

## ASA GUIDELINES: THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF SUBSCRIPTION AGENTS

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*Subscription agents serve both librarians and publishers. This is a definitive guide to best practice for the mutual benefit of all concerned.*

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The Association of Subscription Agents (ASA) has published a new set of Guidelines for its members. These Guidelines regulate and inform the conditions of trade between ASA members, library customers, and publishers. They set out the types of service that a good agent should be able to provide, and commit our members to providing, not just the services, but a standard of customer care and service to both customers and publishers that distinguishes ASA members from other agents. Since ASA members account for the overwhelming majority of subscriptions handled by subscription agents, these new Guidelines should be of considerable benefit to both libraries and publishers.

The Guidelines differ from previous editions in three main ways:

- (i) all members are expected to abide by them;
- (ii) they contain several new clauses which align ASA members more closely with the interests of good publisher service than has been the case in the past; and
- (iii) they incorporate the new demands made on the supply chain by electronic journals.

The new clauses relate to two areas which have given rise in the past to friction between agents and publishers: personal subscriptions and third-party addresses.

### **Personal subscriptions**

For the first time, ASA members are giving assurance to publishers that all requests for personal subscriptions are, to the best of their knowledge, for the genuine use of an individual. Publishers can rely on ASA members to do their best to ensure that subscriptions at personal rates do not end up as library subscriptions. This has major advantages for all parties concerned particularly the individual customer. Providing publishers agree, individuals can now purchase journals locally from their agent in their own currency (quite probably from the same company from which they already purchase books). This saves the customer money and time, and makes it much more likely that agents will promote publishers' journals!

### Third-party addresses

ASA members will provide publishers with full third-party addresses of institutional subscriptions. There is only one qualification, and that is the agreement of all the parties concerned. The publisher respects the role the agent plays and does not attempt to persuade the customer to buy direct.

ASA members are therefore using the Guidelines as a form of standard agreement between themselves and publishers worldwide. It is the ASA's view that these new Guidelines will help to build a partnership approach to the sale of subscriptions. The opportunity now exists for ASA members and publishers to co-operate in selling more personal subscriptions. Agents and publishers can work together to upgrade paper subscriptions to include electronic, in the knowledge that ASA members will be happy to provide the information required to make access as easy as possible, and to participate fully in the sale.

Publishers now have something that has long been lacking in our industry: an indication of the services which a good agent performs, assurances of co-operation with and information from subscription agents, and a list of the agents involved in this scheme. The ASA confidently predicts that as a result of these new Guidelines there will be new opportunities for ASA members and publishers to work more effectively together to obtain better business.

### ASA Guidelines

The Association's members exist to achieve the highest standards of service for both customers and publishers, and to improve relationships and terms with publishers. The Association aims to foster the use of a 'best practice' approach to customer and publisher service and to represent members' common interests to publishers, customers, representative and governmental organizations and associations. It is recognized that members are in fair and friendly competition with each other.

#### *Services for customers*

- ♦ provide an overall quality of service in line with generally accepted standards and/or recognized best practice procedures;

- ♦ maintain accurate and easily accessible records;
- ♦ maintain up-to-date journal and price information, backed up by a comprehensive collection of reference material for tracing out-of-the-way titles;
- ♦ provide a single source of information on serials consistent with the needs of customers;
- ♦ keep information on the availability and prices of electronic journals and provide advice on their licensing and access as required;
- ♦ be able to handle some or all of the following material: back issues, microforms, electronic and other new media;
- ♦ produce price lists, newsletters, or bulletins and provide price quotations;
- ♦ provide clear, detailed invoices observing the customer's special requirements;
- ♦ process and order efficiently new subscriptions from the many thousands of possible suppliers;
- ♦ renew subscriptions in good time thereby avoiding breaks in the supply of serials;
- ♦ handle subscriptions on both an annual and an 'until forbidden' basis;
- ♦ respond effectively to claims for missing issues and other queries
- ♦ provide advance information about delays in publication, title changes, etc.;
- ♦ build good personal relationships with the librarian and staff and handle all dealings with customers in a professional and courteous manner;
- ♦ establish good relationships with publishers and become familiar with their procedures;
- ♦ aid customers as much as possible with their budgeting and finance management;
- ♦ provide management reports and/or advice in order to help the librarian to manage the collection;
- ♦ support and encourage the use of automation by customers;
- ♦ represent all publishers' material honestly.

#### *Services for publishers*

- ♦ work closely with all publishers to improve services, save costs, and increase sales;

- ♦ to enter and maintain subscriptions for institutional and/or personal customers; wherever possible to ascertain the *bona fide* nature of personal subscriptions and to guarantee that they are not intended for institutional use, and to ensure that such subscriptions conform to individual publishers' criteria;
- ♦ help automate the renewal procedure so as to reduce administration for both agent and publisher wherever practicable and economic to do so;
- ♦ pay the publisher in the appropriate currency and at the appropriate rate as declared in publishers' price lists or such other agreement as shall exist between members and publishers;
- ♦ provide the full address of institutional end users by agreement;
- ♦ provide publishers with appropriate information on customers so as to enable the publisher both to deliver postal copies and make electronic journals available to the customer.