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Options for the E-reference Collection

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by Sue Polanka

Last year, we looked at 5 options for the e-reference collection for the academic and large public library market: ABC-CLIO's *History Reference Online, Gale Virtual Reference Library, Greenwood Digital Collection, Oxford Reference Online,* and Xrefer's *Xreferplus.* Much has changed in one year. Xrefer has now become Credo Reference and has added more than 200 historic videos and flash animations, 1,700 audio files, a link resolver for bibliographic entries, and a new interface (to debut in less than 6 months). Greenwood added 500 new titles in 2007, all imprints from 2005 to 2007. Gale added 16 new publishers and released an updated interface with an enhanced sidebar; a search within results option; a toolbox for quick print, e-mail, and download options; and a persistent Search within This Publication feature. Oxford added more illustrated content, sidebar features on article front pages, e-mail and print options, and cross-product linking between *Oxford Reference Online* and 4 other Oxford databases.

In addition to adding new titles, ABC-CLIO introduced 2 additional lower-priced subscription plans, Premier and Elite, and now offers libraries the opportunity to purchase to own ABC-CLIO titles for hosting on 1 of 5 different e-book platforms: ABC-CLIO, EBL, Ebrary, netLibrary, and myiLibrary. Finally, a newcomer—*Sage eReference*—is on board.

This year we'll take a detailed look at the new *Sage eReference* (p.76) and provide an updated comparison chart for the 6 e-reference collections. Once again, similarities between the e-book products abound and include 24/7 unlimited simultaneous users; keyword searching across 1 title or the entire collection: browsing by title, author, or subject; persistent links at the book and entry level; and downloadable MARC records. All are indexed in Paratext's *Reference Universe,* a unique database that searches the content of both print and electronic reference materials. Pricing information is based on a 4-year college or university with 5,000 FTE and was current as of August 2007.

Electronic reference titles can be a blessing, but choosing titles, vendors, and interfaces and getting them all to work together can be frustrating. What can librarians do to plan and prepare for the surge of electronic books? Several things: focus on content, select an interface, and negotiate prices. First, libraries should investigate the titles and collections available from all vendors and choose content that fits the needs of the library, not the needs of the publisher's package. Pick and choose titles that will get used, and don't purchase titles twice—with so many publishers and products, it can be easy to duplicate. If we start doing this, publishers may begin to treat e-books the way they treat journals, creating expensive catchall subscription products that duplicate half of their competitor's content, which we already own and pay for. Let's stop this cycle before it begins.

Second, make access a priority. The best way to drive business to e-reference is through the online catalog. Make sure all MARC records are in the catalog with persistent links to the e-books. Strive to use as few interfaces as possible. Our comparison chart lists 6 vendors, each with a unique interface and special features; how can we make things simpler? Purchase titles to own, and get the licensing agreement to provide a copy of the e-book in either the HTML, XML, or PDF version. With this data, libraries can mount all e-book content on 1 platform, like Ebrary, or an open-source product, like XTF. Or purchase from vendors that support multiple publishers in one platform—*Gale Virtual Reference Library* is a good example. Another good option for access is through Paratext's *Reference Universe,* which indexes the table of contents, entries, and thousands of print and electronic titles. It's a deeper search than the catalog, uses one interface, and has persistent links to the article level of e-books and to the catalog record of print titles. When shopping around, talk to publishers about access, and remind them that fewer interfaces make for simple searching by users and librarians.

Finally, negotiate the right price. Vendors offer product subscriptions, single-title ownership, subject-set ownership, and a multitude of packages and prices. Bottom line: e-books are expensive, so budgeting and planning properly is a must. A few ways to save money include buying multiple titles, purchasing through a consortium, negotiating discounts with vendors, and purchasing book titles only *one* time and in one format (e or print).

One year later, this reviewer is even higher on e-reference. The titles are here to stay, so get a plan in place, massage the reference budget, and start buying! The usage results will stun and amaze you.

Sue Polanka is Head of Reference and Instruction at Wright State University Library in Dayton, Ohio, and the Chair of the RBB Editorial Board.

ABC-CLIO's History Reference Online	
Titles Available	Complete Package: 533 Premier Package: 404 Elite Package: 255
Publishers Included	ABC-CLIO
Content	U.S. and world history, current issues, geography, politics
Updated/New Titles Added per Year	Quarterly, 50-70 titles added each year
Subscribe or Own?	Subscribe or own with 5 years' free hosting and a small fee for extension of hosting
Cost (Four-Year College/ University with 5,000 FTE)	Complete: >5,000 FTE: $8,476 5,000+ FTE: $9,756 Premier: >5,000 FTE: $6,396 5,000+ FTE: $7,356 Elite: >5,000 FTE: $3,436 5,000+ FTE: $3,916 Price to own: >5,000 FTE: 125% of print cost 5,000+ FTE: 144%
Customization	None
Citation Styles	Chicago, MLA, APA, Harvard
Unique Features	By the end of 2007

*Numbers and prices are current as of September 2