

Understanding Book Vendors and Approval Plans

By **Thomas Mannell**

When my placement at Coutts began I was also starting a course on collection development. Prior to the class and placement, my knowledge of the role of book vendors and approval plans in building a library's collection was sketchy at best. The course and placement were an interesting juxtaposition because of the different perspectives they offered. On one hand, the professor for my collection development class provided us with a cautionary viewpoint alerting us to the temptation to surrender our skills and knowledge in collection development to book vendors. On the other hand, my time at Coutts provided me with insights into the importance that book vendors and approval plans can play in building a library's collection.

The professor was concerned that overreliance on approval plans could make librarians lazy, leading them to abandon the use of the intellectual and analytical skills that are needed for good collection development. He pushed us to become familiar with the ins and outs of the publishing industry as well as develop our own strategies for collection analysis.

He also warned us not to lose track of approval plans, which could result in libraries purchasing books that are

not needed. The concern from the library's perspective is that vendors may not be vigilant about the appropriateness of books purchased because of a primary interest in the bottom line.

In summary, librarians need to be cautious of vendors because their primary concern is not meeting the library's needs, and of approval plans, because they are only as good as the personnel managing them.

While the professor's cautionary tale needs to be heeded, my experience at Coutts provided a balancing perspective. An approval plan is only as good as the person running it; however a good vendor can be an important partner in collection development. In fact, the vendor can be a critically important resource.

Yes, vendors are private sector organizations and in order to continue to provide services they need to make money by emphasizing sales. However, in order to make sales, good vendors are always updating and improving their services. I found that Coutts is well aware of the attention that needs to be given to their approval plans.

This awareness became clear after I met and chatted with

several of the sales managers and customer service representatives. They do encourage their clients to re-evaluate their approval plans to ensure they are receiving the books that they want and need. Also, vendors' online help content is constantly being updated and improved to ensure librarians have access to the full capabilities of their databases.

My practicum with Coutts is a good example of this attempt to assist collection development librarians. During my placement, I created several video tutorials on key new features in the OASIS database. These tutorials are now posted on the OASIS help portal. The "community groups" function is the most exciting of these new features, allowing the creation of online library groups. In these groups, a library has the ability to share information about collections and book purchases.

This feature is a great tool that helps to keep purchasing costs down. For example, it can prevent two libraries within close proximity from purchasing the same titles. Also, it can be used for communication between collection development librarians from different libraries, allowing them to quickly and easily discuss which books are worth purchasing.

Innovative features, such as community groups, demonstrates Coutts's active role in helping build library collections as cost effectively as possible.

With the completion of the class and the placement, I came to realize that knowledge of the publishing industry, good collection analysis skills, and the ability to use and develop an effective approval plan are crucial in maintaining a useful collection that is relevant to the community being served by the library. Approval plans are necessary, especially now that librarians are increasingly being assigned many responsibilities. The liaison librarian structure has decreased the number of librarians whose sole task is collection development. Given that most librarians have many more areas of responsibilities, less time can be devoted to collection development. Consequently, approval plans are helping to compensate and have become a valuable resource for librarians.

Working with vendors and understanding the dynamics of

approval plans have become important areas of skill and knowledge in the collection librarian's tool box.

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graduated this year in the Masters of Information program at the University of Toronto. Thomas is open to all opportunities and eager to see where this degree will take him. He hopes to find a position that will also make good use of his background in fine arts and photography. tom.mannell@utoronto.ca