ACQUISITION OF PERIODICALS—METHODS & PROBLEMS

Dissimilarities in the acquisition procedures of books and periodicals have been brought out. The advantages and disadvantages of acquisition through agents, STC and direct from publisher have been analysed and it has been concluded that though direct acquisition of periodicals involves some extra cost, this method is better than all others. The creation of a body for exchange of duplicate issues to help libraries in filling up the gaps of the incomplete volumes has been suggested.

As primary journals are the most important channels for communication of science information since their inception more than 300 years ago, periodicals constitute an important component of a library collection. Their importance is all the more marked in a technological university library where R & D activities would form a major plank of the university’s work. Indeed the ranking of a science and technology library itself would owe much to the extent of its periodical holding.

Naturally, a large slice of a library’s budget is allotted for acquisition of periodicals and serials. Hence, due care has to be exercised in their selection, acquisition and organization.

WHAT ACQUISITION IS

The term "acquisition" means in library parlance the process of acquiring books and periodicals and other reading materials in a systematic manner. The task of acquisition involves careful selection, methodical ordering and regular procurement of materials by means of purchase, gift, exchange or deposit.

The procedures involved in the acquisition of books and periodicals are, however, dissimilar.

As books are commercial publications, the publishers and booksellers, besides flooding the library with their catalogues and handouts of recent publications, arrange for book exhibitions from time to time for facilitating 'spot' selections. It is also a common practice with enterprising booksellers to send, their new arrivals to the libraries 'on approval' basis, for physical examination and selection from them.

This facility of examining periodicals before their selection is generally not readily available.

Of course, specimen copies of journals upon request are supplied but not all publishers would send them free of cost. Naturally, therefore, the libraries have to base their selection of periodicals on the leaflets announcing the new titles received from the publishers or their reviews in journals.

There are dissimilarities also in the mode of procurement and payment of books and periodicals. As stated earlier, books are commercial publications and naturally the common practice of libraries is to order for them through booksellers who willingly supply them on credit basis and prefer bills for payment. It is thus seen that it is an uncommon practice to acquire books directly from publishers or to effect advance payment for them. The mode of direct purchase of books from publishers is resorted to only in the case of learned publications and where the book trade shows reluctance to supply them due to low margin of profit, where they claim handling charges.

But it is a common practice among established libraries to acquire periodicals directly from the publishers. Though there are other methods of procurement through intermediaries, direct subscription to periodicals is the best as would be examined later in the paper.

The acquisition process of books end once the publications are received in the library, taken in stock and paid for. As against this, acquisition of periodicals is a continuous process involving besides selection bottlenecks, advance payment and expectation for the arrival of the issues in time as and when they are published. Besides the vagaries of transportation, the publication schedules of publishers which are at times irregular cause a lot of headache to the periodicals librarian. Missing issues will land him in a situation where he may have to resort to endless correspondence. Hence, acquisition and handling of periodicals are no mean tasks and call for a high degree of alertness on the part of the librarian.

METHOD OF ACQUISITION

There are two principal methods of acquiring periodicals in a library depending upon the size and nature of the collection and the financial resources available for their procurement. These two methods are:

1) Through Agents

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2) Direct from Publishers

Of the other methods of procurement of periodicals mention may be made of

a) Centralised procurement through STC
b) By membership
c) By exchange/gift
d) By deposit

Of these other methods, the last mentioned is rather confined only to National and State Central Libraries. Some special libraries like IIT/Calcutta and IIT/Madras in our country also get some periodicals by deposit. The gift and exchange methods of acquisition of periodicals do not pose any problem as these modes of acquisition depend upon mutual agreement between two libraries. And so acquisition of periodicals by membership either individual or institutional is a straightforward proposition.

THROUGH AGENTS

Libraries adopting this method generally appoint a firm for handling subscriptions to periodicals for one calendar or financial year. There are many firms in India and abroad which are doing such work for libraries. Quotations are invited from such firms for handling subscriptions to periodicals and a firm offering the lowest rate is appointed. On receipt of the consolidated invoice covering subscriptions to journals ordered through them, the library makes advance payment to the agent for onward transmission to the foreign publishers. The money is easily transmitted to the publishers through foreign currency drafts issued by the bank against the import licence. After the receipt of the money at the publishers' end, the subscription is entered for the particular calendar year. This process is normally initiated during August/September of each year so that the subscription for the following year is finally remitted by the agents to publishers by December.

The journals are received by the libraries direct from the publishers. In case of non-receipt of any issue/issues of any journal, the library writes to the agent who in turn forwards such claims to the publishers. If copies of these journals are available, the publishers generally send the replacements.

Likewise any enhancement of subscription to any journal is also paid by the library when claimed by the agent through supplemental bills.

This method of procurement of periodicals through agents on the surface holds the prospect of smooth sailing and indeed there is no reason why it should not! But in actual practice it bristles with problems. Not all agents are above board. Some unscrupulous agents with their dubious and wrong business deals like misuse of subscription amounts paid by the libraries create sundry problems. There is also a growing awareness among librarians that in the acquisition of periodicals through agents, the role of the agent in practice has shrunk to only transmitting money to the publishers in foreign currency and nothing more.

CENTRALISED PROCUREMENT THROUGH STC IN INDIA:

Recently we are aware that the STC of India has entered the book trade. With great hope, many libraries including IITs/Madras have placed their orders for the supply of foreign journals with them. It was felt that STC could save foreign exchange as trade discount will also be allowed to them by the publishers. Libraries getting the journals directly from the publishers do not always get a discount. It was hoped that considerable man-hours would be saved by entrusting the entire work of ordering periodicals with one agency. It was also fondly hoped that STC would manage to airlift many copies of a particular journal in one parcel and then mail them to different libraries in India thus reducing the time lag in the receipt of journals from abroad.

But perhaps due to the inexperience of STC in book trade and more so due to their mode of cumulated quarterly payments to the publishers their service was not found entirely satisfactory. Also STC is not prepared to take up the responsibility of sending reminders and claims to the publishers for missing issues. Such claims have to be preferential by the concerned libraries at their cost and time. STC also is not offering any discount to the libraries.

DIRECT FROM PUBLISHERS

Direct subscription to periodicals means direct dialogue with the publishers to obtain current periodicals from foreign countries. No import licence is needed for this. Foreign exchange for subscribing to current periodicals can be drawn from the banks. In the case of back volumes, however, import licence is required.

When a library decides that certain titles are to be procured, letters ordering these titles are sent, calling for invoices for arranging payment in advance. On receipt of these invoices, letters along with 'A' forms duly filled in for issue of drafts in foreign currencies are sent to the bank. These forms are obtainable from the concerned banks or libraries with reprographic facilities may take multiple copies of these forms themselves.

The bankers usually insist on separate 'A' form for each beneficiary. This would in practice amount to making one 'A' form for each of the invoices to be processed for payment. In a library like IITs stature which would subscribe to some 1000 to 1500 titles making separate 'A' form would naturally mean considerable work. To avoid this unnecessary duplication of work and waste of manpower, time and money the bankers may be convinced to accept one 'A' form for the total sum of invoices in a particular currency. For instance, if a dozen invoices in dollar currency are to be arranged for payment, their single listing showing the beneficiaries names and addresses and the amounts for which the drafts are sought with the total at the bottom and form 'A' for that total sum could be attached with the letter addressed to the bankers for issue of drafts. This would simplify the whole procedure and expedite payments but not all banks may accept this practice. When the drafts are received from the bank they are forwarded to the concerned publishers after making the necessary entries in the internal financial recording system. Most of the publishers require that a copy of their invoices

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should accompany the payment and it is better to do so to ensure proper entering of subscriptions.

RENEWAL OF SUBSCRIPTIONS

If all the periodicals subscribed to in a library run their course from January to December of an year their renewals for the ensuing year would be a simple process. Their renewals could be taken up sufficiently early in the year, say in the months of August-September so that it could be seen that all invoices are received and paid for promptly before the start of the next year thus ensuring continuity in the supply of journals. Also, in a library where a good number of periodicals are subscribed to, it will take time to prepare and issue all the renewal letters to different publishers. For administrative convenience, the issue of renewal letters could be broken up into groups proportionately so that the arrival of invoices may be correspondingly spaced out enabling the periodicals and serials division of a library and the central accounts section of an organisation to process them in a phased manner. But in actual practice not all journals are subscribed to from the start of a calendar year. There would be mid-year subscriptions, two year subscriptions, package deals, standing orders and so on. These would naturally stall the smooth rhythm of effecting renewals. A system has to be evolved to alert the periodicals librarian sufficiently in advance as to their renewals. Also if standardised forms are devised for such renewals and arranging for payment, periodicals renewal work could be greatly simplified and expedited.

Usually foreign publishers start sending the renewal notices sufficiently in advance and for such titles renewal instructions need not be sent. But where regular invoices are not received they may have to be called for. Sometimes publishers would delay sending invoices until the year end. There are however stray cases.

AGENT VS. DIRECT METHOD

It is generally believed (i) that subscribing to journals direct from publishers involves lot of correspondence and that this could be saved if journals are procured through an agent, (ii) that much staff time would be saved by subscribing through an agent as it would eliminate processing of individual invoices, filling of 'A' forms, etc. for obtaining foreign exchange drafts etc., (iii) that banks charge commission for issuing of foreign currency drafts, (iv) that some agents offer discounts to libraries if the orders exceed certain amount etc. etc.

But all these are mistaken notions. The time taken to verify the prices of individual titles in the consolidated invoices submitted by agents, item by item with the publishers catalogues/journals and or other sources, checking the conversion rates, their totals etc. would more than neutralise the time saved in placing a single consolidated order for them with an agent.

As to the discounts offered by the agents, it may be stated that similar savings could be obtained from the publishers also by placing bulk purchase orders, package deals and other incentives offered.

Above all, of late, too many firms are coming up offering periodical handling services. Hence, it is incumbent on the library to ascertain the financial soundness of the firms before entrusting the orders to them. In other words, an element of financial risk is involved in entrusting bulk subscriptions orders to agents.

SUBSCRIBING THROUGH EXCLUSIVE AGENTS OF FOREIGN PUBLISHERS

Some foreign publishers appoint their agents to handle their publications exclusively in different countries. Here are a few notable examples pertaining to our country:

1) Academic Press Inc India Book House, Bombay
2) Gordon & Breach
3) Marcel Dekker
5) Unesco publications Orient Longmans

These are the cases where there is no choice. You can have the cake only from their pack. Hence, due care has to be taken while sending orders/renewals of subscriptions to these journals for which exclusive agents have been appointed in India by the foreign publishers. If by mistake orders for these journals are placed directly with their publishers they would be redirected to their appointed agents.

But then getting journals from the sole agents in India is an exasperating task. Firstly, the libraries have to call for their terms and rates of exchange of foreign currencies during a particular year. They have to be approved by the authorities of the organisation to which the libraries are attached. Meanwhile if there were to be any fluctuation in world currency there would be further correspondence and fixing of rates. There may be delays in effecting payment - such delays are inevitable as even libraries of IITs stature cannot make direct payment but have to arrange through their Institute's Central Accounts Section. There may be enhancement of subscription rates. If payments were made at the earlier rates of subscriptions at the commencement of the year, the agents are sure to send supplemental bills. This will lead to endless correspondence between the library and the agent on one hand and the library and the accounts section of the parent institution on the other. The agents for the sake of a paltry difference would hold up the major portion of the payment already made. Correspondence and still more correspondence. Meanwhile the rates may go still higher up. Another supplemental bill and thus the vicious circle would go on and on! Meanwhile the supply of journals to the library would cease causing considerable difficulty to the library and its readers.

It is rather unfortunate that some publishers who have appointed Indian agents for their journals do not look into these matters and refuse to deal directly with subscribers. The only saving grace in getting journals through these Indian agents for foreign publishers is that if any issue is not received they hold themselves responsible and either
supply replacements for missing issues or extend the subscriptions suitably instead of asking the libraries to check up with post offices at their end!

REMINDEERS AND CLAIMS FOR MISSING ISSUES

There is hardly any mechanism anywhere in the world that can ensure the regular receipt of all issues of periodicals subscribed to by a library during a year. In fact, no library however well-administered, can lay claim to immunity from this festering sore of missing issues.

Missing of issues occurs due to many reasons beyond the control of libraries. These may be due to loss in postal transit, computer errors in dispatch, human carelessness, wanton pilferage, etc.

There is no foolproof mechanism devised by library technology yet that can enable a librarian to keep track of the issues of journals as and when they are published and released so as to lay claim for the missing issues if any, in time. Also, existing registration and recording system of journals cannot expeditiously alert the librarian about the missing of any of the issues of a journal. In the present system, only at the time of registering a particular issue of a journal one would know whether the earlier issue of the same has been received and, if not, a reminder is sent. Supposing two issues of a journal were to be missing by the time one notices this and rushes his claims, the missing issues would have gone out of print or the publishers would quote their stock 90 days rule. As the regular supply of journals itself would arrive only after 8-12 weeks time from the date of their dispatch by seafreight, it is really a challenging task of "Chasing missing issues" of journals. It is really time that some of our reputed library associations like IASLIC, ILA or better still some special body like a Central Duplicate Exchange Union is established to help the case of missing issues in the different libraries of the country. It could collect and pool all its duplicate issues received by the different libraries in the country and arrange for their distribution against specific requests. Reminders for non-receipted issues should be sent whenever warranted while registering the periodicals daily and again, once in a month on thorough checking for missing issues. The period between two previous issues received and recorded in a library may be treated as a normal delivery time if the publication of the journals are not before or behind schedule. If an issue is not received within that period, a reminder has to be rushed. Printed reminder cards would come in handy for this purpose. Usually the response to a timely reminder from foreign publishers would be quite encouraging. A replacement copy would be promptly sent.

In the case of Indian journals, especially from the Publications Division of Government of India, it is an exasperating task, to get replacements for missing issues of a journal. Their stock (or stocky?) reply that according to their records all the issues were duly dispatched will arrive after the whole episode of the errant issues is forgotten and given up for lost. Or, if by any chance an early reply were to be received, it would be for furnishing the library's subscription number, date of payment etc. etc. The library would be kept in the dark all the time as to whether it could hope for replacement copies or not.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it could be seen direct acquisition of periodicals from publishers though may mean some extra cost (but certainly no additional administrative work as is mistakenly thought) may be considered as the better method. It must, however, be noted that careful planning and methodical follow up work is a must for direct subscriptions. Any slag in the process would result in delay and interruptions in supply.

Above all, this method will work smoothly and satisfactorily as long as there is a two way traffic between the parties, i.e. the publishers and the library and both realise their mutual responsibilities and perform their duties well.

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