

Chapter 4

Evaluating and Selecting a Library Web-Scale Discovery Service

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ABSTRACT

Selecting a major new discovery service for students and researchers is an important undertaking. Web-scale discovery has implications for library staff and the work they do. More importantly, Web-scale discovery offers promise in simplifying the research process for library users and steering them toward selected and often scholarly content owned or licensed by the host library. Given such broad implications, prospective customers should carefully evaluate options to meet their goal of finding the best potential match for their library. This chapter provides a frame for such an evaluation, based in part on the evaluation process used at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Libraries. It highlights the important internal and external steps library staff may wish to consider as they evaluate these discovery services for their local environment. By involving a wide range of stakeholders and conducting thorough research, libraries are in the best position to make an informed and confident decision.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of this chapter, a library Web-scale discovery service is a service which builds a central, searchable index containing a large portion of a library's locally hosted and remotely licensed content, and which provides a search and retrieval interface to search this index. The selection, implementation, and care of a Web-scale discovery service is not a casual undertaking. Subscription-based in nature, discovery service products carry a significant ongoing cost, and in some cases, a separate initial purchase/setup cost. Despite vendor promises to the contrary, library staff will be involved in a series of implementation steps that will likely last several months at absolute minimum. On an ongoing basis, some number of staff will be dedicated to the nurturing of this service. This could involve:

- web designers hoping to refine the interface themselves or suggest to the vendor tweaks to consider for a future release;
- catalogers and metadata experts who may clean up local record deficiencies exposed by the discovery service;
- staff reporting broken links;
- staff monitoring vendor developments, such as the availability of major new content sets the vendor incorporates into the index, and working to effectively communicate such updates to colleagues.

For those working frontline service desks, staff will be involved in:

- answering users' questions about the service (e.g. "What does this search?");
- some level of instruction, including leading students to other library databases and resources;
- detecting the skill level of researchers, such as novice or advanced, and acknowledging that Web-scale discovery may be

- more suited to some user groups or users in particular disciplines;
- working with their Web designer colleagues and usability specialists to try and ensure the library's overall portal to information--the library's Web site--is well designed and perhaps self-sufficient to the greatest degree possible

In sum, there are significant costs associated with library Web-scale discovery. However, it is important not to fixate on these costs, real as they are. Today's students, faculty, and other researchers should be the most important focus, and for them, Web-scale discovery holds major promise. A single service that can search a vast amount, likely the majority of the library's content assets, is a significant step forward for discovery, with the impact augmented even more as this content is presented in a clean search and discovery interface offering features and functionality expected by today's researchers.

BACKGROUND

An established body of literature exists related to evaluation and selection of federated search systems, a technology that could most closely be considered the precursor to modern day Web-scale discovery services. Similarly, a growing body of literature is emerging related to modern day Web-scale discovery services, the direct focus of this monograph. Regarding the former, federated search technologies, *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* devoted volume year 2007 to the topic of federated search, simultaneously co-published in the 2007 monograph *Federated Search: Solution or Setback for Online Library Services* (Cox, 2007). Of particular note in this monograph are a chapter on developing requests for proposals (RFPs) by Casell and Wynstra (2007) and an annotated bibliography from Freund, et al. (2007).

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