Ask the Aggregators

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Ask the Aggregators

Last November, I moderated a session at the Thirtieth Annual Charleston Conference called “Ask an Aggregator.” Panelists—Kevin Sayar, president of ebrary; Kari Paulson, president of EBL; Rich Rosy, vice president for library services at Ingram Digital; and Tim Collins, president of EBSCO—representing four e-book aggregators fielded a variety of questions from the audience. There were many similarities between the aggregators, each boasting a strong commitment to providing service, expanding title lists, and offering a variety of business models. One important thing I learned was the difficulty aggregators have in negotiating rights with publishers. Every time an aggregator wants to change a business model, these rights need to be negotiated. This can be a daunting task, to say the least, but demonstrates why change is not instantaneous. Below is a summary of the Q&A session.

BKL: Which business models do you support?

Ebrary: We offer subscription packages and over 300,000 titles through perpetual access, a majority of these for single users. Ebrary recently launched a patron-driven acquisition model for perpetual access and is working to get contracts for short-term loan.

EBL: Our approach from the outset has been perpetual access (over 150,000 titles), but we offer a variety of short-term-loan and pay-per-view models (over 250,000 titles). EBL has offered a demand-driven model since 2004 and also offers a patented nonlinear lending model that allows 225 views per book (single or multiuser access). We also utilize rights for chapters so that chapters can be grouped together in course packs.

Ingram Digital: We offer perpetual access on most titles (more than 260,000), 90 percent of which are multiuser, and have some subscription models. Additionally, we are testing short-term-loan options and hope to launch an ILL model in the next few months.

EBSCO: Over 300,000 titles are available for perpetual access (one-book, one-user model), but we are currently negotiating with publishers to gain additional rights for multiuser, loan/lease, and subscription models.

BKL: Do you have any business models for reference titles?

The consensus was that though it is difficult to have a different business model for a specific type of content, reference may be mediated out of a demand-driven workflow because of higher prices.

BKL: Can you provide some standardization for printing and downloading?

Aggregators agreed this was a difficult thing to argue with because making the student’s research easier is what they are all striving to do. All were willing to be supportive but say there is a balance to everything, and everyone needs to have patience while the industry develops. Some of the printing and downloading options differ because of the rights gathered from publishers. Once the aggregators gather more use data to show publishers, they may be able to come to some consensus on this.

BKL: Is your content available on mobile devices?

Ebrary: Content works on web-enabled devices, and we are coming out next year with an application to optimize the experience.

EBL: Because EBL uses the Adobe Digital Editions format, content can be loaded on most e-book readers, except the Kindle.

Ingram Digital: A large part of our business is retail, and as a result, we have a lot of apps. We are working to accommodate library demands for mobile content.

EBSCO: Existing content is available on iPhones and iPads using the Bluefire reader, and we are working now to make the content available on as many devices as possible.

BKL: Whose responsibility is it to archive e-books?

Ebrary: It’s everyone’s responsibility, and one solution isn’t the be-all and end-all. We need to have multiple solutions.

EBL: We are in need of more robust solutions. EBL provides a copy in free unencrypted PDF that can be accessed on a particular machine at the local level. It can be printed in full to serve as a preservation copy and can be circulated. This is in no way a solution, but it is a backup plan.

Ingram Digital: It is our responsibility—publishers, libraries, and aggregators. We need to come to a solution collectively, and there will be a myriad of solutions.

EBSCO: We have a relationship with OCLC where content is stored as part of a dark archive, but this is an area that needs discussion.

BKL: What keeps you up at night? Are there competitors out there beyond each other?

Ebrary: Google. It has such a far reach with billions of searches on a monthly basis. We want our search to be just as easy but with better results.

EBL: Competition is vital to continue innovation, and although we want to standardize many of our services (downloading, printing, mobile access), this inhibits new ideas. Competition keeps us thinking ahead.

Ingram Digital: Publishers. It’s their content, and many want to offer it on their own platforms.

EBSCO: Library funding. We want to drive use on library systems because use drives revenue, but use can also drive library funding.

Sue Polanka is Head of Reference Instruction, Wright State University Libraries, Dayton, Ohio. Her blog, No Shelf Required, deals with issues surrounding e-books.