

# PROBLEMS OF DOCUMENT ACQUISITION IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY LIBRARIES<sup>@</sup>

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M.S.SRIDHAR\*

## Abstract

The paper stresses the importance of acquisition librarian in collection development, points out the general lack of formal training in librarianship about mercantile and purchase activities, book trade practices and relevant laws of the land, enumerates the prevailing circumstances in which document acquisition decisions are made and finally attempts to highlight and discuss selected significant problems of selection and purchasing of books, reports and journals in science and technology libraries.

## 0. Introduction

Document acquisition is the most fundamental activity in pursuit of the objective of collection development in any library. This activity calls for librarian to play the additional roles of purchase officer and accounts officer. Consequently an acquisition librarian is considered to perform more of nonprofessional activities than professional. Yet the role of acquisition librarian is very crucial as every act in acquiring documents contributes to the collection development both negatively and positively. He has to follow certain norms and he is subjected to stringent financial audit. This interdisciplinary area of work within librarianship has a wide variety of problems. The purpose of this paper is to highlight and discuss the salient problems of document acquisition mostly in the context of a special library and particularly of a science and technology library.

By and large, special libraries have to acquire reading materials (documents) in variety of forms, in variety of ways mostly from foreign countries with the objective of having exhaustive or comprehensive yet compact or just adequate and upto date collection. Consequently avoiding

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\* Scientist/Engineer 'SE' (Library), ISRO Satellite Centre,  
Airport Road, Vimanapura Post, BANGALORE - 560 017.

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duplication and identifying documents more than once (though it leads to the operation of 'law of diminishing returns') become two important issues. For the purpose of this paper, the document is limited to 'books, reports and journals' and 'acquisition' to 'selection and purchasing/procurement'.

#### 1. Background of Document Acquisition Transaction

Libraries regularly buy information products and services apart from equipment, consumables, furniture, etc. Products include books, reports, standards, journals, etc. and services include translation, reprographic or photocopy, current awareness, literature search etc. These purchase activities call for a basic knowledge of the relevant laws of the land and purchase procedures on the part of acquisition librarian. Unfortunately, this aspect is totally neglected in the formal education for librarianship. As a result many inexperienced but qualified librarians fall prey into the hands of seller or seek merciful help of allied professionals such as purchase officer, accounts officer, etc. Seeking outside help for buying a noninformation commodity like equipment and furniture is reasonable. But acquisition librarian must be well versed in mercantile activity, practices of information/book trade and law of the land in order to make economical, efficient and effective purchases.

Let us look into the peculiar circumstances under which purchase of information products and services are normally made in libraries. Firstly, neither the seller nor the buyer is fully aware of the value of the product being transacted. Further, the buyer is not the consumer of the product. Secondly, the product specification is inadequate on most of the occasions and often misleading too. In other words we buy a product based on a title or a short abstract or at the most based on a review. In case of journals we pay for products even before they come into existence. Recently, we were about to acquire a book entitled 'Microprocessor Technology' of a reputed publisher costing about Rs. 600/- based on vendor's announcement. To our surprise, it was a bibliography and we had to forcibly return it to the vendor. Thirdly, almost all the products are proprietary in nature and publishers dictate price and terms. At the same time they are available through multiple letouts under differentiated pricing. Fourthly, for obvious reasons neither a system of calling for competitive quotations nor extensive contracting

is workable. In the situation each library evolves its own procedure keeping the broad guidelines of GOC (Good Offices Committee) and terms of book trade in view. However, in practical situations such procedures cannot be strictly enforced for lack of a workable contract.

Now let us examine the document selection as well as document procurement problems separately.

## 2. Document Selection Problems

### 2.1 Need for Subject Background

A science and technology library has to buy a large number of foreign documents in different forms and as mentioned earlier to make the collection comprehensive one cannot take the risk of missing any relevant item. Due to law of diminishing return while identifying items more than once, it calls for not only more efforts and hence manpower, but also sufficient subject background.

### 2.2 Lack of User Participation

Normally, the lack of user (or subject experts) participation in selection of documents becomes a serious problem where librarian lacks sufficient subject knowledge. We have recently made a case study of user participation in collection building at ISRO Satellite Centre library and found that about 20% of users have ever suggested/indented a book with the library.<sup>1</sup> If we exclude the books on approval exhibited in the library (as per Dealer Library Plan) the number of users participating in collection development comes down to below 5%.

### 2.3 Multiplicity of Vendors

Thirdly, there is a havoc of multiplicity of vendors (Today's salesman of a firm is tomorrow's independent vendor) and a consequent flood of books on approval of popular publishers which are easily available but normally above average cost. This problem in cities like Bangalore is going to such an extent that an encyclopaedic book is sent on approval to a library by not less than six vendors. The vendors in their fervant efforts try to create an artificial need among users for books readily available with them by sending them on approval basis and as such the relative assessment of these books against books to be bought on confirmed orders will not be made. In the process, the document selection may become

highly flexible to suit the requirement to the readily available documents and by mathematical induction serve the hidden and derived objectives than real objectives in collection development.

#### 2.4 Inadequate Product Specification

Fourthly, as mentioned earlier, the details of the documents (other than books received on approval) inadequate that confident selection cannot be made even by the subject expert. The announcements of vendors usually lack year of publication, edition, publisher and other details of documents. Most of the announcements of Indian vendors are for those available on the shelf and costly books.

#### 2.5 Lack of Information about Cheaper Editions

Another serious problem coming in the way of economical acquisition of documents is the lack of correct information about availability of latest editions, low priced/Indian/paperback editions. This problem together with the differentiated pricing policies and deliberate manipulation of local vendors in avoiding supply of cheaper editions leads to inefficient purchases.

#### 2.6 Lack of Confirmed Prices

Yet another peculiar situation under which document selection has to be made are nonavailability of confirmed price of document at the time of selection. Unfortunately, suppliers keep the right to revise the price till the date of billing/supply.

#### 2.7 Need for Avoiding Duplication

A very crucial problem of document acquisition is avoiding duplication in the collection. This assumes additional significance in special libraries where collection has to be compact. The duplication may appear in the form of duplicate copies of documents, different editions (with or without revision) of the same document and it may be substantial content duplication among different documents. As far as duplicate copies are concerned we can have a thorough checking with existing stock, on order files and 'just received but not processed' files and reach almost 99.5% success. The acquisition librarian has to be doubly careful about different editions of the same documents. Having known the traditional

approach of the librarians to treat different editions of a book as fresh/different books many publishers do print new editions without any changes. The duplication arising out of contents has to be checked only with the help of subject experts and users. However, the duplication due to reappearance in different forms like special issue of a journal and a book, journal article and conference paper, thesis, report and books, at times is difficult to check.

For all these reasons it would not be wrong if we say a sort of blind means choice takes place in document selection without really knowing how much is being paid for how much of utility of the product.

### 3. Document Procurement Problems

Having seen some of the problems faced at the time of selection of document, let us now examine the problems related to the document procurement transactions.

#### 3.1 Lack of Strictly Enforceable Purchase Procedure

The first and foremost problem of an upcoming library is determining the purchase procedure, choice of mode of procurement and selection of suppliers. The issues involved are whether to buy directly from publishers or from agents, through Indian agents or foreign agents keeping in view the differentiated prices, mode of payment, discount and handling charges. Accordingly, the procedure of calling for quotations for terms or for individual titles, mutual acceptance of terms of payment, conversion rate for foreign currencies, procedure for ascertaining price etc., have to be evolved. Among different ways of procurement the institutional membership, standing order and other more economical ways of acquiring also need to be examined. Two most important considerations in the choice of procedures, modes of procurement and suppliers are economy and efficiency in supply of documents.

#### 3.2 Problem of Local Vs Foreign Suppliers

Many times local vendors try to propagate that direct import of documents from publishers or foreign agents is costlier as one loses the normal 10% discount and at times may have to pay additional postage and handling charges. But it is not always true. Except for books of exclusive agencies, cheaper Indian editions and off the shelf books of popular publishers,

the supply of all other documents will be more efficient from publishers and foreign vendors. Infact, it is not desirable to approach local agents for short discount titles (what are called society publications) wherein we have to pay additional handling charges. We have recently made a study on delayed supplies and found that the average efficiency of an exclusive/specialised agent, a local vendor and a foreign supplier as 82%, 28% and 59% respectively.<sup>2</sup> Further, it is not only economical in certain cases to import directly but also one can save upto 50% of the price. At the outset this looks very unusual but it has been demonstrated at ISRO Satellite Centre Library. Firstly you save on your conversion rates as the conversion rate of foreign currency as per GOC is always ahead of prevailing RBI rates. Secondly, many publishers do offer substantial discount on their publications (eg. World scientific publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., Singapore offers 25% to Developing countries). Thirdly, depending on volume of orders, foreign vendors do allow free postage and handling. Fourthly, in case of multinational publishers by ordering books on agents of appropriate country substantial savings (upto one third) can be availed. Fifthly, wherever opted for paper-back editions, the price difference is of the order of 40% and normally local vendors do not stock paper-back editions of scientific and technical books. Again, it may be cited that at ISRO Satellite Centre library we have been saving on all the above grounds and the saving is of the order of 50% on purchase of technical reports. A case study done a couple of years ago has revealed that the average cost of a technical report acquired through Indian agents foreign agents and direct sources are Rs. 254, Rs. 171 and Rs. 111 respectively.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.3 Short Lived Titles

Irrespective of the procedure followed and selection of suppliers the following problems exist to varying degrees in document procurement process. Most of the off the shelf books are available in a seasonal way from few months to few years from the date of publication and if they are missed at the right time the library has to wait for a minimum of four months to acquire. Many a times such books may become out of print and may not be available till they are reprinted.

### 3.4 Delayed Supply and Nonsupply

As mentioned earlier on demand documents are supplied as late as two years. We found approximately little over 50% of on demand documents are supplied within one year from the date of order. The

delayed supply or nonsupply do not carry any penalty and acquisition librarian has to wait patiently accumulating the dissatisfaction of users. This may also paralyse the budget planning of the library if unusually excess commitment is not allowed.

### 3.5 Mandatory Airfreight/Airmail charges

One welcome development of recent years is that many publishers are sending their books in bulk airfreight to selected exclusive/specialised agents cutting the delay. Unfortunately this is mostly restricted to few popular publishers. Another problem of mode of supply is mandatory airfreight or airmail supply. Items like technical reports consume 10 to 20% of the expenditure on airfreight charges itself and take as much time as surface mail supplies.

### 3.6 Problems of Payment Terms

The procurement procedure should have taken cognisance of payment terms. Though an element of risk is involved in advance payment, it is necessary to make advance payments to many publishers and foreign vendors if only occasional transactions are made with them. For others including local suppliers a 30-45 days credit terms should do. If credit terms are not agreeable it is better even to agree for payment against delivery in case of publishers and foreign agents. It is here that the acquisition librarian has a moral responsibility to arrange timely payment for suppliers. Just as delayed supply is a serious problem to librarians, the delayed payment is a serious problem to suppliers. Infact a mutually agreeable genuine penalty clause for both sides is a good step in the right direction. An extreme type of case we often hear is that the advance payments made towards journals subscriptions are not immediately transmitted to publishers by agents leading to delayed or nonsupply of initial issues of the year .

### 3.7 Loss in Transit

Another perennial problem very much faced in case of journals and occasionally in case of books is 'loss in transit'. In majority of the cases suppliers refuse to supply at their risk unless the agent acquire the documents to their office and distributes them. Yet, many publishers and abroad vendors do replace the 'loss in transit' free of cost. The trade cannot afford to go for insured safe delivery as the total cost of insurance far exceed the value of loss in transit.

### 3.8 Custom Clearance

In case of direct importing of documents occasionally the problem

of custom clearance might arise and hence it is better that the organisation as a whole take an OGL. In addition, it is better to be in touch with import procedures as and when revised.

### 3.9 Price Verification

Another sticky issue often faced in libraries is price verification of documents supplied. As noted earlier there is a regular price hike (of documents ordered) without notice. In case of journals additional invoices for additional volumes will be coming throughout the year. Unless the suppliers cooperate and produce necessary information as and when sought the acceptance of revised price becomes extremely difficult. On the other hand since upward revision of price takes place in almost all the documents supplied after 3 months, a foreign vendor is likely to get annoyed for such price proofs. It may be desirable to make a random check of all hikes upto 10% or 20% and an 100% checks for items where price hikes are more than 20%. A related problem is that use of GOC conversion rates for foreign currencies especially during the time of revision of conversion rates. Some suppliers do not maintain the consistency of applying conversion rate as on the date of billing/supply and occasionally manipulate and adjust the date of billing to suit rates just revised.

### 3.10 Reduction in Buying power

Lastly, it need not be overemphasised here that the price of books, reports and journals are increasing at an alarming rate and marginally increased budgets are unable to match them. Consequently the buying power of libraries is steadily decreasing.

## 4. Conclusion

As it was not the intention of the paper all alternate solutions of problems are not discussed here. Nor the problems discussed are exhaustive. There are many significant, probably contradictory versions of, problems of suppliers too. But they are outside the purview of this paper.

Document acquisition in libraries calls for a business oriented approach. It is a continuous activity where changes in book trade, and other environments have to be taken into account in addition to continuous

monitoring and evaluation of existing suppliers, vigilant look out for alternate sources of supply and opportunity for efficient and economic acquisition.

In addition, the acquisition librarian has to keep an eye on what collection he has, its strength and weakness, how it is being used and what changes in the requirements of users are anticipated to suitably modify the document acquisition program.

#### 5. REFERENCES CITED

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### About the Author

Dr. M. S. Sridhar is a post graduate in Mathematics and Business Management and a Doctorate in Library and Information Science. He is in the profession for last 36 years. Since 1978, he is heading the Library and Documentation Division of ISRO Satellite Centre, Bangalore. Earlier he has worked in the libraries of National Aeronautical Laboratory (Bangalore), Indian Institute of Management (Bangalore) and University of Mysore. Dr. Sridhar has published 4 books, 83 research articles, 22 conferences papers, written 19 course materials for BLIS and MLIS, made over 25 seminar presentations and contributed 5 chapters to books.



**E-mail:** [sridharmirle@yahoo.com](mailto:sridharmirle@yahoo.com), [mirlesridhar@gmail.com](mailto:mirlesridhar@gmail.com), [sridhar@isac.gov.in](mailto:sridhar@isac.gov.in) ; **Phone:** 91-80-25084451; **Fax:** 91-80-25084476.