FULL TEXT SERVICES: THE VIEW OF THE AGENT

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Full text services offer a unique opportunity for agents to utilise their resources and expertise to resolve many of the current problems by providing cost effective and efficient services. Both publishers and librarians will benefit.

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Blackwell's Information Services owns very little copyright. So what, you might ask, do we know about full text services? The answer of course is not a lot, but it may be more than you might think! Publishers understand content and the market for it. They are beginning to build new electronic services which go much further than is possible in a printed journal. Their position on this is determined by their understanding of the requirements of the end user for content and as Figure 1 shows they tend to see agents and libraries as having a rather small role.

As an agent we have, historically speaking, had little contact with end users. Our expertise lies in our understanding of what happens when an organisation discovers it need hundreds or thousands of products, electronic or otherwise, from many different publishers over a wide range of subjects. This is about distribution, because it concerns the processes through which the customer obtains and purchases the content which is used by the individual. In some cases it is possible for the desires of the individual to access some content of interest can be at variance with the requirements of the organisation as a whole, particularly in the electronic arena. Agents of course, therefore, see themselves as key to the whole process, as illustrated in Figure 2, where the size of the boxes has
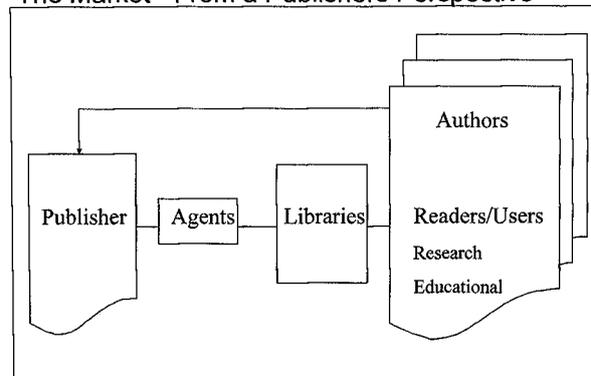
The Market - From a Publishers Perspective

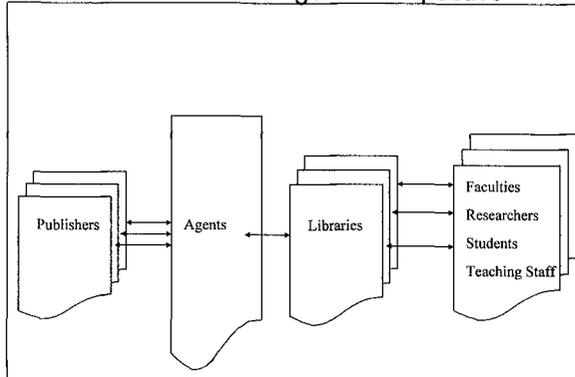*Fig.1*

The Market - From an Agents Perspective

Fig.2

somewhat changed from those illustrated in Figure 1.

Over the past two years BIS, like many other agents, has developed tools for delivering, and adding value to, full text services. These new tools, such as Blackwell's Electronic Journal Navigator, deliver electronic journal content from a wide variety of different publishers to organisations throughout the world. These tools will do many things for the customer (at present the librarian) although most of these services are still in their infancy. In effect, what they all offer the organisation is a single source for full text content, a means of searching simply across many publishers' offerings and a mechanism for purchasing such disparate content. Shortly we are likely to see links to secondary services and doubtless many other services related to the needs of the researcher and/or the librarian.

As agents go around the world discussing with customers these new full text distribution systems, they are also able to show and demonstrate publishers' journals to potential customers. In doing this they provide additional marketing tools for publishers. In fact, the simple existence of services such as these is a free advertisement for participating publishers since their journals contents are easy to see and to browse by the agents' customers.

Messages from the market

It is perhaps strange that electronic journals, which should be simple to use and to buy, turn out to be anything but! To some extent this is because of their continuing links to paper, although often this is more in the mind than

reality. After all, it takes all of us time for new ways of working to become familiar. However, there are some problems which will not go away unless we all - customers, agents and publishers - work together.

Too many licences

All full text services come with some sort of licence. For many publishers this is a document that needs signing by the customer. All licences have three main components of interest to the majority of customers (other than price).

~   who can use the service;

~   what they can do with the content;

~   where they can use, i.e.: the site definition.

Although these three things are important, vital even, they are also to some extent irrelevant because there is a far larger problem. That is, there are simply far too many different licences. When all publishers go electronic there could, in principle, be over 100,000 different licences, one for each publisher.

It does not matter how wonderful an individual licence is for a publisher with a few journals, if it is simply one licence among several hundred dealt with by a single customer. No organisation can implement so many simultaneous different legally enforceable conditions on use, site and content if they are all subtly different. This is undoubtedly likely to mean a slow-down in the implementation of electronic journals if the present situation continues. By working together, we should all be able to agree on some common ground to simplify the current situation, and all agents are beginning to look carefully at this problem and provide solutions to libraries and publishers. However, the best solution lies in a more standard approach. I doubt we will ever get to the stage where a single licence covers all types of publication and marketing approaches from publishers. We should, however, get much closer than at present.

Too much administration

Licences are just one administrative burden. Reading them, getting everyone's agreement and negotiating changes takes a colossal amount of time from skilled and knowledgeable people (often in short supply both with the customer and

(often in short supply both with the customer and the publisher). Others are VAT, well known to all of us, the various mechanisms for tying paper to electronics, for example, free with paper journal, additional cash for purchase of the electronic part, multiplicity of site licences to choose from, provision of additional information, i.e. IP address, e-mail addresses, new subscription numbers for electronic journals compared with the print, etc. All these take considerable administration when you consider that customers and agents are dealing with thousands of journals and quite probably thousands of publishers. As if that were not enough, if there are simultaneous use provisions in the contract it may be that additional money needs to be spent in mid-year, which is not very common practice in the paper journal world.

In addition, the question of what has been purchased raises questions. Is it access or a purchase? Then there are questions peculiar to electronic journals, such as: how many papers have been bought for the subscriptions when there may be no such thing as an electronic issue; what is the frequency of refreshing the content so that the customer knows they have the latest material and not some fault with one or another of the many systems involved in obtaining content (customers' network, agents' aggregation service, publishers' site, for example). How does the library potentially check thousands of electronic titles to ensure they are all up to date, or, if not, what can they advise clients accordingly? Again, these are all administration systems that agents can help with and smooth out, thus increasing confidence in the product usability.

Site licences

Our experience is that libraries prefer the concept of a site licence covering all their users - faculty staff and students - and permitting more or less unrestricted access to the material on site. Use in the library only is of little value since everyone seems to agree that getting the information to the researcher's desk is the key to effective use of the information. Simultaneous usage can be a difficult concept on the Web and restrictions by IP address can be awkward if they are generated on the fly. All these things cause the library

difficulties and difficulties equate closely with purchasing decisions or their lack.

Added value

If the library is to pay more from scarce or non-existent resources for electronic versions of the same material it has on paper, it generally is disinclined to do so, in our experience. On the other hand, providing the electronic versions at no extra charge makes a difference to users' acceptance. So does making it available in electronic-only format and there are a small but growing number of libraries around the world who are actively looking at electronic-only access as a direct alternative to paper. Generally customers are keen to make use of electronic resources. They are prepared to look favourably at pricing policies which give them more access and content for a small amount, or no additional, cost, but in general they are not purchasing electronic when it simply costs them more for each journal.

Into the future

Therefore, where are things going, what is the emerging role of the agent on electronic full-text services and where are the benefits of working together?

The end user

Publishers traditionally market to researchers, agents to libraries. That is all changing because I believe that agents' full text services will deliver all publishers' journals and electronic services directly to the end user and provide a huge wealth of information and market reach. Agents' systems will do this because they will be an institutional purchase and as such will be rolled out to all within the organisation so that there is one standard way of accessing journal literature electronically which can be properly supported internally, and by the single external supplier, the agent. The information specialists can then train the users and ensure that appropriate content is available to all. Of course, this will not stop individuals going to publishers' sites, nor would agents or libraries wish to stop this, but it does give a single 'backbone' service across the site.

However, this does not mean there will be no libraries. They may change but some of their most

important functions will remain. Centralised purchasing is here to stay; how else can resource sharing and control of substantial budgets be maintained? Certainly the source of funds may change somewhat from the library to the department, but even they have heavy overlaps in research journals and conflicting demands on scarce resources. Students need different and more general resources which may need to come from other budgets, and there will always be a need for additional resources bought by the individual article.

Agents, therefore, will in the future deliver the end user, not just that set who uses a specific journal but en masse, helping publishers market sensibly to end users in all market sectors.

Agents will take on more proactive roles in helping define and refine licences to ensure compliance with customer expectations and hasten take up of the publisher's journals. Agents can also actively sell and promote publishers' products to their growing numbers of electronic customers.

One major benefit of this new role for agents will be the provision of much more accurate marketing information for publishers and libraries on the usage patterns of electronic journals. This information is likely to be vital for publishers in deciding whether to launch new journals or simply change the cope of existing ones. It will also be of very considerable use to the organisation, because it will tell them if they are making full use of their electronic resources and pointing to areas where better use might be made. Of course, confidentiality of such information will always need to be respected both for the publisher and the customer.

In conclusion, agents add considerable value to full text services through their aggregation services. They achieve this through the additional services which they provide to customers, based on cross-publisher indexes, ease of purchase, assistance with licensing and customer support. They also provide additional value to the publisher by providing an easier channel to the market, information on the library and end-user market and the ability to display and demonstrate publishers' products to the customer.