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# Dispatches from the Field. A Guide to Buying Ebooks

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## DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD



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### A Guide to Ebook Purchasing

By Sue Polanka

Tue, 11/15/2011 - 09:12

#### Advice from the author of *No Shelf Required* on how to flex your library's purchasing muscle

For those libraries looking to purchase e-books, you are not alone. According to the *Library Journal* 2011 survey of ebook penetration and use in libraries, 95% of academic, 82% of public, and 44% of school libraries are already offering ebooks, and many more are considering it. For anyone contemplating purchasing ebooks, asking why is the most important question. What are the primary goals of purchasing ebooks in your library or your consortium? Is it to expand the collection or to increase the buying power of a group of libraries? Is it to replace existing print collections, offer new services, or experiment with new business models in the hope of saving money? Whatever the reason, it is imperative to keep one's goals in mind throughout the process. Buying ebooks is a complicated process. To do it effectively is an even greater challenge due to the many ways to procure ebooks.

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#### Print to digital

Buying a print book is relatively easy. With the introduction of library ebooks in 1999, however, the once-straightforward process of buying books took on many complexities. First, for purchasing and accessing ebook content, vendors require license agreements. These agreements contain terms of use and restrictions on access. Second, ebooks are priced differently from print. Instead of the traditional print list price (or list price with a discount), the price of an ebook is generally the list price plus a percentage. The final price is determined by the business model selected, the number of people who will use the book, or the size of a library's user group. Third, new business models were developed—and continue to be developed—to fit the diverse needs of libraries and vendors. Many of these models are very different from traditional print purchase models. Fourth, the notion of ownership has come into question with ebooks. Do libraries actually own the content, or is it leased? Libraries must circle back to the license agreement to determine the answer to this question.

#### Business models

There are a variety of business models available for purchasing ebooks. Several options are one book/one user, multiuser, unlimited simultaneous use, subscription, patron-driven acquisition, and short-term loan (aka pay per use). Depending on the model selected, a library may own the title in perpetuity (perpetual access) or use the content for a designated period of time (lease). Many vendors also require libraries to pay ongoing access fees. Fees may be waived if a negotiated purchase amount is spent with the vendor annually. However, some vendors, such as OverDrive, calculate annual fees based on existing collection use data. Libraries that choose not to pay the access fees could lose the content. Therefore, it is imperative that librarians carefully read the license agreement to determine if ebook content can be used when access fees are withheld.

#### Publishers, aggregators, and wholesalers



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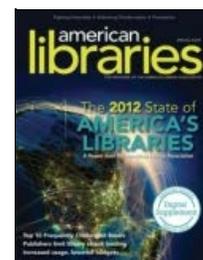
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#### CURRENT ISSUE



The State of America's Libraries, 2012



Ebooks can be purchased directly from publishers, through aggregators (vendors that distribute content from multiple publishers), or wholesalers (vendors that distribute print and electronic content from publishers and aggregators). Keeping their prime directive in mind, libraries should investigate the opportunities and challenges of purchasing ebooks from all vendor types. When buying directly from publishers, libraries have more room for price negotiation since there is no intermediary. Publishers may be the only vendor for top-producing or backlist titles, providing a larger title list from which to choose content. Furthermore, publishers that offer book, journal, or multimedia content may provide access to all formats through a single interface. Because the interface concentrates on one publisher, unique features may be available to augment the content.

The greatest challenge of purchasing directly from publishers is that some publishers will not negotiate with libraries. Institutions that choose to work with publishers will find themselves negotiating business models and license agreements multiple times. This process will require significant library staff time, particularly for licensing and electronic records management. Moreover, each publisher supplies a unique interface for ebook content. Purchasing from 10 publishers will require libraries to learn, teach, and troubleshoot 10 different interfaces.

## Buying through consortia

Libraries that are members of consortia will discover many benefits in operating as a group when purchasing ebooks. First, libraries can increase their buying power and access larger collections by negotiating as a group. In other words, 20 libraries with \$5,000 each will acquire far more content than a single library with a \$5,000 budget. Second, the ebooks can be shared across a consortium. This loosens the limitations of interlibrary loan—a primary library service that is excluded in most ebook license agreements. Third, libraries in the consortium have equal and consistent access to content. For example, a liberal arts college with fewer than 2,000 students can access the same content as a state university with 25,000 students. Finally, the licensing and technical work can be centralized, saving individual libraries staff time and money.

Despite all these advantages, there are some drawbacks to buying ebooks through a consortium. Determining the content, vendors, business models, and level of access is difficult for one library. Within a consortium, however, this problem is exacerbated by the number of libraries involved. As a result, the unique needs of libraries may not be met by group purchases. Once the best mix of content is finalized, the consortium must negotiate with vendors to determine the price of the ebook collections. The purchasing history of member libraries comes into play in negotiations. Vendors determine how many consortium members have already purchased their titles, and from this they determine a multiplier. The multiplier is the number of times the list price will be paid to provide unlimited simultaneous access to the consortium members. For instance, a consortium with 34 members may negotiate a multiplier of six times the list price. A title with a \$100 list price will cost the consortium \$600. Some consortia say that negotiations among members take as much effort as negotiations with vendors.

## Evaluating vendors

No ebook should be selected, no money exchanged, and no license signed without properly evaluating vendors. Libraries should again visit their prime directive and determine the criteria most important to their purchase decision. Once criteria or questions are determined, the easiest way to conduct the evaluation is by tracking data through a matrix or spreadsheet. There are several good examples online that can be adapted by libraries. Equally as important, ebook publishers and aggregators have existing clients. Find them. Ask them questions. Solicit their advice.

Transitioning to ebook purchases in libraries offers many opportunities and challenges. These challenges, however, are not insurmountable. New business models continue to emerge. Changes and improvements are occurring in the industry every day. These changes will continue as publishers, libraries, and vendors experiment with the growing market of ebooks. The most important thing that librarians must do in this changing environment is to articulate clear ebook purchasing goals. With these goals in mind, libraries need to find the content they desire, seek the best price possible, determine sustainable business models, analyze license agreements, and evaluate vendors to effectively purchase ebooks.

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“Since the future is already here, we can see that many publishers are placing bets on a declining library market. I think that's the prudent thing to do. The evidence for this is that librarians keep telling us that their...

”

Joseph Esposito, “

Predicting the Present,” in *The Scholarly Kitchen*, Mar. 19.

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SUE POLANKA is head of reference/instruction at Wright State University Libraries and editor of *No Shelf Required: 2: Use and Management of Electronic Books* (ALA Editions, 2012). She is the moderator of *No Shelf Required*, the popular blog on E-books and Libraries. This article is taken from the introduction to the November/December issue of *Library Technology Reports*.

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## COMMENTS

### REFERRED TO THIS COLUMN

I recently referred to this column in my blog post titled “Annealing the Library”. It is available at <http://scitechsociety.blogspot.com/2012/04/annealing-library.html>

In the blog, I argue against library-mediated digital lending. I hope you find the critique interesting.

—Eric.

Submitted by **Eric F. Van de Velde** (not verified) on Wed, 04/18/2012 - 10:55.

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