

UK PILOT SITE LICENCE INITIATIVE: SITE LICENSING AND THE ROLE OF THE AGENT

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One role I do not wish to play is that of the whingeing agent. Life is often difficult when you are in the middle of the sandwich between publishers and librarians, and adaptability is essential to survival.

We are not against change. Any measures to bring relief to the cash strapped academic community must be welcomed, particularly if as a result, there is more money to spend on new subscriptions.

What we are rather obsessive about is providing a first class service to publishers and librarians, and anything which interferes with this goal does cause us unhappiness, frustration and irritation. It is, I hope, understandable that when major changes are about to happen, we should be consulted first.

Let me give you an analogy. Imagine an overgrown hedge which nobody has been able to keep under control, it just goes on getting bigger and bigger. It is however part of a delicately balanced ecosystem, and home to birds, insects and small animals. Its life is very much controlled by the seasons.

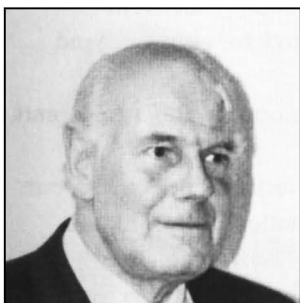
Along comes someone with a new approach to hedge control and some very sharp tools to achieve this. He does a very thorough job. Well, maybe it was not the best time of year to do it. Too bad that the inhabitants of the hedge have been upset and too bad that no one has thought about clearing up the mess left behind. The cutter certainly did not see it as his job.

If we now imagine the hedge represents the growth and cost of journals, and the cutter is the HEFCE, I hope you will see where I am leading you.

About 80% of the journals taken by academic libraries in the UK are handled by subscriptions agents. It is a cyclical operation with peaks and troughs and very clearly defined seasonal activities one of the most important of which is obtaining accurate price information by the end of July, so that this is incorporated in the renewal and invoicing cycle which starts up in September.

So how and when did the news break about the HEFCE initiative? Only very slowly. Some agents were aware that something was in the wind. The official press release was dated 31st August, but the actual information from the three publishers came in late September and October. Even then there were no complete lists of subscriptions involved or even libraries involved, just libraries' main addresses. One manager in a publisher's office said the decision had been made at director level, without any thought for the administration problems (the hedge cuttings).

Renewal invoices were held up for three weeks. There was confusion over which accounts were HEFCE funded and difficulty



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in establishing the correct rate and terms for agents. At the Frankfurt Book Fair in October agents were still trying to resolve the problems with the publishers. Manual checking and cross checking was involved. Many hundreds of hours of extra work, at the busiest time of the year. Somehow, all concerned managed to pull through, but it was a miracle.

The lessons learnt. The key is planning in advance with operations staff, who with their expert knowledge can address the problems and find the solutions. Timing is also very important.

What benefits could have ensued had agents been involved in the HEFCE talks at the outset?

1. Agents could have provided more accurate and definitive address lists than the publishers.
2. Changes could have been made to agents' systems (especially for prices) at an earlier stage, ensuring that customers were invoiced at the correct rate first time.
3. If they had been included, or represented throughout, they would have been in a better position to advise customers, who naturally turn to agents with questions. In most cases, agents were just in the dark.

What are the financial implications for agents, once all the extra set up costs have been absorbed? One crucial issue is whether the agents discount is calculated on the full price or the cheaper HEFCE rate. Obviously, if it is the latter then the agent loses revenue. Only three publishers are involved at present. If the scheme really takes off and other major publishers are involved, then the agents face a very severe loss of revenue which will drop straight through to the bottom line. One publisher is giving discount off the full price.

We believe the Site Licence experiment will provide a model for future licences to consortia. If it does, then there will always be room for the agent because there are a lot of publishers to be paid. Different consortia will want slightly different licences and individual libraries may need to tie the paper to the electronic journal access. We believe that they would prefer agents to do this for them.

In our view the Site Licence for electronic products should be strongly supported. It provides a

standard in a very variable field. If there is a financial advantage for libraries to be gained from the licence, the agents must support this. We should also be trying to ensure that the supply of material is available from a variety of sources to avoid monopolistic practices developing.

There seems to be some doubt whether the site licence allows access from individual publishers' servers or just through BIDS onto JANET. If the former, then agents will be required since there will be thousands of publishers, all with different addresses and access codes etc. Some one will still have to pay them and collect the money from the universities. I understand Blackwell is using a BIDS/ICL system. (STeaMline) Academic is using the ICL system which they are calling IDEAL, and Institute of Physics Publishing (IOPP) is using its own: three publishers, three different ways of accessing even without considering how they handle pass words.

As far as we know no consortia has a single billing address. Individual organisations are still buying but consortia are negotiating the deal. Agents, therefore, have the opportunity to become involved in the distributing of electronic journals as well as provide their traditional role. In an expanding world there is also scope for marketing electronic journals to libraries and users as well as password control, URL authority files, technical support and training.

We believe that librarians are anxious that agents remain involved. Our members report that librarians are finding life increasingly difficult, with academics pestering them about electronic journals, and more and more publishers announcing electronic products in different shapes and forms. They are looking to the agent to announce a new product or service which addresses the problem of different publishers. A single source for electronic and administrative matters.

All in all, we see more opportunities for agents, not fewer.

One of the regular advertisers on Fox FM, our local commercial radio station in Oxford, is a consumer goods store called Tempo. Their advertising jingle is "Before you sign on the dotted line talk to..." the subscription agents. I am sure none of us want to repeat the traumas of last autumn.