E-book Usage Data

Sue Polanka
Wright State University - Main Campus, sue.polanka@wright.edu

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E-book Usage Data

I hear it all the time from a variety of librarians: “I'm not going to invest in e-books until I know they will get used.” In fact, I hear it most from school librarians who are low on budget and don't want to invest in e-books without proof, from someone else's school system, that the investment will pay off. Luckily, usage data is available for e-book publisher and aggregator products, and this data can be mined in a variety of ways to determine use of the product or particular titles.

Standards have been developed over the years to ensure that when comparing e-book usage from vendor to vendor, you are comparing “apples to apples.” For example, if you wanted to track the number of turnaways in an online resource, you would know that each vendor counts turnaways in the same manner because the standards define it. COUNTER (Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources), SUSHI (Standardized Usage Harvesting Initiative), and ICOLC (International Coalition of Library Consortia) are three common sets of standards that govern the counting of online transactions between library users and online products. For more on these standards, visit www.projectcounter.org/about.html.

What kind of data is available? Generally, data includes some combination of the number of searches or downloads; the number of pages viewed, printed, or downloaded; time spent on the site; titles viewed; and the number of turnaways. Data is generally tallied on an annual or monthly basis, but some vendors offer it by the week, day, or hour. For those of you concerned about privacy, rest assured that usage data is collected at the institution or IP-range level and contains no patron-specific information. Some vendors offer reports for a specific library location, a benefit for school and public library systems or universities with multiple branches that wish to calculate use at a single location.

After the initial investment in an e-book product, you can request that a usage report be e-mailed to you on a regular basis, usually monthly. Most vendors offer an administrative module as well, which provides access to the usage statistics any time. Here, the data can be viewed and sometimes manipulated by librarians in order to create custom reports covering a specified time period, title, or other criteria. The administrative modules typically have additional benefits, like user guides and tutorials, marketing materials, and options for adding library branding to the e-book interface.

You might be asking yourself, how will this help me decide to invest in e-books if I can't get the data until after the purchase? I have a few suggestions. First, ask vendors for sample usage reports from libraries or school systems of your size or type. Second, start a pilot program by purchasing a small amount of e-books and tracking the usage. Third, ask your colleagues with e-book collections to send a sample report, or encourage them to report their e-book usage through workshops, newsletter articles, or discussion lists. The important thing is, when you have access to the usage data, use it! Vendors who monitor the amount of traffic in their administrative modules report that only 40 to 70 percent of libraries are actually viewing the data. Make sure you track your e-book data by assigning someone in your library to check it on a regular basis.

There are a number of ways to benefit from usage data for e-book resources. First of all, the data calculates usage of library resources that may only be remote. Since some gate counts are decreasing in libraries, it's important to show that electronic-resource use is on the rise. Second, data can be used for collection development. Looking at e-book titles with low or high use can help determine which new titles to purchase for the collection, whether in electronic or print format. Third, you can use this data in annual reports for your institution or the state and national recording agencies.

To prepare this column, I sent an informal survey to 10 e-book publishers and aggregators. Responses were received from ABC-CLIO, Credo Reference, EBL, ebrary, Gale/Cengage, Oxford University Press, and Sage Reference. (NetLibrary was unable to participate as it is in the process of revamping its usage data.) The survey asked about compliance with current standards, administrative modules, report types, time frame available for analysis, and the type of data available, such as searches, downloads, and printing. For a detailed look at the survey responses, consult the comparative chart, available on the No Shelf Required blog Articles page [www.libraries.wright.edu/noshelfrequired/?page id=66].

Sue Polanka is Head of Reference Instruction, Paul Laurence Dunbar Library, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. For more on e-books, check out her blog, No Shelf Required [www.libraries.wright.edu/noshelfrequired].