

IN SEARCH OF NEMO: PURCHASING NON-TRADE AND OUT OF PRINT MATERIAL

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Abstract

Increased access to non-trade and out of print publications can be linked to the advent and enormous expansion of the worldwide web, the advances in electronic trade, and the increased sophistication with which small dealers, learned societies and organisations worldwide utilise these possibilities. This paper attempts to share some of the experiences of a large academic library in its quest to find these publications. Acquisitions staff need to develop advanced skills in searching the web and in making judgement calls regarding the feasibility and affordability of specific direct purchases. In addition, factors such as high postage costs and unique payment requirements have implications on the policy, workflow and the utilisation of human resources in an acquisitions department.

In conclusion, experiences of successful direct purchases and less successful attempts are shared and useful hints are given on pitfalls that might be avoided.

Scope and aim

This paper is limited to the acquisition of non-trade and out of print publications of a monographic nature. These two diverse material types generally present the same purchasing options. The aim is to advise on the successful acquisition of these materials.

Motivation

The premise is that, should a monographic item of a relatively obscure nature be required by a client, the library should do its utmost to obtain it. Although this does not necessarily imply purchase, this paper will deal specifically with those items that are indeed available for purchase.

The reasons for purchasing out of print material varies. Broadly speaking they fall into three categories: a) older titles that are still considered very relevant to acquire at the present, b) replacement of lost material, and c) unexecuted orders originally placed with regular vendors. In the case of b and c it is important to evaluate the need for purchasing each title and the maximum price that the library would be willing to pay for it. Alternative titles on the same topic may be considered.

Means

Extensive internet access and a flexible, accommodating and supportive local financial department are the keys to the successful purchase of hard-to-find materials. The second factor also implies the flexibility to use new and small vendors and the ability to prepay when required by whatever means required. A credit card is virtually essential for some of these purchases.

Cost

The search for unique material is certainly not cheap. Although the price of an item may be reasonable, overheads are high. Postage is usually quite high. Surface mail may easily cost \$6-\$10 for a small parcel. Airmail is much higher, but is a much safer option. Some firms, especially certain agencies supplying grey literature, only supply by courier, which may be up to \$50 per parcel.

In rare cases out of print material could be quite expensive, but in many instances these are particularly the cases where alternative titles are not advised.

It is advised that, at the very least, the price of an item plus its postage cost should be considered the "price" to be paid.

Purchases on the web, especially when using a credit card, entails much paperwork and can hardly be squeezed into the normal line of production in an acquisitions department.

Process

- Does the publication exist?

When in doubt about the existence of an item or the precision of bibliographic information, verification of the information in web-based library catalogues or national bibliographies is required.

Most of us have experienced past instances where a “publication” that was required proved to be an article in a journal or in a book, or a paper at a conference. These cases may require bibliographic verification in electronic subject indexes and databases. In the case of a conference paper, it may even prove not to have been published formally at all. A decision needs to be taken on whether the “bigger” publication should be purchased, whether it is available in the book market at all, or whether obtaining it by means of interlibrary loans might be a better option.

One should be aware of the bibliographic strengths and weaknesses of web-based resources. Bibliographically speaking, booksellers and their databases do not always have the correct information. On the other hand one should be aware of web-based booksellers that do indeed supply excellent bibliographic information.

- **Where to buy it from?**

Should it be established that an item is not as obscure as was originally thought, e.g. the publications of certain governmental, non-governmental and learned societies, a regular library vendor may be considered. Experience should determine decision making. Should a regular library vendor not be the chosen route, direct purchase on web-based vendors’ secure websites is advised. In many instances, however, no such websites are available. This requires assessment of the nature, origin and age of the required publication, clever web searching, and the use of e-mail, fax or telephone. The correct questions should be asked when originally enquiring, including all the relevant questions about shipping and promises of payment. The whole process is strongly supported by the tacit knowledge of an experienced acquisitions librarian.

- **Additional complications**

The availability of an item in electronic format may raise some questions, e.g.

- E-format or not?
- Can / may it be networked?
- Rather print?

These factors should be considered in the light of legal issues, local policy, local technical facilities and ability, continued support and maintenance required, and the client’s requirements.

Not all websites are user-friendly. Here are but a few obstacles:

- Outdated websites and outdated stock lists
- No indication of availability, price or purchase options, i.e. a lengthy e-mail is required
- No secure website for electronic purchases, or no electronic purchasing facilities at all
- No facility to save client information for future purchases
- Limited or badly structured input screens for address information
- No clear indication of shipment options and costs
- No order confirmation
- No shipment confirmation
- Insufficient facilities for e-mail queries
- Websites constructed only in the language of the vendor it represents.

- **Staffing**

In order to search effectively for obscure or out of print publications staff should be skilled in web searches and in evaluating the information found. This implies continuing professional development. The availability of staff with a working knowledge of German, Dutch, French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese has been invaluable in the past.

Furthermore, decisions regarding web purchases, prepayments, the use of new or unknown vendors and, especially the use of an institutional credit card, require high level staffing and the delegation and acceptance of a high level of financial responsibility not traditionally associated with acquisitions librarianship. It is advised that the final decision should lie with the head of the acquisitions department.

In order to limit operational costs it is important that

- the operator searching for the required item should be empowered to execute the final order, which may include decisions such as price, credit card purchase, prepayment, shipping method and courier service
- the operator should understand the importance (or relative unimportance) of the specific purchase to the fullest to be able to make the correct decision regarding price and shipping speed

- in the case of web searching and purchasing, the operator should have the required knowledge to take the shortest possible route to the achievement of a successful end result.

Meticulous administration of credit card purchases and prepaid orders is essential. In the case of credit card orders it is advised that two independent staff members be involved: the acquisitions librarian or delegate, who should be responsible for decision making and follow-up procedures, and a staff member from the financial section, who administers credit card statements and who has the authority to query any order placed by this means.

It is essential that all direct purchases should be claimed timeously, which may mean additional administration as they are not to be handled as part of the normal acquisitions claim cycle. Personalised e-mail claims, possibly incorporating the original order confirmation, have good results.

Risks

Here are but a few:

- Insecure websites and subsequent credit card abuse
- Abuse of the credit card at local level
- The loss of parcels containing prepaid material.

Practical hints

- Do not prepay any vendor (whether by credit card or any other means) should there be the slightest suspicion or discomfort about the vendor's honesty or solvency
- Never send credit card information by e-mail
- Only use secure websites for transmitting credit card information, or, alternatively, use the telephone
- Use fax for the transmission of credit card information only if absolutely necessary, but be aware of the many hands that may be handling faxes on both the transmission and receiving ends, and counteract these where possible
- Keep documentation of credit card information safe with limited access
- Monitor the delivery of prepaid material
- Insist on secure shipping, e.g. registered mail and the use of tracking numbers.

Case studies

- The case of the two geology books from Russia:

In May 2003 two geology books, published in Russia, were requested. No information whatsoever about the publications or the publisher could be traced anywhere. A Google search was done on all of the four editors who fortunately all had quite unique names, and one editor's e-mail address was traced at a Russian university. He replied to our e-mail but required payment by cash (wire transfer). He could not accept a cheque, bank or credit card payment. Consequently our University declined to execute this payment. We returned the order request to the client.

Episode two: On 25 December 2003, out of the blue, an e-mail was received from the publisher, supplying all the required information for credit card payment and shipment. The order has subsequently been executed successfully.

- The video of Malawian music

A video was required comprising music recorded in Malawi by a researcher from the USA. Although this recording was used in music research in the USA, it was not available in the trade. An e-mail was sent to the researcher himself who supplied the video after receiving our cheque.

- The near-disastrous German case that turned out successfully:

13 very specialised items were required from Germany within 6 calendar days. A telephone order was placed directly with the publisher supplying our credit card information. Courier delivery was requested. A proforma invoice was faxed to us subsequent to the telephone call. The parcel was delivered within four calendar days which included a weekend.

This case, however, had a less successful history: Some weeks previously this order was placed with a regular vendor. The decision was based on all the information regarding the order, the publisher and the client that was supplied to the acquisitions department at the time. To cut a long story short, at the time of writing this paper, six weeks after placing the order, the items have not yet been received from them. The

items were fairly cheap; this was in our client's favour and we could therefore afford to purchase duplicates directly from the publisher in the meantime.

➤ World Bank publications:

Developing countries are granted between 35% and 75% discount when purchasing directly from the World Bank, but there is a postage fee that also needs to be taken into consideration. There are vast savings especially on the more expensive publications.

➤ The scent of wine:

A kit of approximately 60 tiny bottles, each containing a different aroma that could be associated with wine, had to be purchased from Australia. Should anything ever be described as a "non-book trade" title, this was it. A credit card order was placed on the supplier's website and the item was received six weeks later, but not before there were a few nailbiting moments on our side about the possibility of anyone along the dispatch line being able to sniff this one out.

Conclusion

In order to fulfill our clients' needs regarding the successful purchase of unique material we

- need to be brave
- negotiate and debate with the authorities
- need to play it safe
- need to be meticulous in administering potentially risky transactions
- need to have the experience and instinct to negotiate these murky waters.

Recommended websites

- General acquisitions

<http://acqweb.library.vanderbilt.edu>
<http://www.libdex.com>

- Bibliographic verification

<http://www.loc.gov>
<http://www.bl.uk>
<http://www.lib.ox.ac.uk>
<http://www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de>
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Libweb>
<http://bookfindonline.com> (by subscription only)
<http://www.buchhandel.de>
<http://www.infoball.de>
Sabinet Online (by membership only)
OCLC WorldCat (by membership only)
BookWhere as a tool for searching through Z39.50 library catalogues

- Bookselling (mostly credit card purchases)

<http://www.amazon.com>
<http://www.amazon.co.uk>
<http://www.amazon.de>
<http://www.amazon.fr>
<http://www.kalahari.net>
<http://www.fnac.com>
<http://www.barnesandnoble.com>
<http://www.biblio3.com>
<http://www.boeknet.nl>
<http://www.dkagencies.com>
<http://www.lib.umi.com/dissertations>
<http://www.bookfinder.com>
<http://www.dealtime.com/xMP-Books>

- Second hand books

<http://www.2ndhand.org.uk>

<http://rarebooks.ch>

<http://abaa.org>

All Amazon sites

- Other

<http://www.mpa.org>

<http://www.sheetmusicplus.com>

<http://www.cduniverse.com>

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