim missing issues. In more recent times the Library has also found some publishers will not accept responsibility for missing issues unless the title is delivered via air mail supply. We felt an agent based geographically closer to the publisher would be able to handle claims successfully on our behalf.

Many popular 'in-demand' overseas titles displayed in the Library's public reading rooms, as well as major city daily newspapers, were traditionally supplied via air mail because of the need to receive current information in a timely fashion. However, airmail supply is significantly more expensive with some daily titles attracting a freight/handling/postage charge of over 100% of the cost of a standard subscription. A consolidation service could ensure prompt supply of these and other titles at a significantly reduced bulk rate.

Three other factors influenced the decision to trial serial consolidation services:

Our initial analysis indicated that the charges quoted by our two US agents for the consolidation service and freight would be partially offset by the reduction in the subscription cost which was now offered at the US domestic rate. This made the cost of the consolidation service very attractive as we would not have been able to embark on anything that would require a significant amount of additional funding.

The Library had selected and was intending to implement an Integrated Library Management System which would provide an OPAC, acquisitions module, serials module and a circulation module. It seemed at the time that the on-line check-in facility within the serials module would soon be able to interface with the check-in data received on disk from the agents. This would eliminate the need to check-in titles again at the Library and would result in significant savings in staff resources. The promise of possible EDI and system interfaces to assist ordering and invoicing in the future were also attractive options.

The services offered as part of serial consolidation presented themselves as an effective means of 'outsourcing' the claiming and initial management of serial titles. This could release staff from what was a labour intensive and often fruitless task for other duties.

Experimenting with consolidation

Since there seemed to be little difference between what was offered by our two major US subscription agents, the Library decided to trial

both services. At the time the Library had approximately 1,500 subscription titles on order with each agent. As we did not have staff resources available to transfer 3,000 orders over to consolidation, we sought a sample group of titles from those currently supplied by each agent via surface or air mail supply. Titles were deliberately chosen so that staff would be able to compare the two services based on the cost per title/issue, timeliness of service, action on claims and format and reliability of reports.

Titles were selected from those that were required promptly for circulation within the Library or for display in public areas. We ensured a mixture of titles with varied publishing frequencies; bi-annual, 3/yr, quarterly, bi-monthly, monthly, fortnightly, and weekly. Annual titles were not selected as it seemed that consolidation would not necessarily improve supply. Daily titles were also excluded from the trial sample, as were complicated subscriptions linked to memberships.

We found there were many options available to the Library and that it was beneficial to discuss tailoring the service to meet the Library's specific needs. Although a full consolidation service includes not only the receipt and claiming of serial issues but end processing as well (labelling, stamping, circulation lists, covers etc.), the Library chose to have titles received and checked-in, missing issues claimed, and titles forwarded by air freight accompanied by cumulative packing lists and claims reports. Quotations were sought from both agents on 320 titles (160 titles from each agent) selected for the trial. A separation of the base subscription cost, regular service charge, consolidation service charge (per issue if possible) and an estimate of the freight cost per issue was requested.

By the end of October 1991 we had received quotations for supply of these titles on consolidation for the 1992 subscription year. There was very little difference in the service and consolidation charges quoted by the two agents. However, one agent was able to offer a cheaper freight cost. It is worth noting here that further investigations by Library staff into freight options proved to be very valuable.

Library staff were able to negotiate with an international freight courier to obtain a much cheaper freight charge than quoted by either agent

At this stage we had reached the 1992 renewal deadline so we decided to opt for a trial with one agent only, with the intention of trialling consolidation with the second agent the following year. The Library selected the agent whose overall charge was slightly lower than the other. Forty eight more titles were added to the selection, bringing the total number of titles to be supplied on consolidation to 208 titles.

The second North American agent was contacted in October 1992 to provide another quote for 1993 subscriptions for 170 titles. The quotation was in line with their previous quote so we decided to go ahead with the second trial in order to make a comparison between the two services.

Evaluation of the two services

An evaluation following twelve months parallel operation of both consolidation services revealed that both agents had delivered issues in a timely manner, consignments contained clear and accurate packing lists and claims were actioned promptly with a high success rate. The major difference between the two agents was the level of customer support, with one agent providing a high level of support and the other providing minimal support.

A major difficulty, which we anticipated but not perhaps to the degree that it did occur, was the receipt of duplicate issues for the nine months following changeover to consolidation. Although the agents had advised the publishers of the cancellation of the Library's direct supply subscriptions, publishers continued to send duplicate issues directly to the Library. Dealing with the volume of duplicates, advising the agents accordingly and discarding the duplicate material proved to be very time consuming. For the first 18 months of consolidation, we were also receiving and discarding many publishers invoices for these cancelled orders. Thankfully duplicate supply and publishers invoices did eventually cease. We have found this problem has occurred with each expansion of our use of consolidation services.

Expansion of consolidation

Due to the success of the North American trials, in 1993 the Library also decided to trial a UK consolidation service. We sought quotations for the supply of eighty titles from our two major UK subscription agents. Once again we found the options and costs to be similar, with one notable exception. One agent was able to offer to supply titles at the domestic rate, whereas the other agent was unable to provide any titles at the domestic rate. As Colin Harrison, Chief Executive WH Everett & Son, indicated in his article in the November 1996 issue, "some [publishers] still perversely charge the overseas rate for all subscriptions delivered to an agent, however close he is". The Library commenced a trial with the agent who offered the domestic rate and the UK consolidation service was successfully implemented from the 1994 subscription period.

In 1993 the Library also implemented a consolidation service with an Australian subscription agent for a wide range of serial titles published in Papua New Guinea. Provision of this consolidation service for the supply of titles from this region has enabled the Library to recommence collecting in an area which Library staff are unable to manage without the availability of a service which offers the receipt of titles and claiming of missing issues. This service has worked very well in spite of the complexities of acquiring and maintaining a regular supply of titles from this region.

During 1994 another Australian agent was selected for the supply via consolidation of a specific category of Australian serial titles. The main need for this service was to enable the Library to separate receipt and claiming of purchased Australian serial titles from the large volume of Australian serials received on legal deposit.

The future

Since 1992 the Library has re-evaluated its overseas collection development policy. As a result the Library now maintains a core collection of 2,500 overseas subscription titles. During 1997 we intend to move as many as

possible of our overseas subscription titles to consolidation. With fewer titles to manage the Library may look towards reducing the number of agents it is currently using for consolidation services.

Future availability of an interface between an agent's system and the Library's own Integrated Library Management System may influence this decision. Certainly the 'down side' of consolidation remains the lack of a systems interface which will facilitate the electronic transfer of check-in data supplied by agents to the Library's own automated check-in system.

As an interim measure the Library is revisiting the possibility of wanding into the check-in system those titles which carry a SISAC barcode.

In conclusion, the use of serial consolidation services has enabled the Library to vastly improve the reliability of supply of overseas titles in high demand by our clients. More recently the use of consolidation services has facilitated the collection of material from Papua New Guinea and assisted us with the management of purchased Australian serial titles.