

Chapter 20

Behind the Scenes: Approval Profiles From a Vendor's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In discussions surrounding collection development and approval plans, one often forgotten aspect of the conversation is the role of vendors in crafting the profiles and systems that aid library subject selectors in title-by-title selecting. This chapter outlines current approval practices and highlights new challenges, such as integrating e-books and mediating Patron Driven Acquisitions. The chapter aims to provide library selectors with information about the approval profile process so that they can get the most out of meetings with vendors.

INTRODUCTION

The work of a subject selector at an academic library is complex and can be daunting to a newly hired librarian. Selectors are given a budget and a subject area and told to spend it, sometimes with little training or prior experience. The names of some publishers may be familiar (either from library school or from personal experience) and some librarians will be lucky enough to encounter faculty who are interested in fostering a relationship to assist in developing the collection in their subject areas; however, one of the primary sources

of information about newly published materials will likely be the library's approval plan vendor. Academic books receive far less marketing than mainstream fiction titles, so vendors have honed their craft to find out about pertinent publications and pass the information on to libraries and their subject selectors. For this reason, the approval profile document that guides the vendor in deciding what information is relevant to a particular subject collection becomes especially important, as does the regular review and updating of this document. What does a subject selector need to know about the profile process so that he or

she can get the most out of the books and slips received through an approval plan? The authors' intend to answer this and other related questions. This chapter provides an overview of the approval process: where it came from, how it operates, and new challenges the facing the industry.

The "dark side" of the library industry can be a mystery to selector librarians as opportunities are rare for practitioners to learn about what goes on behind the scenes in the commercial side of the library world. The information in this chapter will help librarians with selection responsibilities feel better prepared for profile review meetings with their vendor, help them understand what details to consider and how to get the most out of the process so that they will receive the most relevant materials.

APPROVAL PLANS: WHERE DID THEY COME FROM AND WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?

What began in the 1960's as a way to help libraries spend their burgeoning budgets has since evolved into a sophisticated selection support tool for today's multi-tasking librarian. Approval plans have at times been criticized for outsourcing library selection; however, the sheer volume of tasks that today's academic librarians face makes them a necessity. Taking a look back at how approval plans have evolved over the past five decades reveals much about how the nature of collection development has changed, and points to where libraries may be headed in the future as they continually refine book acquisition in an ever changing, increasingly technological world.

What is an Approval Plan?

An approval plan is simply a process in which newly published books are selected by a vendor according to criteria set by the library, and shipped automatically to the library for purchase. A profile is set up based on the Library of Congress,

National Library of Medicine or Dewey subject classification schedule, and is guided by various non-subject parameters such as readership level, country of origin, book type, language, and price. As academic material is published, vendors review each title, and if it matches a library's profile, send a copy directly to the library without first receiving an order for it. Subject selectors then have the opportunity to examine the title and decide if they "approve" it for their collection.

Prior to the 1950's, collection development at academic institutions was being carried out either by faculty, or at the rare large institution, by specialized bibliographers whose sole responsibility was to select for the collection and arrange to order direct from individual publishers. This process often involved international travel to book fairs, coupled with the ordering and tracking of each title amid many publishers and was therefore time consuming, inefficient and expensive. As the baby-boomers grew and started attending college in the 1960's, "vast amounts of money were being pumped into academic libraries for book acquisitions. Academic library personnel budgets were not increasing at a corresponding rate, and book selection and ordering procedures were labor intensive" (Halloran, 2001, p. 28). In short, libraries found themselves in the enviable position of having too much money to spend in their annual budgets and not enough people to place the orders fast enough to keep up.

Watching this situation grow more desperate, Richard Abel came up with the idea that if he could anticipate what libraries might want to collect, he could more accurately stock his newly-formed academic book distribution company and supply libraries faster and more effectively. His solution not only assisted libraries in spending their budgets efficiently and effectively, but also provided lower prices for the books, as Abel worked with publishers to obtain better discounts due to volume ordering and passed a portion of these savings on to the libraries (Halloran, 2001). Seemingly everyone won.

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