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# Individual Article Purchase: Catching the Wave of the Future, Or Getting Pounded on the Reef

*Douglas K. Bates, Dean, Angelo and Jennette Volpe Library, Tennessee Tech University*

## Abstract

For many libraries, particularly small to midsize academic libraries, journals have placed significant strains on the acquisitions budget. For fiscal year 2012–2013 the Volpe Library at Tennessee Tech University faced a significant materials budget shortfall. Rather than simply cutting titles to cover the shortfall or asking the administration for more money, we concluded that the existing system of acquiring and delivering information packaged in journals was not sustainable for us. Therefore, we embarked on a yearlong process to develop a different way of providing article information that would more efficiently use the budget that we have. The process we have developed focuses more heavily on purchasing individual articles, using the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) product Get it Now, in an attempt to maximize the impact of our budget resources. This paper describes the issues prompting the change and the process that was used to prepare a plan to meet the budget challenge. It also includes a description of the final plan, the implementation of the plan and early results that are available on the operation of the new process.

## Tennessee Tech University

Tennessee Tech is a comprehensive Masters, large university with a student body of 11,000. It is one of six universities in the Tennessee Board of Regents system. The challenge for the Volpe Library at Tennessee Tech is to provide the faculty and students with the information they need for research and teaching on a modest-sized library budget that is not going to be getting bigger anytime soon. In the spring of 2011, it became clear through a series of events that we needed a plan to meet this challenge. This paper will discuss briefly the development, the nature, and the implementation of the plan as well as some preliminary results.

## A Series of Events

In the spring of 2011, three events prompted us to look at our acquisitions practices. First, we looked carefully at what we purchased and how it was being used. We saw that we were spending \$449,000 on 234 journals from five publishers, which raised the question, what are we getting for our \$449,000? From those 234 titles we could expect to “buy” about 31,000 articles. Looking at the use of those 234 titles over a 3-year period we found that, on average, there were 6,454 full-text downloads or about 21% of available articles. Fifty-four of the 234 titles accounted for over half

of the full-text downloads. There were many titles that had little or no use. So one of the major issues we were facing is that we spend a lot of money for articles we do not use.

Not long after our investigation into journal use, a professor from the Chemical Engineering department reported that the library did not have enough journals to support her research and asked us to add 69 new titles. This request raised several questions. There is a vast amount of information out there. How does one decide which journals to buy? And if after subscribing to a certain collection of journals a member of the faculty or a department decides they need more or different titles, how does one respond to their changing information needs in the context of a system based on annual subscriptions to journal titles? How do you support the potentially wide variety of research interests when you throw in graduate students and then undergraduate research? Then, a second major issue was that under the current system, we could not supply all of the information needed by the faculty and graduate students by relying on subscriptions to journals.

Not long after the visit from the professor of chemical engineering, our head of Acquisitions announced that we would be short \$100,000 for the 2011–2012 fiscal year. We have made six

journal cuts in 20 years, and since 2006 we seem to have entered a pattern of needing to cut titles every 3 years. The philosophy has been to make the cuts deep enough so that we do not have to do it every year, but even so, it looks like every 3 years. I created a spreadsheet to test different budget scenarios, including different rates of inflation and levels of budget cuts. This allowed me to calculate how much needed to be cut in order for us to remain in the black for various periods of time. This spreadsheet became a useful tool to test the impact of different alternatives as we explored alternative methods of spending our money. So the third major issue was we cannot afford the titles that we have.

These three events revealed three major issues. We spend a significant amount of money on material that is not used; under the current system, we cannot afford the information needed by the faculty by relying on subscriptions to journals; and we cannot afford our current collection of journals. These issues are not unique to us, but we needed to address in order to be able to support our faculty and students.

### **Important Conclusions**

After studying the issues, we came to some important conclusions. For a school our size and with the aspirations that we have as an institution, the current system is not sustainable. The faculty is not getting what they want or need. We have to find a more efficient way to spend our limited materials budget. We need more flexibility. We cannot afford to pay for material that is not used.

Based on these conclusions we needed to find a different system to supply our faculty and students with article literature within the confines of our budget. The issue was presented to the Deans' Council, which included the Provost and the Vice President for Budget and Finance. It was not our intent to ask for more money. Our recommendation was to form a team of faculty and librarians and spend the next year studying the issue and develop a different way of acquiring and providing information to the faculty and graduate students. We had about eight months to investigate and create a plan or somehow deal

with the anticipated shortfall in the budget. In the early part of 2012, we would return to the Deans' Council and present our recommendations.

### **Development Process**

To create the team, the deans identified representatives from each college. Each member of the faculty agreed to work on the team with the understanding that we would be meeting often throughout the summer and fall and that there would be work outside the regularly scheduled meeting times.

From the library, we had everyone from public services plus key staff from other areas. As we progressed in our meetings, we invited members of the University's purchasing office to ensure that whatever discussed regarding purchasing would comply with university policies.

In order to meet our goal, we considered several important issues. One of the most significant parts of the development process was the investigation of the purchasing options that were currently available. Also included in our discussion was as much information as we could gather on the current use of our products. Another important area of investigation was a review of accrediting bodies and the standards that they might have for library collections in relation to the various disciplines. We also needed a comprehensive picture of what we had and how it was acquired. We also focused on the library budget. Using the budget spreadsheet, we were able to test various scenarios. Finally, we wanted to know if other libraries were facing similar challenges and how they were handling them.

Early in our discussions, we started considering the feasibility of relying more heavily on buying articles individually as opposed to subscribing to journals. We investigated the single article purchase programs of various publishers. We considered, among other things, price, flexibility, ease of use, and terms of use. We also learned of and investigated the Get it Now service from the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC). We came to the conclusion that the Get it Now service had the advantage of providing the material through one service, avoiding the confusion of presenting the

patrons with multiple platforms. The coverage included four of the five publishers which would be subject to our journal cancellations.

As we investigated various options and began to focus on single article purchase, we also wanted to know as much as possible about faculty information needs. We considered also investigating student information needs but ultimately did not pursue it due to lack of time.

Because of time and the effort involved, we did not gather as much information from faculty as we wanted to or would have been beneficial.

Investigating the needs of the faculty was crucial because whatever was developed needed to meet as many of their needs as possible. We conducted a survey of the faculty through a questionnaire that was sent to all 500 faculty and received 94 responses. Although the response rate was not as high as we would have liked, we did gather some valuable information particularly from faculty comments. Because we were seriously considering single article purchase, one of the survey questions raised the issue of using this method of supplying information. Several of the comments related to that question raised concerns that we as a team shared and needed to be considered. Four of the main concerns, as stated in the comments were:

- “How do I know if it is an article I want or has something I want without reading the entire article?”
- “Not being able to browse an entire journal is too restrictive and won’t allow the faculty to be as thorough as needed.”
- “A potential black hole for funding, if researchers are allowed to download (purchase) articles without limit. If researchers are given a limit, how is that limit decided? “
- “What is the turnaround time for getting the articles?”

For each of these issues, subscribing to full-text journals is arguably superior to the existing single article purchase process as exemplified by the Get it Now service. However that superiority comes

with a cost and would only apply to those relatively few journals to which we could subscribe.

Along with comments raising concerns, there were other comments expressing support and pointing to possible advantages of single article purchase. Some of those advantages are expressed in the following comments:

- “If the cost would be similar then individual articles would probably benefit better than buying whole journal subscription that only benefit a few.”
- “I am usually looking for individual articles, not the contents of an entire journal.”
- “As long as we have access to a wide selection of journals and not just one publisher.”

These comments speak to the advantage of flexibility and only paying for the material that is used.

Among the comments from the faculty, there was one that was particularly intriguing for what it said about what the future might be of acquisitions, information, and libraries. An engineering professor commented, “TTU's limited resources have never been an impediment to instruction and research with the Internet around (which has leveled the playing field) in my opinion.” I wonder how true that is today and for how many people, and if we will see more of this in the future.

### **Materials Acquisitions Recommendations**

After all of the research and deliberation, we decided to move forward with a much heavier investment in individual article purchase. To facilitate the purchase of individual articles, we chose the Get it now product. Get it Now covers four of the five publishers of the journal titles we were planning to cancel. The cost was reasonable compared to the pay-per-view prices from the publishers. The turnaround time seemed adequate, and the publishers’ offerings would be searchable through the Summon discovery software and even Google Scholar was a

possibility. To fund the transition to more dependence on individual article purchase, we would cancel low-use journals and other products. We proposed to allocate \$100,000 for purchase of articles. In order to sustain the budget in the future, we would request that savings from the cancelations and the anticipated lower expenditures would be carried over.

There were two key components in the move to a larger role for individual article purchase: discovery and delivery. Access to a wider range of journal articles and delivery of those articles in a reasonable time are important advantages that offset the loss of more immediate and direct access to a narrower selection of full-text journals. To provide discovery, we rely on Summon, our Serials Solutions discovery product. Another avenue of discovery is through Google Scholar which some of our faculty prefer over Summon. For delivery, we would use Get it Now and would also rely heavily on Interlibrary Loan through ILLiad.

### **Issues to Consider**

Once the broad structure of the plan was formed, we had several issues to consider. There were several discussions on whether or not we should charge faculty and graduate students for articles delivered through Get it Now. We came to the conclusion that we should charge to reinforce the idea that information has its costs. However, after repeated attempts, we could not make it work because of CCC's reliance on PayPal and the policy of our Business Office against working with PayPal.

Get it Now allows for either mediated or direct access. Mediated access would let us more closely manage the requests and avoid the potential problem of "runaway ordering." On the other hand, unmediated access provides an experience closer to direct access of full text. Therefore, we chose direct access to provide freedom for the patrons to order and receive documents 24/7 and have the experience as close to a subscription as possible.

We also needed to decide who would have access to the system. We choose to limit access to faculty

and graduate students because that was the biggest perceived need. When patrons encounter an article available through Get it Now, they have a choice of ILL or Get it Now. The wording of the choice indicates the service is for faculty and graduate students only. However, there is no easy way to authenticate, so we depend on the honor system and after-the-fact monitoring.

We began our discussions about marketing the new service with the idea that we needed to mount a large campaign to reach as many people as possible. However, events have changed our thinking. The effect of implementation will be felt gradually since most of the cancellations do not take effect until the end of the 2013. Also the scope of the change in terms of loss of access is potentially small since we are only canceling 182 titles all of which were low use. Our marketing has been through contacts with faculty through individual visits and college and department meetings.

It is important to gather feedback from patrons about the effectiveness of the service and how satisfied they are with the change. We are developing mechanisms to gather this feedback from faculty on the use of the program, but so far have not created a systematic method for gathering and evaluating feedback. There is anecdotal evidence that those that have used the system are happy.

The recommendations of the team were presented to the Deans' Council in early 2012. We explained in detail how the service would work and the advantages that we anticipated from providing single article purchase from a larger selection of journals than was available previously through journal subscriptions. We asked for and received permission to carry over the surplus from the cancellations from year to year. With this available to us we calculate that the system will be sustainable at current budget levels for 7 to 9 years.

### **What We Have Seen to Date**

The Get it Now service became available in September of 2013. Faculty and students continue to have access to most of the 182 titles that we

plan to cancel since the majority of the journal cuts will not be finalized until December 2013. We have recorded seven requests through the service. We have also looked at all ILL requests. Through the end of September, we had received 412 ILL requests. Of those requests, 95 also included an option to request the article through Get it Now. Therefore, it appears that of the 102 articles where there was an option to choose either ILL or Get it Now, the patrons chose ILL 95 times and Get it Now seven times.

## **Conclusions**

We cut journal titles and began offering single article purchase because we were spending too much money on material that was not used. Journal subscriptions are not an effective method of spending our budget because we are not able to subscribe to enough titles to satisfy the needs of the faculty and students. Single article purchase is a better mechanism for effectively spending our budget to provide the most relevant information possible for our faculty and students. The Get it Now service provides the effective platform currently available for single article purchase.