A REVIEW OF SUBSCRIPTION AGENCY SERVICES TO LAW FIRM LIBRARIES – INVESTIGATING CURRENT AND FUTURE SERVICE RELATIONSHIPS

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The environment of change in which all organisations are working inevitably affects the business relationships between them. As part of an MA dissertation at the University of North London, the author undertook research into the current and future state of relationships between law firm libraries and subscription agents.

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Introduction

Libraries and information units within law firms, as with libraries elsewhere, are constantly undergoing changes in the services that they provide and the way in which products are delivered. The increased possibility of immediate access to certain forms of electronic information in law firms may have resulted in more demanding end-users who now also expect printed materials such as journals more quickly. The ways in which libraries use subscription agents to obtain this material, and the demands that they place upon them, may therefore also be changing. Change is prevalent for subscription agents also, as has often recently been written (for example, Jim Rose on the role of the subscription agent in 1998[1] and Helen Henderson on the roles for agents in an electronic world in 1999[2]). Mergers and take-overs of subscription agents have resulted in a very small number of multinational companies controlling the market: a situation brought about by their own need to survive, and probably by a perception that a larger volume of business is safer for a company economically[3]. Alongside them, much smaller agents are surviving in a different way, by specialising and tailoring their services.

A study of the literature on subscription agents and their use since the late 1970s, found that nothing had been written on the specific relationship between law firm libraries and agents, so I undertook some research as part of a Masters dissertation at the University of North London.

Research methodology

The hypothesis developed was that in an area of rapid change, the relationship between library and agent is likely to be put under

increased pressure, resulting in dissatisfaction on one or both sides. The objectives of the research, drawn from this hypothesis, were:

- to discover the level of use of subscription agents by law firm libraries;
- to ascertain whether there is a gap between the perceptions of service providers and customers;
- to see if there is a pattern to any dissatisfactions;
- to find out which type of agent seems more successful at developing good business relationships, and
- to discover which aspects of the relationship cause problems.

Initially, a literature review was carried out to research the nature and use of subscription agents from the late 1970s to the present, and methods of measuring the levels of service received. Internet sites of the main subscription agents operating in the UK, and of organisations such as the UK Serials Group and the Association of Subscription Agents, were also investigated to obtain information on the services offered by agents and service quality expectations.

Two very similar questionnaires were then developed which would be sent to law firm libraries and to subscription agents. These were based on the SERVQUAL method[4] which measures various dimensions of service quality – tangibles (physical appearance of
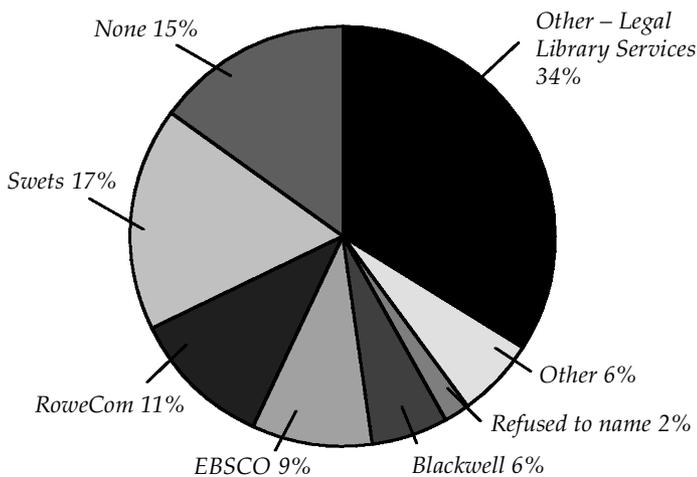
facilities and equipment), reliability (ability to perform the service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and be prompt), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and ability to convey trust) and empathy (individualised attention). The questionnaires asked how important various areas of service were to customers, then whether the service they were receiving at present was satisfactory. The gap between expected and perceived service would show where agents were failing.
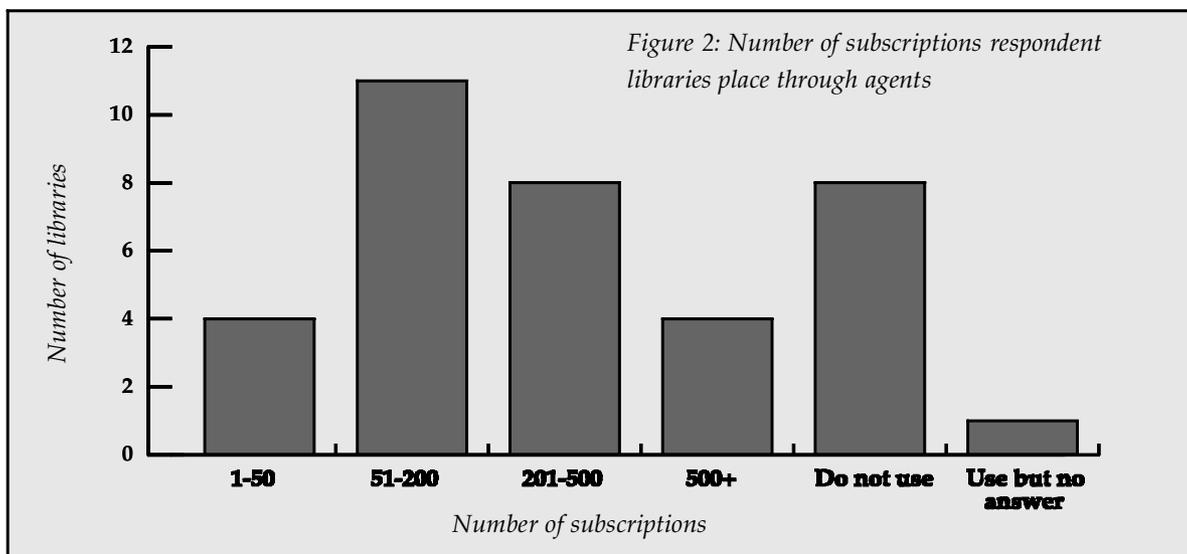
Other areas were also investigated using the questionnaires, such as the types of services used by law firm libraries (more 'traditional' services or newer ones such as electronic journal licensing or consolidation services). Factual data was also gathered, such as what agent, if any, was used, the number of subscriptions ordered through them, and the time they had been used for. The answers could then be used to determine if the length of a relationship or the monetary value of the customer were influential in the service quality received.

The questionnaires were sent to the information units of law firms of varying sizes within London, and a response rate of 70% achieved. The relatively small sample size of the survey does mean that there is a danger inherent in producing certain generalisations from the results. The law firm market may differ greatly in its needs from other 'special' libraries or corporate libraries, so the relationships of those libraries with agents cannot be inferred from this research. However, many of the opinions expressed by libraries, especially where they related directly to the position of the agent in the serials process, might be relevant to all customers of subscription agents. Similar questionnaires were also sent to the major subscription agents, and to the specialist agent operating in the legal area, Legal Library Services. Three replies were received, from Swets Blackwell, EBSCO and Rowecom.

Figure 1: Agents used by respondent libraries

None 15%
Swets 17%
RoweCom 11%
EBSCO 9%
Blackwell 6%
Refused to name 2%
Other 6%
Other – Legal Library Services 34%

Figure 2: Number of subscriptions respondent libraries place through agents

Results

Agents used by libraries

The libraries surveyed use various agents, and some use more than one. The results show that while there are a total of 20 customers for the major subscription agents, there are almost as many customers who use the specialist agent, Legal Library Services. Within the law library sector there is therefore as high a usage of the smaller agent as there is of the larger ones. *See figure 1.*

Number of subscriptions

Libraries were asked how many subscriptions they placed through agents. There was no apparent pattern to this, and an even spread of results was obtained. *See figure 2.*

Length of the agent-library business relationship

Libraries were also asked how long they have used their current agents. The results show that fewer libraries have remained with the same agents for longer time periods. There is therefore a tendency to switch agents after a certain number of years, which could be for various reasons, such as dissatisfaction with services or cost, or a need to use the agent who offers the best quote for services rendered. *See figure 3.*

Analysing the individual questionnaires, there was no apparent relationship between the agent used and either the number of subscriptions placed or the length of time they had been used. All agents had customers who placed a range of numbers of subscriptions, and all had some customers who were relatively new and others
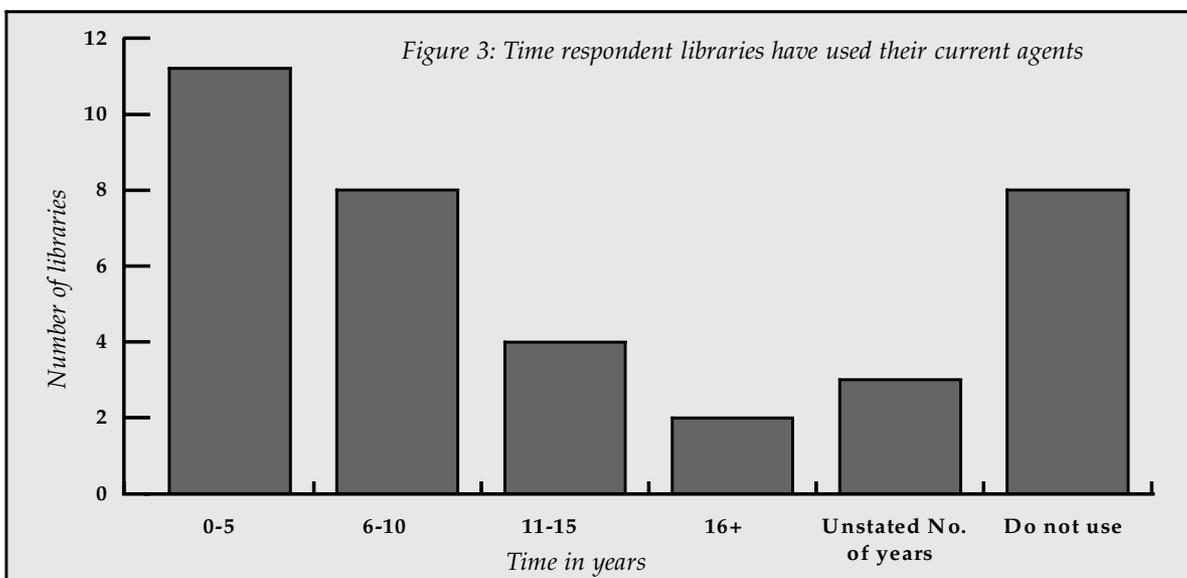

Figure 3: Time respondent libraries have used their current agents

Table 1: Most important areas of service for respondent libraries

Service	Number of libraries who placed them in each position of importance					
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Total
Efficient renewal process	16		4	3	2	25
Friendly staff	2		1	1		4
Invoicing according to requirements		1	7	4	4	16
Knowledgeable staff	1	6	4	3	4	18
Low service charges		1	3	2	3	9
Proactive provision of information		2	1	4		7
Prompt responses to requests	9	4	5	6	2	26
Regular updates on work in progress		1	2	4	5	12
Speedy claiming		13	1	1	8	23

who had used them for many years. This suggests that agents do not treat customers very differently according to the number of subscriptions, and therefore the amount of money, they bring to the agent. Neither does the higher number of subscriptions affect the library's decision to move agent where necessary. The fact that the length of the relationship varied also suggests that a sense of loyalty is not necessarily an influence in the termination of the business relationship.

Most important service areas

Libraries were asked to rate the five services they felt were most important. Prompt responses, an efficient renewal process and speedy claiming gained both the greatest number of ratings in the top five, and the most first and second places. Invoicing according to requirements and knowledgeable staff were also amongst the top five, but with respondents giving them more varied ratings of importance. The services which agents thought customers found most important were quite similar. The agents each named three or four of the top five. All three agents knew that knowledgeable staff were highly important to libraries; other responses varied. *See table 1.*

Performance of agents

Libraries were also asked if they were satisfied with the services currently received from their agents. I would emphasise that these are extremely subjective judgements, and two libraries receiving exactly the same level of service may have very different opinions of that service, depending on their expectations. *See table 2.*

There are very few problems related to service charges or friendliness of staff. However, these areas were also amongst those least placed in the top five important service areas. The people and costs are therefore not the main issues libraries have problems with. The only areas where fewer respondents are satisfied than not are in speed of response, updates on work in progress and claiming. All of these are areas which require a certain amount of pro-activity on the part of the agent, in keeping the customer informed. These issues are strong enough for a quarter of the respondents to admit having considered ceasing to use an agent. A further quarter already did not use agents.

Types of agents with the most satisfied customers

The level of satisfaction with each agent used was calculated, by looking at whether a customer had

Table 2: Respondent libraries' satisfaction with services

Service	Satisfied	Not satisfied
renewal process	21	5
friendliness of staff	26	1
invoicing	23	4
knowledge of staff	18	8
service charges	22	3
provision of information	15	8
response times	11	14
updates on work in progress	10	14
claiming	12	13

considered ceasing to use an agent, and the number of services they were dissatisfied with.

In the following table, LLS refers to Legal Library Services. Swets and Blackwell were in the process of merging at the time of the survey, and were named separately by libraries. Some libraries use more than one agent, as shown. *See Table 3.*

It is those libraries which only use Legal Library Services, the specialist agent, which were shown to be the most satisfied with the service received. There also seems to be a pattern relating to the number of agents used. Where more than one is used, customers are far more likely to be dissatisfied.

table 3: Agents used by satisfied and dissatisfied customers

Satisfied customers	Dissatisfied customers
2 Blackwell	1 EBSCO
9 LLS	2 LLS
2 Swets	2 Rowecom
1 LLS/Swets	1 Swets
	1 unnamed
	1 Blackwell/Swets
	1 EBSCO/Swets
	1 LLS/Swets
	1 Rowecom/Swets
	3 more than 3 agents

Conclusions

The first objective was to discover the level of use of agents by libraries in this particular sector. Although the sample group was relatively small, there was a high response rate within the sample. However, as the group was entirely based in London, it may not be possible to generalise the results to law firms across the country, although the work actually carried out within the libraries is the same. However, taking the results as an indicator, it can be seen that the majority of law firm libraries use an agent of some kind. The conclusions drawn from this research may therefore be very relevant to most of these libraries.

The level of use of different types of agent by the respondent libraries is of particular interest. Of those which use agents, nearly half use the specialist agent, Legal Library Services, either alone or alongside one of the larger agents. As the results have shown, it is those libraries who use this specialist agent alone who were shown to be the most satisfied with the service being received. This may be because the smaller agent has been able to focus on the specific needs of law firm libraries. The customer will then feel that the agent understands the ways in which they work, while the larger agent, with a wide range of customers, is unlikely to be able to focus on a particular sector in this way.

This focus on individual needs relates to the next objective, which was to ascertain whether there is a gap between the perceptions of service providers and their customers. The results have shown that there is something of a gap, though this was not really seen in the agents' replies to the survey, where they were quite in touch with their customers in terms of the services which were important to them. It was seen though, by researching the literature and the promotional material of the large subscription agents, that the focus of many agents at present is the development of new 'value-added' services alongside the traditional ones. However, the value of these for the customers in this sector is not clear. Very few of the respondent libraries claimed to use newer services such as electronic journal licensing or consolidation services. This may be because they do not realise that their agent can provide such services, or because they have already found other means of obtaining these services where necessary. While agents see these services as their future, most law firm libraries still perceive agents merely as vendors of the traditional subscription services. It is therefore important that the intentions of the larger agents are communicated to their customers before they begin to feel neglected as non-purchasers of these new services.

Another objective was to see if there was a pattern to any dissatisfaction that became apparent in the survey. As we have seen, customers using larger subscription agents were more dissatisfied with the service received than those who used specialist agents. Libraries were also dissatisfied where they used a number of agents instead of just one. This dissatisfaction may be for various reasons, such as being able to compare the services of each and therefore finding them to vary greatly in quality. However,

the greatest problem is likely to be that the library is duplicating effort in having to maintain a relationship with a number of agents. This defeats the primary object of using an agent, to reduce the amount of work for the library and its organisation. Where a library maintains contact with a number of agents, this is not far from maintaining contact with a multitude of publishers.

By looking at which types of agent the libraries are most satisfied with, another objective of the review has been discussed: which agents are more successful at developing good business relationships? The specialist agent would seem to be by far the best at building good relationships, since the majority of their customers were very satisfied by their services. As has been noted, this is not necessarily a reflection of the objective quality of their services compared to those of other agents; rather it means that customers are receiving the quality of service which they expect, and are not being disappointed. The agent who specialises by subject area, such as law, can maintain a single contact person who can offer all the services of that agency, because as an organisation they do not attempt to offer all services for all customers. Instead, the smaller agent has already tailored their services to one sector of customers, so it is easier for them to further tailor their services to each individual library, resulting in the customer feeling invested in, and more satisfied with the service being received.

The final objective was to discover any aspects of the relationship which seemed to be causing problems. The key to the relationship seems to be two-way communication. If the needs of the customer are different to the aims of the service provider, the customer should inform them that this is the case. Where the customer makes clear their expectations of the level of service to be provided, then the service provider is obliged to try to fulfil these expectations. However, if they are unable to do so, this needs to be made clear to the customer. As has been seen, problems exist with the service relationship where there is a large gap between the service expected and that received. If each side of the relationship makes clear what is expected, then these expectations are easier to fulfil.

Communication is therefore the key to building that relationship which the ASA guidelines themselves emphasise.[5] The hypothesis was proved by the research, that the relationship between law firm library and subscription agent is under pressure, and there is dissatisfaction as expressed by a number of customers. It is likely that individuals in the agents' organisations are also dissatisfied with the way their customers work. In order for future relationships to be successful, the expectations and intentions of each side need to be made transparent to allow each to fulfil their roles as customer and vendor.

References:

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