Sense and Sensibility — Saving yourself into the poor house...

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Saving yourself into the poor house....

Perhaps it might be a good thing, especially when thinking about life four or five years down the road, to look more closely at these tempting small "incremental expenditures" for "Big Deals." "Saving yourself into the poorhouse" is what my mother — or perhaps it was my grandmother — used to call it.

Just spend a bit more to get lots and lots of good stuff.

I remember life as a teen-teenager allocated a clothing budget of $25 a month. I went out to buy a sweater. I came back with two. Kind of a lot of money — more than I had planned to spend for sweaters. But it was two-for-one! I had saved a lot of money. Well, yes, said my mother — you could go out and buy some more and save twice as much. You could save yourself "right into the poor house."

I somehow doubt that they had poor houses in southern California in the 1920s. Or on Nebraska farms thirty years earlier. But my mother and grandmother understood the temptations of small incremental expenditures.

Sometimes such an offer is a bargain. And sometimes it is just a temptation to spend more money than you really planned to on something that you would not have otherwise have bought. At least in some instances, it might have been prudent to resist temptation.

Publisher packages are seen as bargains — they lower the per title cost of the stuff you were planning to buy by spreading the cost over an additional batch of stuff you weren't planning to buy — but which users are very likely to find useful. You are, of course, also committing to continuing to buy the stuff you have been buying, whether or not you continue to find it useful, and to paying a further incremental cost each year on something labeled "inflation."

Having two sweaters is great. Then there are the socks that didn't get bought. Is the extra sweater worth foregoing new socks? I thought so. (Even in Albuquerque, where the usefulness of sweaters is limited.) But at least some of the time, it might be better to have only one sweater and an ample supply of socks. And I certainly would not have been so naive as to sign up for a two-sweaters-a-year plan — at least sweaters are a one-time expenditure!

In 1996, the *Salt Lake Tribune* published an article called "Librarians draw a line in the Stacks." The article describes the decision of the **University of Utah Libraries** to cap expenditures with the most expensive publishers. There were a number we objected to, but **Elsevier**, being then as now the biggest, got the most attention. At any rate, we declared that we would not pay for the same number of titles any more dollars per year than we paid that year — we would refuse to continue to pay more and more for titles which were already costing more than they ought.

We canceled serials that year, and have canceled most years since — and we have used the savings not only to meet budget shortfalls but also to reinvest in several hundred new subscriptions to titles we had not previously held.

We have done this in a number of ways — varying tactics from year to year so as to examine over time all the titles in our collection. Some years we have looked at titles costing over $100 a use. Or at titles with high subscription prices which appear to have less than five uses a year. Or at titles regardless of subscription price, including very inexpensive ones, which show no use at all. We have never actually targeted titles on the basis of the publisher's name.

Each year we have publicized a review list of titles we are considering cancelling. Some years we have also had a "watchful waiting" list — populated with titles which we might need to consider for cancellation in years to come. In all but the leanest years, we have actually canceled only titles to whose loss no objection was registered. (We do, of course, talk to faculty about paying attention to prices before deciding whether or not to object.)

We are feeling pretty good about these decisions. We don't have the additional titles which would have come with the packages, but we do have lots of other new serials titles and electronic packages selected on the basis of user requests, reviews of the collection for accreditation studies, and other such criteria. And our faculty seem pleased with the library and to feel that our services have — for lots of reasons, of course, not all related to collections — been steadily improving.

So what if we had not taken the road we did?

I was trying to figure out how the **University of Utah** might feel if, in 1996, we had, instead of drawing a "Line in the Stacks," signed a few "Big Deals." Would we be pleased, or would we be less pleased? Would our collection be better and our faculty better served?

I expect we would feel, whichever road we took, that we had made the right choice. These things aren't so clear-cut that it is obvious, even in retrospect, what the right choice is or was. And this is not a black or white thing — there are benefits and drawbacks to any given set of choices. Besides, given all the work and angst put into such decisions, the desire to believe, and even to find the numbers to prove, that the choice made was the right choice, is likely to be strong enough to ensure the conclusion.

Suppose though, that we had taken the other road and signed a "Big Deal" with **Elsevier**. Between **Marriott Library**, our main campus library, and the **Eccles Health Science Library** we were subscribing to 480 journals. Out of about 1,200.

A decision to sign a "Big Deal" for all 1,200 titles would have been a decision to add 720 new subscriptions. (And to promise to keep 480.)

What would we be paying for these subscriptions? How many uses would we be seeing? How could we compare cost and uses for these 720 subscriptions to costs and uses for other purchases which could have been made for the same amount?

When we subscribe to new journals, we certainly hope use will go up. And, as has been widely documented in "Big Deal" libraries, it does. What would that use have been on our campus?

continued on page 82

Sense and Sensibility
from page 81

For the **Marriott Library**, although our total serials list is much bigger, actual paid subscriptions have hovered around the 5,000 title mark. So 720 is a big number. It's a substantial increase in the number of subscriptions. One would expect a proportional increase in the number of serial uses, whatever the source of the new titles.

Our neighbor, the **University of Nevada at Reno**, says their use of the **Elsevier** all-titles package splits 60%/40% when looking at browses of previously non-subscribed titles as compared to browses for titles which were held in print. If you check actual downloads of articles, it reverses. 30% of the downloads are from titles which were not held in print and 70% are from titles which were in the print collection. So how would this look on our campus?

We probably had more **Elsevier** titles than **Reno**, so we'd need to find a "Big Deal" campus similar to ours — an RU 1, with a health sciences library — whose expenditures ranked, as do ours, in the 40s in the ARL rankings. Then we could look at the number of uses of our present **Elsevier** subscriptions and, using **Reno's** or other's findings, project what use of the new titles might look like.

What would the 720 titles be costing us? This is harder.

We just finished a publisher-blind cancellation based on low use/high cost. Of the $383,000 we cut, about $100,000 turned out to be from **Elsevier**. We couldn't have cut those titles had we signed a "Big Deal," so perhaps it is fair to count this sum towards the cost of the 720 new titles. As well as dollars for **Elsevier** titles which were canceled in other years since 1996.

Had we signed a "Big Deal," we would have been paying an annual price increase. Some percentage of the increase since 1996 could be attributed to the new titles. We were sending **Elsevier** $750,000 in 1996 — and are sending about the same amount this year.

I have no idea what kind of cap we could have negotiated, but 4% of $750,000 would be around $30,000 a year. 7% would be $50,000. We've had expenditures capped for 8 years, so that's a tidy additional sum we would be paying. Part of that would be for titles we find good value for the money, so you wouldn't count the whole figure — but some part of it.

On the other hand, the $100,000 in **Elsevier** titles we cut this year and the amounts canceled in other years had to be cut — so if we hadn't cut these, we would have cut other titles — almost by definition titles from less expensive publishers (since in our studies **Elsevier** was then the most expensive per-title major publisher on our list). So the total number of subscriptions lost from **Marriott's** list would be higher than it is. And surely the loss of those titles ought to be weighed against the gain in new **Elsevier** titles.

What would a "Big Deal" be costing us currently? I don't know. But there are at least four sorts of costs to consider:

— dollars we would have paid and would be committed to paying in the future for annual increase costs

— dollars we would be paying for titles we would have liked to have cut

— we would not have the new journals purchased with dollars realized from cutting expensive titles

— we would not have some of the non-**Elsevier** serial titles we have retained which would have had to be used to make up the budget shortfalls requiring cuts.

"Big Deals" do have incremental costs. Those incremental costs may start out as small ones. But they don't stay small.

Sometimes such offers are true bargains — when they cover material the library truly wants to purchase or when the titles are so inexpensive that bundling them produces a lower overall cost than choosing title by title (think **MUSE** and **BioOne**.). And sometimes it is just a temptation to spend more money than you really planned to on something that you would not have otherwise have bought.

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