

The Easier Things Get, The More Complicated They Become: The Dichotomy of E-information

by Daniel Belda

The information industry is a fascinating creature. In the past decade or so it has shed its skin and reinvented itself so frequently that it has evolved into something of immense size, shape and power, bearing little resemblance to the tame animal that it was only ten short years ago.

The goals of the information industry haven't changed. We're still looking for ways to make information easier for people to use and obtain, but the means in which we do that have changed dramatically. As technology has advanced, our industry has welcomed each and every change with a warm embrace. It does not matter how the information gets to us as long as it is easier to obtain, more efficient to use and easier to manage. What is interesting about all of this is that in our search for simplicity and efficiency things seem to have become more and more complicated.

The move to electronic journals started it all, thanks to the technological wonder (or monstrosity, depending on your point of view) that is the internet. Making publications available electronically seemed like the end of all our problems. No longer would you have to wait weeks for an issue to arrive in the post, now you'd simply have to click a button and it would immediately appear, as if by magic, on your desktop thanks to one little insulated wire. Things would never be the same again.

Many at Swets can remember having conversations with people who were convinced that electronic journals would signal the end of subscription agents. Surely the middle man would no longer be needed? Librarians would be able to communicate directly with publishers and everything would become instantly available, thus eliminating all the administrative hassle that librarians used to turn to agents like Swets for help with.

Well, one thing was correct, things were never the same again though perhaps not in the way that was expected. The arrival of e-journals signaled the introduction of a host of new, complex issues into the subscription management process that needed to be monitored and maintained; pricing models, access methods and licensing rights. Tiered pricing, username/password authentication and access via IP check are three phrases that would have made little sense a decade ago, but are now as much a part of our industry's vocabulary as Year, Volume and Issue. Publishers, libraries and subscription agents all jumped willingly into this new electronic world. As we began to find our feet, we quickly came to realise that while electronic journals made information available faster, they also made administering subscriptions much more complex. Instead of being the curtain call for agents like ourselves, the emergence of e-journals actually ended up strengthening the relationships we have with our customers.

In the ten years I have been at Swets, we have constantly been working, together with our customers, on developments designed to make the acquisition and management of e-journals simpler. Over the years, we have made great strides in making the different offerings available from publishers more visible and easier to understand. Over time, our focus has shifted from clearly outlining what was available in the market, in which format and through which business model, into developing a service that made the conditions

of use on purchased content easier to understand, manage and maintain.

Our first significant achievement in this area came in January of this year with the introduction of the License Bank functionality into SwetsWise Subscriptions. The License Bank tracks 45 separate license fields, selected in accordance with the DLF ERM12 initiative, and displays the conditions of more than 850 individual licenses, covering 250 of the industry's leading publishers. With the License Bank, a customer can easily see which publishers require a license to be signed and what the conditions of that license are, but that was only the first step.

In the electronic publishing world, things are never as simple as they first appear. License conditions can change frequently, almost on a case-by-case basis. For example, licenses can be amended during customer negotiations with publishers. Different conditions can be applied depending on the location of the library, the size of the deal or any number of other reasons. In order to help navigate this new minefield of information we have developed SwetsWise eSource Manager, the latest module in our pioneering range of content management services.

SwetsWise eSource Manager builds on top of the License Bank functionality, allowing librarians to not only view and manage the licenses they have and what conditions apply to those licenses, irrespective of how they acquired them, but also to change the conditions of a standard license to reflect the agreement they have actually arranged with the publisher. It also allows them to track the progress of any new licenses they are in the process of negotiating through their own internal workflow procedures. This innovative new service will help librarians to truly master their electronic resources and coupled with SwetsWise Subscriptions it provides them with the ultimate electronic resource management solution.

The information industry continues to evolve at a dramatic rate. We've noticed that similarly complex issues to the ones that reared their ugly heads with the arrival of e-journals are beginning to pop up once again with the emergence of eBooks. Therefore, as the industry continues to shed its skin and develop further new trends and new technologies, it is important for Swets, and other companies like us, to evolve alongside it. At Swets it is our desire to build the ultimate environment for the acquisition, access, management and evaluation of content, in whatever format, that propels us forward. We will continue to innovate and develop new services that tackle the complexities the information industry throws at us. The search for simplicity, efficiency and clarity continues.



Daniel Belda
Innovation and Development
Manager at Swets