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Profiling Vendor Performance

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Giving a single wholesaler virtually all of the Knox College Library's firm orders, in return for promises of better delivery and discount, necessitated a change in the method of evaluating wholesaler performance. Unable to compare our vendor with his competitors, we instead attempted to profile the vendor's performance, coding the firm orders by response time in weeks and then arranging them by accounts (or subject areas) and by publishers. This method allowed us to identify specific strengths and weaknesses in our vendor's stock and to determine how well he could serve the particular needs of the library. About thirty-six hundred orders in twenty-nine accounts (or subject areas) and forty trade and academic publishers were analyzed, with the results indicating that, despite the vendor's claims for the comprehensiveness of his stock, in fact, only 40 to 50 percent of our orders could be filled from his stock, and, furthermore, his performance with regard to both subjects and publishers varied as much as 50 percent. The findings suggest that order periods should be shortened from twenty or twenty-four weeks to sixteen or twelve weeks to encourage delivery and that a vendor's performances with specific subjects and publishers should be considered before placing orders.

Heretofore most evaluation of jobbers, suppliers, and wholesalers has been comparative — either of vendors to publishers¹ or domestic dealers to one another.² Although the effect of differing subjects or publishers is sometimes noted in passing (medical versus nonmedical books,³ or *BIP* versus non-*BIP* titles⁴), most studies concentrate on delivery and discount (whether in theory,⁵ or in practice⁶). Insofar as we know, no one has attempted an analysis of vendor performance by subject and publisher, the way a dealer attempts to profile a library for an approval program.

In 1981, the Knox College Library was splitting about half of its firm orders between two major jobbers in closest geographical proximity (one in Momence, Illinois, and the other in Bridgeton, Missouri) and sending the other half to some two hundred publishers directly. Early in 1982, in order to reduce the number of invoices the publisher-direct orders produced, the library concluded an agreement with one of its two major suppliers which would give that wholesaler virtually all (93 percent) of the library's firm orders, both domestic and foreign, in return for a promise of better delivery and discount. For the remaining 7 percent (260 titles), we were instructed to place orders with six other dealers: an art retailer, a paperback publisher, and a record dealer in New York, a Spanish-language retailer in San Diego, a Parisian exporter, and a London bookseller.

This consolidation necessitated a change in the evaluation procedures, since we could no longer compare our vendor's performance to a competitor's as recommended by Melcher.⁷ We had certain subjective impressions (that recently reviewed titles were easier to obtain than replacement titles, or, as Ford has noted,⁸ that titles from commercial publishers were easier to obtain than those from academic presses), but these impressions were difficult to verify, and we began to feel the need for a report more sophisticated than one which measured only response time and discount.

Since we were in the habit of sorting our statistics file by account and publisher, a folder from our major vendor describing his approval program, which used a list of subject descriptors

and included a list of preferred publishers, suggested the design of the new report. If we could code the firm orders by response time in weeks and then arrange them by accounts (subject areas) and publishers, the elements of the dealer's performance would become clear. After seeing these elements grouped by weeks, we might know better whether we would like to see them in larger blocks (semimonthly, monthly, or bimonthly) also.

Early in 1983, the director of the college's Data Processing Center wrote two short programs that permitted us to do this. The first calculated a time-period code by subtracting the date ordered from the date received and inserted the result into each record of the statistics file. The length of the time period could be one or several weeks, at our convenience. The second printed the titles of a specified dealer from the edited statistics file, which had been sorted by the code and subarranged by account or publisher, and summed the number of titles of each time period. By the end of the fiscal year, we had gathered enough data to test our impressions. We examined 3,621 orders in twenty-nine accounts, or subject areas, paying particular attention to the forty publishers we thought to be most valuable to either an academic or public library. Although we used a computer, there is no reason that the method could not be used with edge-notched cards to indicate response time in weeks and alphabetized within each group by account or publisher, realphabetizing if the file is blocked in longer periods.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

VENDOR'S OVERALL PERFORMANCE

What we discovered as the result of our efforts confirmed some of our initial subjective impressions: 224 of 233 titles (96 percent) ordered from the one-week account (titles of contemporary interest selected from *Library Journal*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*) were delivered within twenty weeks, while only 78 of 147 titles (53 percent) ordered from the replacement account were received in a similar period. It also became apparent, however, that not all commercial publishers were equally easy, nor all academic presses equally difficult to obtain. Despite the dealer's claims for the comprehensiveness of his stock, his performance with regard to both subjects and publishers varied a good deal.

Since almost all of the library's firm orders were for titles identified in the major reviewing sources (*Choice* for most departmental orders, and *Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly* for most general orders) and, in any case, all were for titles then in print, we anticipated speedy fulfillment; but, in fact, of the 3,621 firm orders sent to the vendor in 1982-83, only 1,790 (about half) were filled within ten weeks, and within the entire twenty-week-plus order period, the dealer supplied only 2,924 titles (81 percent). We were still concerned that the vendor could fill only four out of five orders, just as we had been the previous year with a cancel-if-not-received-in-sixteen-weeks policy; but also we were now concerned with the pattern of fulfillment we found, illustrated in figure 1. Apparently only about 40 to 50 percent of our orders could be filled from stock, that is, within two or three months, while 30 to 40 percent required several months additional handling time.

Our experience from the previous year had suggested that the lengthening of the firm order period from three or four months to five or six months insured only that the last 10 percent came in later than ever, and the data in table 1 support that conclusion. To compel its vendor to provide more expeditious service, a library might well consider shortening its order period from twenty or perhaps twenty-four weeks to sixteen or even twelve weeks rather than extending it. This action would allow a library to reorder the unfilled titles from competing dealers before the

unprofitable later weeks of an extended order period.

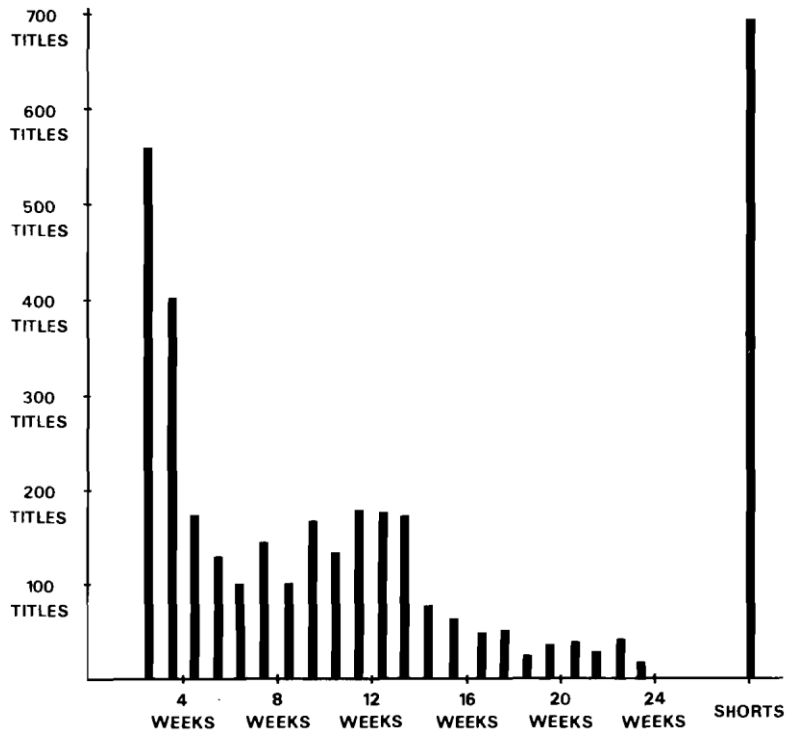


Figure 1 Graph of Vendor Performance by Weeks

TABLE 1 VENDOR PERFORMANCE BY WEEKS

	No. of Titles	Cumulated Total	Cumulated Percent
Third week	561	561	15
Fourth week	404	965	27
Fifth week	175	1,140	31
Sixth week	131	1,271	35
Seventh week	100	1,371	38
Eighth week	148	1,519	42
Ninth week	100	1,619	45
Tenth week	171	1,790	49
Eleventh week	137	1,927	53
Twelfth week	178	2,105	58
Thirteenth week	177	2,282	63
Fourteenth week	174	2,456	68
Fifteenth week	81	2,537	70
Sixteenth week	66	2,603	72
Seventeenth week	51	2,654	73
Eighteenth week	53	2,707	75
Nineteenth week	31	2,738	76
Twentieth week	41	2,779	77
Twenty-first week	46	2,825	78
Twenty-second week	33	2,858	79
Twenty-third week	47	2,905	80
Twenty-fourth week	19	2,924	81
Not received	697	3,621	100

We were able to test this thesis in January when 274 orders unfilled by our major vendor were placed with six competing dealers, who were not told that we had previously tried to obtain the titles from another vendor. Of these 274 orders, some 103 (38 percent) were filled in ten weeks and 165 (60 percent) were filled in twenty weeks. One of these vendors, the one whose services were severely curtailed upon reaching agreement with our major vendor, managed to supply within ten weeks 21 of 43 titles (49 percent) from the orders sent to him; and another vendor, from his eastern affiliate in Blackwood, New Jersey, was also able to provide in twenty weeks 26 of 37 titles (70 percent). The 274 orders placed with the six different dealers represented almost 40 percent of the 697 titles unfilled by our major vendor. Had all of the unfilled orders been similarly placed and filled at the rate the six dealers averaged, we could have received 3,344 titles from the 3,621 orders (92 percent). As things were, use of the six vendors helped us to augment total fulfillment by 4 percent. We believe this performance indicated that our major vendor could, at a minimum, have improved his performance by 4 percent, and, were he to work as hard as his competitors all year long, by 11 percent — since we are confident that he had as much access to the publishers of the titles he did not stock as the six dealers had.

RESULTS BY ACCOUNTS

After compiling the data in table 1, we decided to examine the performance after ten weeks and after twenty weeks. For convenience, we have also arranged the accounts and publishers into four distinct performance groups in tables 2 and 3.

Titles from three accounts or subject areas (the one-week account, philosophy and religion, and psychology) were readily available more than half of the time and could eventually be obtained a little more than nine-tenths of the time. We characterized this as the best performance.

Eleven accounts or subject areas (audiovisual account, economics and business administration, English, French, history, international relations, the librarian's account, physical education and athletics, the reference account, technical services account, and theater and speech communications) were readily available half the time and could eventually be obtained more than three-fourths of the time. We characterized this performance, which was also typical of our vendor's overall performance, as average.

However, five other accounts or subject areas (biology, chemistry, education, physics, and Spanish) were readily available less than half the time, although they could eventually be obtained a little more than four-fifths of the time. We characterized this performance as slow.

And finally, ten accounts or subject areas (art, classics, geology, German, mathematics and computer science, music, political science, the replacement account, Russian, and sociology and anthropology) were readily available less than half the time and could eventually be obtained only a little more than two-thirds of the time. We characterized this as the poorest performance.

RESULTS BY PUBLISHER

Publications from five commercial houses (Academic Press, Basic Books, Doubleday, Knopf, and St. Martin's Press) and eight outstanding academic presses (Indiana University, Johns Hopkins University, Princeton University, Southern Illinois University, University of Chicago, University of Minnesota, University of North Carolina, and Yale University) were readily available from the vendor more than half the time and could eventually be obtained a little more than nine-tenths of the time. We characterized this performance as the best (see table 3).

Material from eight large commercial publishers (Barnes & Noble, Harper, Lexington Books, Little, Brown, Norton, Random House, Viking Press, and Westview Press), together with two outstanding academic presses (Columbia University and Cornell University), was readily available about two-thirds of the time and could eventually be obtained more than three-fourths of the time. We characterized this performance as average.

However, publications of seven large commercial houses (Pergamon Press, Plenum Publishing, Praeger Publishers, Prentice-Hall, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Springer-Verlag, and John Wiley & Sons) and four outstanding academic presses (Cambridge University, New York University, University of California, and University of Texas) were readily available less than half the time, although they could eventually be obtained a little more than four-fifths of the time. We characterized this performance as slow.

TABLE 2 EVALUATION OF VENDOR PERFORMANCE BY ACCOUNT

Account Titles	Orders Placed	Orders Received			
		In 10 Weeks		In 20 Weeks	
		No.	%	No.	%
<i>Group 1—Best performance*</i>					
One-week account	233	204	88	224	96
Philosophy and religion	121	83	69	118	98
Psychology	127	72	57	120	94
<i>Group 2—Second best performance*</i>					
Audiovisual account	7	4	57	6	86
Economics and business administration	142	90	63	127	89
English	250	143	57	195	78
French	26	21	81	23	88
History	265	145	55	227	86
International relations	145	80	55	124	86
Librarian's account	632	329	52	491	78
Physical education and athletics	9	7	78	7	78
Reference account	155	78	50	132	85
Technical services account	11	6	55	9	82
Theater and speech communications	85	45	53	71	84
<i>Group 3—Third best performance*</i>					
Biology	96	42	44	85	89
Chemistry	36	16	44	32	89
Education	72	33	46	65	90
Physics	64	19	30	53	83
Spanish	49	18	37	43	88
<i>Group 4—Poorest performance*</i>					
Art	50	22	44	35	70
Classics	128	18	14	84	66
Geology	158	44	28	113	72
German	2	0	0	0	0
Mathematics and computer science	166	67	40	128	77
Music	69	28	41	54	78
Political science	150	54	36	109	73
Replacement account	147	34	23	78	53
Russian	28	8	29	18	64
Sociology and anthropology	198	80	40	152	77

*Group 1: vendor supplied more than 50 percent of the orders in ten weeks and more than 90 percent in twenty weeks. Group 2: vendor supplied 50 percent or more of the orders in ten weeks but less than 90 percent in twenty weeks. Group 3: vendor supplied less than 50 percent of the orders in ten weeks but more than 80 percent in twenty weeks. Group 4: vendor supplied less than 50 percent of the orders in ten weeks and less than 80 percent in twenty weeks.

And finally, books published by three commercial houses (W. H. Freeman, Greenwood Press, and McGraw-Hill) and by three outstanding academic presses (Harvard University, Oxford University, and University of Illinois) were readily available only a third of the time or less and could eventually be obtained only about two-thirds of the time. We characterized this as the least satisfactory performance.

The forty publishers of table 3 form a core of about half the 3,621 firm orders from the twenty-nine accounts of table 2 and, together with the exclusions noted in the second paragraph (the modifiers of the vendor's profile), comprise the elements of a delivery capability statement after the model of a Boolean literature search strategy.

TABLE 3 EVALUATION OF VENDOR PERFORMANCE BY PUBLISHER

Publisher Name	Orders Placed	Orders Received			
		In 10 Weeks No.	%	In 20 Weeks No.	%
<i>Group 1—Best performance*</i>					
Academic Press	81	41	51	78	96
Basic Books	20	17	85	19	95
Doubleday & Co.	26	20	77	25	96
Indiana University Press	38	35	92	36	95
Johns Hopkins University Press	39	25	64	35	90
Alfred A. Knopf	42	34	81	39	93
Princeton University Press	63	42	67	57	90
Southern Illinois University Press	11	10	91	11	100
St. Martin's Press	60	50	83	56	93
University of Chicago Press	50	38	76	48	96
University of Minnesota Press	11	9	82	11	100
University of North Carolina Press	12	11	92	12	100
Yale University Press	49	30	61	46	94
<i>Group 2—Second best performance*</i>					
Barnes & Noble Books	26	19	73	23	88
Columbia University Press	26	16	62	23	88
Cornell University Press	38	23	61	34	89
Harper & Row	48	33	69	42	88
Lexington Books	20	17	85	17	85
Little, Brown & Co.	24	19	79	21	88
W. W. Norton & Co.	32	19	59	27	84
Random House	37	26	70	31	84
Viking Press	25	14	56	19	76
Westview Press	27	15	56	23	85
<i>Group 3—Third best performance*</i>					
Cambridge University Press	110	48	44	97	88
New York University Press	16	7	44	13	81
Pergamon Press	26	8	31	22	85
Plenum Publishing Corp.	19	6	32	19	100
Praeger Publishers	43	19	44	38	88
Prentice-Hall	45	19	42	38	84
Routledge & Kegan Paul	22	8	36	21	95
Springer-Verlag	57	16	28	46	81

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Publisher Name	Orders Placed	Orders Received			
		In 10 Weeks		In 20 Weeks	
		No.	%	No.	%
University of California Press	48	22	46	43	90
University of Texas Press	11	5	45	11	100
John Wiley & Sons	93	41	44	77	83
<i>Group 4—Poorest performance*</i>					
W. H. Freeman & Co.	33	13	39	22	67
Greenwood Press	61	10	16	46	75
Harvard University Press	132	34	26	95	72
McGraw-Hill	28	12	43	22	79
Oxford University Press	118	49	42	88	75
University of Illinois Press	42	9	21	21	50

*Group 1: vendor supplied more than 50 percent of the orders in ten weeks and more than 90 percent in twenty weeks. Group 2: vendor supplied 50 percent or more of the orders in ten weeks but less than 90 percent in twenty weeks. Group 3: vendor supplied less than 50 percent of the orders in ten weeks but more than 80 percent in twenty weeks. Group 4: vendor supplied less than 50 percent of the orders in ten weeks and less than 80 percent in twenty weeks.

CONCLUSION

It is in the interests of every acquisitions or collection development librarian intent on obtaining the best services for the money to develop for each of the dealers serving the library a performance profile that measures the handling of subjects ordered and publishers from which the library customarily orders. The effort will identify the unique strengths and weaknesses of each vendor's stock. No jobber, supplier, or wholesaler can be expected to supply a library with information of this kind. As Lincoln concluded, to do so would be to "give their competition free information."⁹

Unlike evaluations that compare different dealers in the most general terms of fulfillment and delivery, profiling by subjects and publishers enables a librarian to assess a dealer's performance in the particular and, ultimately, to calculate the chances of fulfillment and rates of delivery for any currently-in-print title the library might consider ordering from that vendor. Such knowledge can profitably be put to use to enhance overall fulfillment and delivery.

Vendor performance profiling which considers subjects and publishers can identify specific segments of a library's acquisitions program in need of additional attention in order to increase fulfillment and delivery. Equipped with this information, the librarian can apply considerable leverage on the vendor's representatives to improve service in specific subject fields. Suggesting to the vendor's representatives that the library might be better served by ordering directly from the publisher can encourage attentiveness to a library's needs.

Vendor profiling provides the librarian with a better understanding of the limitations of a vendor's services than any vendor representative dares to provide. It also indicates that acquisitions and collection development librarians today must learn to take advantage of conditions in what can only be described as a buyer's market. Because jobbers, suppliers, and wholesalers need the business of many libraries, they are obliged to weight their stock toward the subjects and publishers that guarantee quantity sales. Even those with the most comprehensive stock are inclined to handle certain subjects and publishers more than others. The effect for a library is, of course, uneven service. Unless adjusted through alternative methods of fulfillment, this kind of service results in an imbalance in the development of the collection. It is, therefore,

necessary for the librarian to take the initiative, using the information from vendor profiles to make sensible decisions to satisfy the library's needs.

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