

What's the buzz about Library Choice?

Electronic information resources continue to grow in number and complexity, impacting the workload of library staff in a range of areas from collection development and procurement to resource integration, access management and usage analysis. Agent and intermediary services are continually evolving to help libraries overcome the challenges of this increasingly complex information landscape, freeing library staff to fulfil their key objective of enabling intuitive, seamless access to their information collections. The professional body the Association of Subscription Agents & Intermediaries (ASA) has introduced the 'Library Choice' initiative to help support librarians further by ensuring they may continue to choose to work with one or more intermediaries in the complex digital information arena.



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What is Library Choice?

'Library Choice' is about supporting choice within libraries. Specifically, it is about choice in the context of procurement of information resources, which could be online, print or a mixture of both. The Association of Subscription Agents (ASA) and its members believe that libraries and consortia should be free to order such resources via whichever method provides the greatest value to them, and not be directed through any particular channel.

The number of publishers offering e-content and the complexity of content packages both continue to increase. These factors impact the workload of library staff, particularly those who manage and provide access to e-collections. Such work is often highly time consuming and potentially a significant drain, particularly when libraries are under budgetary pressure. Intermediaries and publishers understand that many libraries are struggling in this challenging environment. In response, the ASA and its members have collaborated with publishers to develop the Library Choice initiative.

A false economy?

In some situations, a small number of publishers have proposed deals which a library or consortium must order directly from them, eliminating

intermediary services, presenting this as a cost saving. Though removing the intermediary may appear to offer quick-fix savings, it should be remembered that agents provide many value-added services beyond managing the transaction itself, both to libraries and to publishers, so it could be argued that direct deals represent a false economy. Content procurement agreements that do not include an agent can increase workload for the library; library staff often have little choice other than to absorb this additional work, potentially resulting in additional cost. Direct deals can also add to the publisher's costs, since many intermediary services deliver cost and time savings and other efficiencies to the publisher, as well as to the library.

A common perception is that in the digital arena many of the problems associated with print simply disappear. In practice, most publishers and libraries find that setting up and managing online content brings with it a whole new range of complexities and challenges. Let's look at two quite common views of a hypothetical e-content package deal to illustrate this point further:

1. Publisher A wishes to reach a multi-year deal with Library B for a large collection of e-journals with price escalator clauses in second and later years, to present a one-line invoice, to be

promptly paid by a central funding source in their preferred currency, leaving the integration of purchased resources (i.e. cataloguing, setting up links, allocating costs to departments, etc.) up to the purchasing institution.

2. Meanwhile, and whilst being mindful of all of the services necessary for prompt implementation of access, Library B is primarily focused on paying the lowest possible price for Publisher A's content.

In this illustration, subscribing to a large package of e-journals, either directly or through a consortium, will certainly provide greater access for Library B but will also typically create more work for administrative, serials and technical staff. As an approximate analogy, focusing on just the invoice price of an e-resource agreement is a little like budgeting for a trip based on the price of the airline ticket alone without considering taxes, security fees, baggage charges, transport to and from the airport and so on. As with any significant purchase, it pays to consider the associated overhead costs, immediate and longer term, not just the initial price.

Furthermore, lack of clarity about which titles and years are included in a deal can make collection management difficult and time consuming, and content linking and discovery complex. In addition, some libraries have local campus requirements that mandate title-by-title invoicing. In reality then, e-resources require multiple implementation activities, which means the lowest price rarely results in the lowest overall cost, given the range of support and follow-on tasks that must be accomplished to realize the greatest benefit from the purchase.

Agent and intermediary services are continually evolving precisely to help libraries overcome such challenges, freeing library staff to fulfill their key objective of enabling intuitive, seamless access to their information collections.

Libraries should be free to choose

The ASA introduced the Library Choice initiative to help support librarians by ensuring libraries may continue to choose to work with one or more intermediaries in the digital information arena. Through Library Choice, the ASA asks publishers to pledge to allow their library customers to

continue to order through the channels and work with the partners *they find most valuable and thus prefer*. To be clear, we are not insisting libraries or publishers work with agents and intermediaries; we are simply asking all involved in the information supply chain to bear in mind the complexities inherent in digital information provision, and to acknowledge that intelligent, tailored services from agents and other intermediaries may continue to deliver desirable efficiencies and value.

Library Choice enables customers to choose their preferred purchasing process for any deal negotiated between an individual library or a consortium and a publisher. If the customer opts to use an agent, they can get the assistance they need with the extra work associated with the access and management of e-journal collections, whilst being able to take advantage of the pricing and terms negotiated by a buying group or consortium. Library Choice enables libraries to secure the best deal they can whilst remaining free to order through their preferred channels, thus retaining valuable agent services which help them achieve their information access and management goals. Additionally, when libraries select an agent, publishers benefit from efficient order and payment processing, reducing payment collection issues and enhancing cash flow. Similarly, libraries and publishers alike benefit significantly where an intermediary can supply MARC records for online catalogues, assist with account activation and IP address maintenance, and automatically populate discovery and linking services, facilitating discovery and usage.

Value and service from agents

In cases where a deal calls for direct interaction between the library/consortium and the publisher, the Library Choice pledge enables the intermediary to deliver services where required without restrictions, for example:

- processing new orders
- handling of renewals and claims
- providing accurate and timely pricing information
- title-level management information
- historical holdings information (including cost-per-use data)
- COUNTER-compliant usage data and the implementation of the SUSHI protocol

- delivering newer services – including cost comparison calculations and sophisticated, pre-populated ERM services.

Agent consolidation services go beyond handling the transaction itself, to include provision of details of what content has been purchased (e.g. title lists with MARC records), automated population of discovery services with data about subscribed titles (e.g. A to Z lists and link resolvers) and sophisticated electronic invoicing services which can be uploaded into library automation systems, allowing content costs to be charged back to the appropriate department without manual effort. Given the significance institutions attach to usage data, publishers benefit from increased usage via traffic linked from discovery services.

Endorsement from publishers

By signing a Library Choice letter, publishers pledge their support for libraries and consortia to have a choice, for example to place their orders directly with the publisher or, if they prefer, through an agent. Where an agent is preferred, the agent becomes the billing and payment partner, and provides both library and publisher with valuable services and management data. To date, 45 leading scholarly, educational and professional publishers have endorsed this initiative, signing a Library Choice pledge letter, with more joining each month. Readers can visit the ASA website (www.subscription-agents.org) to see the growing list of publishers who have endorsed Library Choice.

Library groups support Library Choice

More recently, library groups in the academic and professional sector have added their support to the

initiative. We are very pleased that the North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) endorses Library Choice and NASIG members feel strongly about their right to choose which groups they partner with and which channels they order through to achieve their goals. The ASA and its members are also proud that the influential German-speaking Serials Interest Group (GeSIG) has also recently endorsed Library Choice.

As the ASA and its members continue to promote the Library Choice initiative, we look forward to more publishers and library groups supporting 'choice' within libraries, enhancing and improving the whole the information supply chain. We furthermore believe Library Choice is a tool to improve the ability of libraries to manage their budget and collection in these difficult economic times. Libraries still receive all the advantages of consortium deals but are able to work with their preferred intermediary to get the much needed workload support. The publisher receives fast and efficient supply of management data and payment for orders. The result would appear to be a win-win situation for everyone.

For more information about Library Choice, please visit the ASA website.

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