

# CRITERIA FOR SELECTING A SUBSCRIPTION AGENT

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*This paper examines some of the criteria libraries might use in selecting one or more subscription agents. Agents do not offer identical services, nor do they all offer all the services that will be discussed in this paper, which is essentially limited to a discussion of the criteria that might be used in selecting a subscription agent from whom to purchase both paper and electronic journals, rather than the a broader discussion of the multiplicity of other services offered to libraries by intermediaries. Subscription agents and other intermediaries also offer a wide and growing range of services for publishers, which range from electronic access and publishing services to the no less important areas of renewal handling and claims screening.*

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## **Libraries' use of agents in the paper environment**

Perhaps the first question to address is what advantages do agents bring to libraries, or to put it another way, why use an agent? At a time when the serials industry is rapidly moving towards licensing content from publishers and accessing the material in digital form over the internet, the question, 'Why use an agent?', seems as if it should require a radically different answer than might have been the case a few years ago. Funnily enough most of the reasons why libraries use agents are much the same for electronic journals as they are for paper. In the past libraries have used agents for several reasons. These are summarised below.

1. *Reduces administration costs.* The resources involved in tracking journal prices, publisher addresses, payment processes, obtaining previously unsubscribed journals and of course claiming missing issues are substantial. By employing an agent to undertake all this the library saves money which can be put to far better use buying more subscriptions or enhancing user services.
2. *Finance.* The use of an agent generally enables the library to purchase in their local currency regardless of the country of origin of the publisher and the currency specified on the price list. It gives the library a 'single line invoice' at a time, and presented in a manner which suits their purchasing requirements. It directly saves money on bank charges and accounts department resources when compared to dealing with hundreds or thousands of single purchases in many different currencies. It also enables libraries to pre-pay subscriptions at a time convenient to themselves which can result in some worthwhile savings to the library.
3. *Specialist services.* Agents provide specialist services in obtaining difficult to get material from remote countries, in foreign languages or in specialist subject areas.

4. *Customer Service.* Agents can also provide a number of other services which are highly beneficial. These range from providing a single point of contact for the libraries' entire serials collection (or a large proportion of it) to consolidation and check-in services performed by the agent to the libraries requirements and the provision of useful management information.

In the final analysis, libraries use agents because overall it is more cost effective for them to do so when compared with the alternative of having to acquire, purchase and maintain all the subscriptions themselves. It should not be forgotten that publishers, by supporting agents, are actively helping the library community to keep their administration costs down and thereby increasing the proportion of the overall budgets available to be spent on subscriptions

#### **The move to the electronic environment**

As is readily apparent, none of the reasons why libraries use agents in the paper environment or the traditional services as described above, relate specifically to paper journals. In fact most of these requirements are accentuated by the introduction of electronic journals to a library's collection. The changes that electronic journals bring are in price complexity, licensing and technology.

1. *Prices.* Purchasing has become even more complex for an average library with several thousand different serials. Whereas journals used to have a single price each now has about three – a price for paper only, the electronic version only and a combination of both is typical. Keeping track of publishers (at the rate with which they buy and sell journals and each other) is difficult. Keeping track of prices, the impact of Value Added Tax (VAT) etc has become much more complicated.
2. *Licensing.* Agents too are active in licensing. They are frequently required to obtain the licence from the publisher, ensure that it is appropriately completed, signed and returned, and then chase the publisher's access department until the subscription has started.
3. *Technology.* No electronic journal can be read or distributed without technology. Many

libraries and users require considerable expertise to maximise the return from their electronic subscriptions, something they either have in house or with which they will need specialised assistance. Both the libraries and the publishers have technical requirements and it is therefore the role of the purchaser or their agent to ensure the correct products for the application are purchased. The new technology can be a confusing area for many, in which agents can help throw some light. So agents are probably needed more than ever in the digital environment.

Against this background then it is worth taking a look at some of the criteria that might be used in selecting an agent to ensure that the libraries' subscriptions are purchased, renewed and maintained in a professional manner and at the minimum cost consistent with maintaining the desired level of service.

#### **Criteria for selecting an agent**

Perhaps the first thing that needs to be stressed is that the type of service and expertise agents can bring to a library can vary quite dramatically. Many agents do not see themselves as competing only on cost, although they view cost as important. Most see themselves as competing on service at an affordable price. This is an important point because it is not unknown in any walk of life for what appears to be the cheapest option to work out as the most expensive in the long run. Therefore libraries are advised to discuss their full requirements for journals and services with their prospective agents so that the most cost-effective option, which may involve more not less service, can be fully evaluated.

The list below indicates those criteria that I believe are the most important in coming to a decision on which agent or agents to select. It is far from a complete list and is intended as a guide only. Libraries should perhaps use it as a checklist but add to it criteria that might be specific to their own library and which only a very few agents may be able to provide.

#### *ASA membership*

Members of the ASA conform to the ASA Guidelines to good practice. These are available on the ASA Website ([www.subscription-](http://www.subscription-)

agents.org) and should form the cornerstone of the service element provided by agents. Membership of this organisation assures libraries that these agents provide a quality service and that they have appropriate systems for handling subscriptions. ASA members account for well over 90% of all subscriptions to libraries worldwide. Membership includes the larger agents as well as many smaller companies. (Note however that the ASA membership is much broader than just subscription agents in the traditional sense and includes many other types of intermediaries.)

### *Size*

Size is of itself no criterion for selecting an agent. However larger agents frequently offer a greater range of services, provide economies of scale and have made substantial investments in developing their systems in recent years. Smaller agents very often offer a highly personal service and specialised knowledge in specific fields. There is a need for both large and small agents and which you choose will depend on your requirements.

### *Serials experience*

Experience is vital. This does not necessarily mean that the company must have been trading for a long time, but it must have experienced staff. Newly formed companies can be just as good as the well established, but make sure they have staff with experience of the serials industry, and make sure you know who they are so that should any difficulties arise you know to whom you can address your problems for a discussion based on experience.

### *Experience of your type of library*

Make sure too that any agent you choose has some experience of dealing with your kind of library. Some agents tend to specialise in specific types of libraries, for example academic libraries or corporate libraries. So choosing an academic specialist as an agent if your library is in a large company is less likely to give you the type of service you require.

### *Experience with the type of material*

Similarly make sure that your proposed agent has experience in dealing with the type of material

you require. If you have specialist requirements for Eastern European or Arabic material say, then make sure any agents you choose have experience in this field and staff who speak the appropriate languages. They may not give the cheapest quote but you are more likely to have better, trouble-free service.

### *Financial security*

It is important that the agent you choose is financially secure. This is very difficult to judge and is not necessarily a function of size though that can be significant. If a company has been trading for a number of years and can show steady business growth these may be pointers to financial stability. If in doubt ask to see their accounts for the last few years. If they are new start ups then ask to see some form of bankers reference.

### *Service*

Before choosing an agent it is vital to decide on the type of service that you require. This means examining precisely what you need to get done, how quickly and by whom – is it an internal job or something that could be put out to the agent? No agent can hope to provide good service in the face of changing client expectations! Service levels can vary depending on your need. For example some libraries may require a full consolidation service where the agent obtains all the material, checks it in, perhaps even adds shelving and cataloguing information and bulk ships it to the library. Others may need very rapid responses to claims. The agent needs to be aware of the requirements and have the systems to be able to deliver. You can always ask for references.

### *References*

When taking up references decide what are the crucial service elements for your library and ask specifically about these. This is, in general, likely to be more informative than simply asking very general questions. Occasionally a reference may express dissatisfaction with the agent. Before deleting that agent from your list of candidates it is always worth talking to the agent as it may be that they are aware of the problem with the customer and can show a very positive attitude to

putting things right. Whilst nobody wants things to go wrong in the first place, the next best thing in an agent is one who works hard to correct any problems – whether or not they are the agents fault.

#### *Reports and documentation*

Perhaps one of the most important criteria should be the reporting that the agent can provide. This should be clear and straightforward and meet the library's needs. It is always worth looking at sample reports to ensure the library can manage its affairs properly based on the agent's reports. Agents vary in their abilities to tailor reports to their clients needs so it's worth a good look. Specifically make sure that such basic documentation as invoices, renewal lists, and claims reports meet the library's requirements. This may vary from needing a 'one line' invoice to having your renewals invoiced in specific ways to meet your internal budgeting requirements, for example.

#### *The personal touch*

The relationship between agent and library is generally a very close one. At the end of the day, it is based on trust and understanding, so one of the most important criteria in selecting an agent is that both library and agent should feel comfortable working together on a professional and also a personal basis. This is a people business and requires good personal skills.

#### *Automation*

Some agents, especially (though not exclusively) the larger ones, can offer highly automated renewals, claims and ordering procedures. These help keep cost down and take away much of the otherwise routine administration, especially at renewals time. They make routine communication easier and reduce errors by reducing the number of times data is keyed in between library and publisher. The larger the library the more likely that such fully automated services will be vital. So make sure the agent you choose has good, robust systems, provides the level of automation you require and that the reporting and invoicing you need can be delivered.

#### *Electronic journals*

Agents' services vary widely in the field of electronic journals. Again it is essential to fully understand what the library requires. Electronic journals place extra burdens of complexity on library, agents and publishers systems so it pays to think through the requirements. The agent should know the publishers' requirements for electronic journals. The agent should be able to obtain information on prices (paper, electronic and combinations), types of licences required by the publisher (whether its site, multi-user, consortia only, click through terms and conditions etc), the information required by the publisher to enable the subscription to be set up (Internet Protocol (IP) address ranges, email address of library specialist etc) and be able to advise whether the publisher requires access via password or IP address validation.

Some agents will go further and be able (subject to publisher permission) to set up the electronic subscriptions for use by the library by obtaining signed licences, completing initial authorisation routines and testing the journal access.

In addition to this, there are a number of new services agents and intermediaries can offer libraries. These range from fully searchable access services to the electronic content on their own or the publisher's servers, to providing specialist software and databases for the library to run their own access system. Some agents may also be able to offer additional services, such as: electronic tables of contents, alerting services, linking to and from abstracting and indexing services.

Again, the key point is to decide in advance the services the library requires as a whole and then see how agent and intermediary services can meet these requirements, measured against other options such as developing the services in-house. Especially in electronic journals it pays not to assume that agents and intermediaries can 'only' do this or that. The field is changing fast and the chances are that some will be able to offer far more than would have been the case only last year.

#### *Consortia services*

Many libraries are now active in at least one consortium. This brings access to unsubscribed titles and demands for information on the library's subscriptions that can be somewhat at

variance with existing reports. Many agents will now have experience of the needs of consortia and be able to help libraries with their information requirements and renewals. Indeed some agents are now actively helping consortia with their administration, sometimes negotiating with publishers and of course delivering the electronic content.

#### *Technology and migration to e-commerce*

It is possible that over the next few years it will become increasingly cost effective for libraries to purchase subscriptions over the internet through e-commerce systems. Some agents already offer these services and doubtless others will be moving into this new area very shortly. If your library intends to move in this direction it would be sensible to determine whether the agent has e-commerce already in place or whether they have plans to develop this.

#### *Tendering*

There has been a growth in libraries requesting agents to tender against a written specification. This is sometimes required under European Union (EU) rules governing large contracts. The tendering process can be useful and constructive, but equally it can be an administrative nightmare for agents who may be required to respond to many tenders at the same time. Evaluating the tender responses can also be difficult and the temptation is always to look at the one with the least cost favourably. That is fine but remember the agent will have gone to considerable trouble to cost out levels of service etc and if all that is really wanted is the cheapest quote it would be more effective to simply say the job goes to the cheapest bidder!

#### *Cost, value and the importance of the mix*

The price the agent will charge for their services is, to some extent, offset by the terms the agents obtain from the suppliers. However these vary substantially between publishers and different types of material. They also tend to be expressed as a percentage of the list price which means that several hundred high priced scientific, technical and medical (STM) journals from a relatively small number of commercial publishers may be

priced at or near list price whereas the same number of journals from a relatively large number of small social sciences society publishers might well be priced at considerably more than list. This reflects not just the difference in price between STM and social sciences publications but also the difficulty of obtaining the material and maintaining the subscriptions. The mix of journals in a library's collection has very significant bearing on the price that agents charge. When looked at as a cost per journal it is often the case that much the same charge is being made between the two types of material so do not assume that the same percentage figure in one area will be reflected in other quite different subjects or types of material.

A good agent will be very clear about how they charge and what for. Not all charge in the same way, some have an overall service charge and others charge per line item (or subscription ordered) whilst others may charge for specific services. Charges can be a percentage of the business or a fixed fee or some combination of both. However the charges are made, ensure that you understand them and can compare them with those from other agents.

Since many journals will be priced in a currency other than that in which the agent is preparing the quotation for the library, there are significant currency exchange risks. By exerting their considerable buying power, agents can bring economies of scale to the purchasing and transfer of funds which is of benefit to the library and helps reduce the exchange risks involved.

#### **Conclusion**

Selecting an agent is about deciding what service the library needs to meet its objectives and choosing an agent who can deliver. Once a short list of agents who can deliver the required services has been produced then it is a question of trust, communications, level of service and cost. Going for the least costly option is not always the least expensive to the library since the best service rarely comes at the lowest price.

*Finally I should add that these views are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of all Association of Subscription Agents and Intermediaries (ASA) members, though I would like to think there was much common ground!*