

Drinking From the Firehose — Two Responses to “Top 10 Suggestions to Publishers of E-Journals.”

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Column Editor's Note: I am pleased to include here two responses to my column from the April 2006 issue of ATG (pp.70-72). And thanks to the Charleston Report (May/June 2006, p.4) for the instant replay of the essence of that column!

Robert Boissy, Manager of Agent Relations at Springer, and Linda Beebe, Senior Director, PsycINFO, at the American Psychological Association, have taken me up on continuing the conversation. Bob replies directly to my original ten items, while Linda contributes ten of her own. Thanks to them both for their thoughtful observations! — EC

In reply to Eleanor Cook, by Robert Boissy:

1. Sorting of titles. I think this means you want publishers to adopt a policy where they do not have journal titles with initial articles like “The” and “Der” so that you get a cleaner spreadsheet sort on the full title field. Such action would remove the need to include a “sorting title” column in the spreadsheet, which some publishers take the time to do now. Removing the article(s) or using a sorting title avoids the problem where titles beginning with “The” are in the T’s and titles beginning with “Der” are in the D’s. Interior articles are already handled fine in spreadsheet sorts, so “for” sorts before “of,” and so on. While this recommendation sounds good, there is something about putting “The” at the start of a journal title that appeals to the publisher’s sense of exclusivity and selectivity, so I have a feeling that the route to take is to ask for a sorting title column in your lists that leaves off initial articles. Many of your publisher lists may already have such a column,

and it may be hidden on the spreadsheet you receive, so look for it. Popular spreadsheet software will always sort titles beginning with “The” in the T’s.

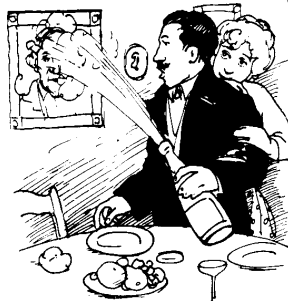
2. Licenses. First of all, we need to decide whether we want simple licenses, or if we want to eliminate li-

censes. Keeping it simple is a somewhat more attainable goal at this point. With the advent of more license sharing and analysis as part of workshops and license expression standards, it seems likely that even if licenses are not shortened appreciably, the elements of the license will become more recognizable and manageable for all. If we ask your lawyers and my lawyers to get together and shorten the document, we are both likely to get a large bill and a longer license. So forget that. However, we ought to be able to get from the 12 pages of terms and conditions you cited to six pages if we work cooperatively. Barring that, we could always use the legal trick of making the document shorter by making the font smaller. One overlooked aspect of licensing is the need for lists of journals and specific financials in the document. I think we need the financials, but I wonder if the lists of journal titles really need to be part of the document. If they do, all larger publishers are doomed to have long licenses.

3. Title changes. In my current position I have had a chance to work with editors considering title changes. I typically try to discourage them unless they meet certain conditions, e.g., the change signals a true change of direction or emphasis for the journal, the change signals a major update from an old research approach to a new one, and the actual wording change to the title is significant. Few publishers understand the cataloging implications, though the fulfillment implications are well understood by the publisher fulfillment staff. This latter group works hard to get the word out about title changes for fear of losing subscriptions due to the change. It is easier to inform the major subscription agents than to inform the universe of libraries. I keep asking myself what role the ISSN agency might play in informing libraries about official title changes. They know when a publisher title change warrants a new ISSN, but they do not know who subscribes. The best they could do is broadcast changes, and then act as a verifying source after the fact.

4. Change of publisher. This is a hot button for those who do sales for publishers, as well as library subscribers and agents. However, it is surprising how low key this kind of information is within the typical publishing

continued on page 81



house. If a journal is lost to another publisher, no one seems eager to document where it went. In some cases, when a society pulls a journal from one publisher and awards it to another, the losing publisher is not told where the journal went; nor does the losing editor always care where the journal went. The losing publisher is not eager to tell the world they lost a journal, and where the journal has gone. However, the new publisher always promotes journals that are won. What does this all mean? It means agents have a proportionately easier time finding the new location of a journal, and a harder/slower time verifying that it truly left the old publisher. But good agents always do both.

5. Coverage. This data normally comes from a combination of the platform access control system where the full text is housed (to let the universe know of what is available), and the sales/licensing records at the publishing house (to know what was bought). Marrying these two sets of data is often not an easy process, and the quality control tends to fall to the sales/licensing staff that have quite a bit of other work to oversee. Having said all this, detailed coverage lists are understood to be important to sales, and will therefore probably end up for most publishers as an improvement to their platform access control systems for e-journals. The details of accessible journals and coverage need to be downloadable at any time from the administrative function of the host platform, much like user statistics.

6. Complicated URLs. Publishers should offer easily downloadable lists of URLs of accessible titles on their e-journal platforms with a choice of URLs. Durable URLs are important. Normally an OpenURL form keyed off the ISSN should be given, as well as a proprietary form. If the ISSN changes, it means a title change, which you want to know about. See item #3. I agree that there is no excuse for forcing the client to change the URL each year just to maintain access.

7. Subscription Agents. Publishers mostly do work with agents, even in the new electronic world, but library clients and consortia must always be offered the option to work directly with a publisher. As long as agents continue to add value for the publishers and libraries, they will remain in their intermediary role. Libraries need to recognize that some publishers do not offer agent commissions. These publishers are freeloading. To the extent that libraries want to keep using agents, libraries should take the freeloading publishers to task. On a separate matter, it has become clear that publishers need to work with agents to significantly improve (automate) the exchange of rate data. Efficiency has been lost in the market due to the proliferation of custom rates.

8. Historic Pricing. This is a complicated issue. The good news is that most progressive serials “deals” allow the library to swap out some subscribed titles, and swap in others, to better meet the ongoing needs of the users. Of course publishers seek to either maintain or in-

crease their revenue from each account each year as best they can. So, it is not so much that publishers are tied to historic lists of specific titles, as it is that they are tied to revenue maintenance. Keep in mind that the electronic journal revolution signaled the end of multiple print subscriptions on most campuses, as well as significant loss of individual subscriptions. The electronic world is a double-edged sword for publishers. As was stated at one session at the recent NASIG conference “someone has to pay for all this electronic convenience.”

9. Usage statistics. Agreed. **CONSER** and **SUSHI** are the only way to go. Audits for **COUNTER** compliance are supposed to ensure uniformity. All journal publishers, regardless of their business model, will succeed or fail based on a combination of their usage statistics and citation data. All anyone can ask is that the statistics are collected fairly, and that a level playing field is maintained.

10. New pricing models. Asking for new pricing models can be camouflage for asking for plain old lower prices. But whatever tactic is adopted, you can be sure publishers hear this message loudly every day. Small and medium-sized publishers with little to lose try a lot of different models, and some are copied widely. But see also item #8. If by “uncomplicated pricing models” we mean going back to models that ignore FTE, size of institution, **Carnegie** Classes, consortium negotiations, i.e., list pricing, most publishers and agents would probably agree. Publishers do still have this simple list price and they generally publish it once per year in their price catalogs. Perhaps we should forget all existing deals and go back to it, and simply focus on making the list price as fair as we can by various means, e.g. some author-side funding, more electronic efficiency, etc. Certainly those business models that rely on a lot of independent data gathering take time to implement. Counting professors in one department, or interns in the hospital, is an obstacle to sales and to user access. Institutional pay per view is basically too unpredictable to budget for the publisher or for the library. The easiest pricing method is simply to charge a fixed percent in relation to the prior year invoice, and ignore list price. The fixed percent could be locked in for multiple years to fit known budget parameters. Such an approach would not be tied to the issuance of annual price lists, and could be billed at any time. Lists of titles included in the price would still be important, but as long as the title lists were fairly consistent from year to year, the billing would be easy. The problem with this model is that it provides a fairly dreary growth picture for the enterprising publisher. I guess we just need to keep working on this one.

And from Linda Beebe:

My Top Ten Actions that would help us serve librarians better.

1. Give us contact information. Libraries often post staff lists, but it is difficult to find exactly whom we should be communicating with for what reason. It would be wonderful if

our customers would update a simple Web form for us once a year (assuming there are changes). Then we’d be providing materials, such as welcome kits, update announcements, and notices of new training materials, to the right people.

2. Tell us when you find something wrong in our products—right away so we can fix it. And tell us when you like something so we can do more like it. We try to ask as often as we can about likes and dislikes, but we don’t reach everyone using our products. At times we have discovered that we have added a feature that simply irritates users. We generally test out any major change in advance, but sometimes minor annoyances pop up, and we want to eliminate them as best we can. This issue is complicated by the fact that our products are available on so many platforms. Although we devote considerable staff time to reviewing the performance of **APA**

products on the various platforms, we may not be aware of some problems. Likewise, if some feature or process is particularly helpful or pleasing, we can learn from that response.

3. Help us navigate your acquisitions process. We hear that acquiring electronic materials is increasingly complex within the library. We want to make sure we’re not adding to the complexity or making it difficult for you to acquire our products. If there are publisher practices that hinder your process, we will try to find a way to make them less burdensome. Although we do attend sessions at library conferences on the subject, we could use a little extra tutoring.

continued on page 82

4. Tell us what you need to write a funding proposal. We understand that many libraries seek funding from a variety of sources in their institution. If you need specific language or descriptive materials, we will be happy to supply them.

5. Give us clues about what you'd like to see in training materials and documentation. Are there new formats you would find useful? Should our user help be presented in a different way? Is something not clearly described? We may be too close to our own products, even though we try to guard against that problem by contracting some of the development to consultants with an MLS degree. It would be great if we could observe one of your training sessions.

6. Help us understand the labyrinth of holdings, Open URL, link resolvers, and other technicalities related to using our products in your environment. We want to produce products that work most effectively for you and that are the easiest for you to acquire and deliver. We do attend sessions on

this technology, both at publisher and library meetings; however, changes occur so rapidly it's not always easy to keep up with them. Certainly, if you are having any difficulties with our products in your new technology environment, we want to know.

7. Help us teach users about what constitutes excessive usage and inappropriate usage. As a professional society, we need to educate our constituents about appropriate use of licensed, copyrighted material. Librarians have always been superb guardians of rights in the print environment. We need to work together in the digital environment to forge new standards that give users appropriate access and that protect all of us. Both librarian and publisher spend too much time dealing with the users who set up processes to download large numbers of books or issues so that they're available on their own machine, rather than returning to the product on the library system. When we have to shut down access, all too often the user has been on the proxy server so it inconveniences many users. And then there are the faculty members who download and post articles on their Website on the open Web for reading lists, rather than using the electronic reserves or

coursepacks available according to the site license. Most likely, we just need to offer more education and reminders.

8. If you expect to find content in one of our products and it's not there, please tell us. Or ask the user who identifies missing content to tell us. For reasons that may always remain a mystery to me, sometimes there is a hiccup; and a bibliographic record that was released does not appear or an article in an issue is not findable. Our developers generally can fix the problem very rapidly, once we know it exists.

9. Point us to a URL for any information we should be seeking out. We're happy to do the homework on institution required language for licenses, your messages to users about appropriate use, how you display terms and conditions, and anything else we should know.

10. Tell us what you need to find on our Web pages. We have a Librarians' Resource page and would very much appreciate recommendations for additional content, as well as responses to how easy (or difficult) it is to navigate. We welcome all suggestions for improvement. 