

PROMOTING TO ACADEMICS AND THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARIAN

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How does a journal end up in an academic library? What is the process which leads to the library taking the decision to spend money on a particular title and what are the important factors in that decision? This paper finds answers to these questions.



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Selection

The process of selection varies widely. Even within the University of Southampton Library, there are at least four different models at work in different subject areas and in different libraries. A good deal of the difference is explained by the history of the institution, and some by the interest which academic staff take in the library. However, all academics are concerned about the journals which are on the library shelves, and will be interested enough to tell the librarians about journals which they want. The publishers' task is to make the academic want to subscribe to their journals.

Academics value journals very highly, and will often regard the range of journals as one of the main indicators of the quality of a library. Libraries sometimes want to reduce that range, usually for entirely financial reasons, but all libraries find it extremely difficult to reduce the number of journals taken. Attempts to do so can lead to serious discussions at extremely senior levels of the university. Changes in technology and possible resulting changes in the way scholarly communication takes place seem to have made very little difference to this attitude.

Librarians value journals too, but they usually have two reservations which will not be significant to academic staff. The first is cost and, more specifically, the fact that the cost of almost any journal is likely to increase more quickly than the income of an academic library. The second, associated reservation concerns the commitment which a new journal involves. A new journal subscription is usually regarded as a medium to long term commitment, and whilst librarians have been accused of being reluctant to break runs of journals, my experience suggests that academics are at least as bad. For these reasons, librarians will almost always look very critically at requests for new subscriptions, and it will usually be them, not the academic staff, who will really need convincing.

The needs of academics

What is an academic seeking in a scholarly journal? First of all, of course, he or she is seeking top quality content, whether it be papers, reviews, letters, reports, or whatever other form of communication. No publisher will need to be told this, but it has become increasingly important. Pressures to publish, such as the Research Assessment Exercise, may have increased the number of papers being published, but I believe these pressures have tended to increase the gap between the leading journals in any field and the others. Academic departments are putting pressure on scholars to publish in the highest ranked journals, and on libraries to hold the top ranked journals. Libraries which find it hard to afford all the journals requested (and this will include almost every library) may well come under pressure to cancel journals rated lower in measures, such as the ISI impact factors, and to retain those with higher rankings.

Secondly, I believe academics are looking more and more for journals which cover their specialist areas. This may be a trend which will be reinforced by electronic forms of communication. People in all walks of life tend to know more and more about less and less, and this is true in academia. Whilst it may be a cause for regret that academics only have time to concentrate on their areas of particular expertise, it is increasingly true, and those journals, which they know will always contain papers on their subject, will be favoured over journals which are broader in scope.

Thirdly, academics are looking for quality control. I often see discussions taking place about speeding up the process of communication, and often this is done by preprints and similar early release of papers. But it seems that, at a later stage, there is usually some element of peer review, without which papers are not regarded as completely authoritative. I believe that publishers are able to organise this process well, and should use this ability in selling to academics.

The needs of librarians

Librarians will have their needs too. The first is good information about journals readily available. As soon as an academic asks about a journal, a librarian will seek to confirm the details, using perhaps *Ulrich's Periodical Directory* or an agent's

catalogue or database, or perhaps the publisher's own catalogue. If a journal is untraced, it may never be ordered. Failure on the part of publishers to provide information may, therefore, cost sales. Besides full bibliographic information, accurate prices are very important.

Librarians will also look at the reputation of a publisher when making selection decisions. They may consider not only the academic reputation of the publishing house, but also look at how it conducts business. There have been suggestions in recent times that librarians should avoid purchasing subscriptions from publishers who have followed certain practices, just as some academics now advocate not submitting papers to journals which adopt certain copyright requirements. Whilst I, personally, do not believe that this should happen, it may be a factor in some libraries.

Communicating with academics and librarians

How can publishers get information about these activities and publications to academic staff? There are many ways. Many publishers already devote a lot of effort in identifying academic staff and producing mailing lists. This is probably useful, although the better any mailings are targeted the more effective it is likely to be. Most academic departments now have Web sites which list the research interests of staff, often in some detail. University prospectuses and annual reports (which may also be available on Web sites) will also provide some information, and databases of research in progress (e.g. Current Research in Britain) are also available.

Publishers can also visit universities and research establishments. I would not recommend visiting particular academics solely for the purpose of selling subscriptions, but visiting universities to take part in activities is useful. I have heard more than one contribution from publishers to events in Southampton which have been very helpful, and have not only contributed to the success of the event but have also helped academic staff understand what publishers can offer. As an extension, attendance at major conferences, possibly to take part in an exhibition, or present a paper, but even as a delegate, would be a good way to make contact. Publishers are part of the academic community as it is currently

constructed, and by playing their role to the full in the community they can not only contribute to the academic process, but also raise awareness of their own products. Companies should also make sure that they have good, up-to-date information on a Web site, because academics seeking information are increasingly starting with an Internet search. A well-indexed and complete Web site will be found and read by academics.

In the same way, publishers should play their part in the bibliographic community. They are frequently criticised by librarians, but I believe they play an important role in the scholarly process, and that everyone, writers, readers, publishers, librarians, and subscription agents, form a mutually interdependent community, with each fulfilling an essential role. Librarians will welcome contact with and information from publishers, and publishers too will benefit from regular contact with librarians to learn of their concerns and of developments in libraries. I would recommend publishers to keep in touch by joining email discussion lists, by attending conferences, and generally by taking opportunities to meet librarians whenever possible. Publishers should also ensure that libraries have access to printed information about their products, especially catalogues, and that their Web site is up-to-date and contains complete information. Finally, publishers should note that librarians rely heavily on subscription agents as a source of information, and effort invested in working with and getting information to subscription agents will pay dividends.

Cancellations

Many librarians, sadly, spend more time dealing with periodical cancellations rather than new subscriptions, so an important aspect of selling subscriptions is not having them cancelled. The best way to avoid cancellation is probably by having at least one academic who is fiercely loyal to a journal and claims it is indispensable for his or her research. This person is likely to prevail over several who find a title useful but not essential. This implies having a clear aim for a title and working hard to meet it and, again, probably favours narrow rather than broader subject coverage. There will, of course, be many exceptions to this sweeping generalisation.

Conclusion

Librarians in academic libraries are there to provide the service which academic staff (and others) require to do their work, and will usually be seeking to work in partnership with them. When choosing journals, they will approach the question from different viewpoints, but the goal is the same, to ensure that the institution's information needs are met. If publishers understand the approaches being taken, they can provide both librarians and academics with the type of information they are seeking, making their jobs easier and, perhaps, ensuring the sale of a subscription. In this way, everyone gets what they want.