

The Work of the Subscription Agent

Introduction

This paper endeavours to cover the work of subscription agents in general, but with particular emphasis on the services offered by members of the Association of Subscription Agents and Intermediaries (ASA).

The generic term for the publications supplied through subscription agents is serials. These may also be known as journals, periodicals, magazines and series. A serial may be published on a regular basis, e.g. weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually, etc., or at irregular intervals. They may be published in a variety of formats – online, print, CD-ROM, etc. Although most serials continue indefinitely, some have a limited lifespan.

In addition agents supply monographic series, which are either shipped direct by the publishers, or handled through the agent. These publications are often invoiced at the time of supply of each volume, unlike subscriptions to journals, which are charged annually in advance and usually posted direct by the publisher.

There has always been a danger of oversimplifying the process of acquisition and supply. The library user's view is quite straightforward. You order a year's subscription. You pay the supplier's bill, and there is nothing to do except check in the copies as they arrive a few days after publication. There is often a similar view in publishers' offices. It is regarded as a simple clerical operation, suitable for low-grade staff. It does not matter if arbitrary decisions are made about the format, title, extra volumes, etc. Worst of all, because it is a simple clerical operation, when a computer package comes along they adopt it, often with disastrous results. However, in the last few years, publishers and agents have increasingly shared their experiences, and the position has greatly improved.

How to acquire serials

It seems that, in spite of economic constraints in libraries, the number of serials continues to increase. To obtain even a small percentage of these, what are the librarian's options?:

- To order direct – in fact some publishers actively encourage this
- To centralise through one reputable agent who would provide value-added services
- To order domestic journals through a domestic dealer and overseas journals from an overseas dealer, or even by agent in country of origin
- To order periodicals through a subscription agent, and irregulars and book series through a bookseller
- To choose an agent/bookseller who offers a complete service for all publications
- To use (for large holdings) two or more agents.

The Subscription Agent in the 21st century

Subscription agents have been around for a good many years. The first was WH Everett and Son Ltd, founded in 1793 and, by 1809, Dawsons were delivering journals by stagecoach. However, in the last ten years many long-established agents, including both Everetts and Dawsons, have disappeared as a result of takeovers, mergers or simply ceasing to trade. Why?:

- It is a highly specialised job and, if it is to be done well, requires heavy investment in computer technology and skilled staff.

- There are very few start-ups of new subscription agents, at least in the western world. However, the introduction of the internet and electronic journals may change this picture.
- The large, established agents are getting bigger and swallowing up smaller ones.
- There must be a high volume of business to cover operating costs from publishers' generally wafer-thin discounts.
- Traditional revenue streams have been eroded due to a variety of factors. These include the rise of library consortia forcing down or eliminating agent service charges, revenue-rich STM e-journal content being ordered direct from the publisher, agents choosing or feeling compelled by the customer to compete with each other on price, and the numerous developmental costs associated with reorienting their business to meet the challenges of the online journals world.

Most of the reputable agents worldwide belong to the ASA. Its aims and objectives are:

- To set and maintain standards of service
- To improve publisher/agent relations.
- To take action when agents' and subscribers' interests are threatened, e.g. imposition of VAT, increased postage rates, etc.
- To maintain friendly competition between each other – we are not a cartel
- To invite publishers to the meetings to discuss and resolve mutual problems
- To provide a means of feeding back the concerns and wishes of subscribers to publishers and vice versa.

The advantages of using an agent

While this paper is slanted towards the supply of serials to libraries, it should not be forgotten that some members of the ASA encourage orders from individual subscribers and businesses as well as institutions. They may also specialise in certain subjects such as the Biological Sciences, for example, and act as distributors for publishers in their particular field.

The supply of periodicals relies on mutual trust between the librarian, agent and publisher, and it usually works well. Large sums of money change hands before any goods are received, which is quite contrary to normal commercial practice. Most agents do not see the titles they are selling because they are posted direct to subscribers (apart from when a library utilises one of the agent consolidation services). It is a high volume operation and without integrity and mutual confidence the system fails.

Since the failure of divine/RoweCom, it is now seen as vitally important that the agent is financially sound and has adequate resources to run the business. The agent forms a vital link in the information chain of author, publisher, librarian and reader. Everyone likes a quiet life with the minimum hassle and by providing an efficient service the agents hope to achieve this.

A librarian concerned about possible service charges should consider how much it costs his/her institution to raise an order and pay a publisher direct, particularly if it is in a foreign currency, added to which is the cost of dealing direct for claims, etc. This cost may be far higher than the service charge made by the agent. Although agents may be unable to offer discounts as such, it may be possible for the librarian to deposit money in advance and benefit from interest that this earns. This is a useful scheme, as many librarians are not allowed to invest through the normal channels themselves.

The agent should be the expert who relieves the library of a large administrative load by providing a convenient and reliable method of procuring print and electronic journals from all parts of the world. A good analogy is the travel agent who:

- Knows the ropes
- Maintains accurate, up-to-date information
- Can manage currencies
- Saves time, worry and trouble.

The service for librarians

The good subscription agent will be offering many or all of the following services to librarians:

- Maintain accurate and easily accessible records with common expiry dates, wherever possible
- Provide gateway access to subscribed electronic journals
- Maintain up-to-date prices and journal information, backed up by a comprehensive collection of reference sources for tracing out-of-the-way titles
- Efficiently process new subscriptions from the many thousands of possible suppliers
- Avoid breaks in supply by renewing in good time
- Offer a choice of whether subscriptions are handled on a one-year-only basis or a standing order basis
- Produce accurate invoices, observing the customer's special requirements, including firm pricing, one-line invoice, tax rules, etc. which is something the publishers will not be able to do for libraries who deal direct. An increasing number of libraries now require machine-readable invoices.
- Respond effectively to claims for missing issues and other queries. Provide advance information about delays in publication, title changes, etc.
- Produce catalogues and price quotations
- Arrange for specimen copies to be sent
- Pay publishers promptly to avoid breaks in the supply, and be able to pay in the various currencies of the world
- Provide one source of information and build up a good personal relationship with the librarian
- Reduce the library's overheads by taking on much of the workload, particularly at renewal time
- Establish good relationships with publishers and become familiar with their individual working methods
- Aid the library as much as possible with budgeting and financial management, e.g. by offering credit terms, and a repayment plan which allows librarians to make the best use of their funds in a time of declining budgets
- Participate in joint initiatives to assist with finding solutions to strategic issues affecting the Library
- Provide management reports, which help the librarian to manage the collection.

Examples are:

- Three-year price comparison giving the amount and percentage of increase in price
- Subject lists which show how much is spent in each subject area
- Country of origin – showing what geographical areas a library is buying from
- Bibliographic holding lists – publisher, frequency, title changes, etc.
- Complete holdings lists indicating status of publication – delayed titles, temporarily suspended, etc.
- Publisher lists – all titles published by a particular publisher
- Union listing
- Foreign language lists
- Claims limits lists.

- Provide serial control systems, and electronic message switching services and on-line enquiry facilities.
- Supply back issues and CD-ROM-based subscriptions.

Working together: the agent and the librarian

The journal records

Keeping track of journal changes is a full-time job. There is a steady flow of information throughout the year, with a peak in the summer when mailings are sent out asking publishers for their new prices for the following year. The replies flow in over a period of six months or more. Ideally publishers should respond before 31 July, in order that the main renewal invoices contain up-to-date prices, and additional charges at a later date are avoided. Increasingly, prices are not established until much later in the subscription year. Many agents notify any price changes which are considered to be excessive. The agent's title database is the main bibliographic tool. It is backed up by a comprehensive collection of reference sources.

The customer record

This contains full details of each customer and their special requirements, and new orders are checked against this to ensure the records are up to date and accurate.

The subscription record

This holds full details about each subscription, including title, period covered, amount charged and date of invoice, customer order number and date, etc.

New orders

The following requirements should be clearly stated:

- Address to which copies are to be sent
- Address for invoices, if it is different
- Order number and date
- Clear instructions when to start. Unless the agent is told otherwise, it is usual to go back to the beginning of the current volume. As the year proceeds this becomes increasingly difficult, as the early issues tend to go out of print. Many US publishers will not backdate to the beginning of the year. It has to be decided whether to supply from the first available issue, or wait until the following year. Some general guidance on what is preferred is helpful.
- State whether the subscription is to run until cancelled or for one year only
- Should the agent take advantage of multi-year rates when these are available?
- Is it an existing subscription formerly obtained either direct or through another source?

Renewals

In general reminders and invoices sent direct by the publishers may be thrown away, unless they are final demands, in which case they should be forwarded to the agent to check. It could be that a payment has not been correctly recorded by the publisher. Other exceptions are:

- When a unique publisher subscription reference must be quoted
- If the expiration date is different
- If there are special early renewal savings (forward with request to process and bill early)
- If there is a special rate.

Agents operate two renewal systems:

- Standing orders (until cancelled). The subscriptions are automatically renewed each year unless cancellation instructions are received. Agents can automatically provide a listing of subscriptions so cancellation decisions can be made ahead of invoicing. Once the renewal cycle is underway and the publishers have been paid, it is often difficult to obtain a refund for a cancellation. Any library supplied on a standing order basis with problems of budget cuts, or lack of foreign exchange, should ask the agent to put a stop on all renewals until the position becomes clear.
- One year only. A reminder list is sent out in the summer and the subscriptions will not be renewed until specific instructions are received from the library. It is important to send renewal instructions as soon as possible, certainly by the end of November, otherwise there is a risk of breaks in the supply.

Claims for missing issues and content

These are a constant headache for librarians, agents and publishers. In an imperfect world this problem will never be solved completely but we do hope to alleviate it. It is a major source of complaint from librarians. The agent can help by offering a speedy claims service, backed up by regular progress reports. There can be no set formula for when, and when not, to claim. The best guide is the receipt pattern. What is important is that claims should be done on a regular basis, as many publishers have a time limit during which they will replace free of charge. The following claiming schedule may be used as a very general guide, making due allowance for country of origin:

Dailies – claim after ten days from receipt of last issue

Weeklies – claim after two weeks from receipt of last issue

Monthlies – claim after two months from receipt of last issue

Quarterlies – claim after five months from receipt of last issue.

There are a number of reasons for claims:

- The customer's original instructions were misleading
- The agent has made a mistake
- Inefficiencies in the publisher's office, e.g. failure to process payments correctly
- Breakdown in postal services
- Strikes and industrial disputes
- Revolutions and wars
- Underprinting
- Inefficient checking-in in the library, failure to record change of title, etc. It is not a suitable task for inexperienced temporary staff.
- Poorly designed automated serials control systems in libraries, which generate premature or invalid claims
- Multi-year subscriptions cut off after first year. This is quite a common problem.
- Problems over multiple copies. It seems very difficult for a publisher to correctly register a second, third, etc. subscription.
- Incorrect address plates
- Insufficient wrapping
- Use of inefficient so-called 'fulfilment' agencies
- Insufficient or no licence details
- Missing or insufficient access activation information
- Timing of internet and print content availability
- Incorrect IP details.

The publishers maintain that a high proportion of missing issues arrive or are subsequently found, and for this reason some of them automatically reject first claims if, from their records, it appears that the copy was correctly sent. Others require proof of payment before they will deal with a claim. This is one of the reasons why agents discourage claiming direct.

Increasingly publishers are providing agents with up-to-date publication status reports now frequently in electronic format. These enable the agent to trap premature claims and immediately report back to the librarian. The extension of a subscription to compensate for missing issues is a poor substitute for the issues themselves, and is not liked by librarians. If it is a particularly important journal most agents will try and get a second-hand copy, although this is often a lengthy business.

Duplicate copies

The most common cause of duplication is premature claiming. The delayed copy can arrive after the claim has been sent. The original copy can then be followed a few weeks later by the replacement. The agent should be informed if continuous duplication takes place. It is most helpful to include the address labels from both wrappers as these aid the publisher in tracing the error. Duplicate copies should not be returned unless requested to do so.

Cancellations

The best way to cancel is to allow the subscription to lapse upon expiry. Once a subscription is underway it is rather like stopping a supertanker – it can be done but you need plenty of warning. If, however, a librarian has a good reason for cancelling mid-term, most agents will attempt to obtain a refund for the unexpired portion of the subscription, but the agent cannot refund unless a refund has been received from the publisher. The renewal cycle starts up in September. It is important if a library has a standing order for the supply of journals, and there is the possibility of substantial cancellations because of budget cuts, etc., that the agent should be warned not later than the end of September, when a stop can be put on all the renewals until the position becomes clear.

Automation

For some years the world's leading subscription agents have invested heavily to computerise their in-house routines. These databases are now available to their customers on the internet. In addition, there are the distributed processing systems for the complete management of serials within the library. It is important for librarians to talk to the agents, in order to keep up to date on what is available.

Invoicing and delays in payment

It is standard practice for the agent to pay the publisher in advance. In fact, virtually all publishers demand this. It follows that the agent expects prompt payment of invoices, otherwise it is necessary to borrow money to finance the renewals.

Particular problems arise in countries where there are difficulties over obtaining foreign exchange. Agents who allow credit have found themselves waiting for up to a year, or more, before payment has been received. Taking into account the cost of borrowing, plus the low discount given by publishers, it is obvious that in these circumstances nearly all the profit on an order is wiped out.

Therefore, most agents now send proforma invoices to libraries that are unable to pay promptly. No subscriptions are renewed until payment is received. If it is not received until well into the new subscription year a very severe problem arises, because in many cases the publishers are unable to backdate the subscriptions, and the early issues are out of print. When the payment is received from July onwards, it is advisable not to attempt to renew the subscriptions but to use the money for the following year. Eventually the issues for the year that has been missed have to be obtained from back issue dealers. This is a lengthy and difficult task.

Periodical price indexes

Agents publish periodical price indexes compiled for the use of librarians in their budget preparations. This is a good illustration of how agents can help librarians by sharing the information available in their databases.

Back issues

Agents have a special department to deal with back issues and microforms. This is quite uncommon in the USA where there are special jobbers who specialise in this type of business, and the subscription agents only deal with current subscriptions. The good back issues department should hold a comprehensive stock and issue catalogues at regular intervals. However, the sheer volume of periodicals is forcing most agents to hold increasingly limited stocks. Budgets for retrospective purchasing are very limited; space may also be a problem.

Agent consolidation service

This can be an efficient and rapid means of distribution but can be more expensive, as the agent takes on much of the work normally carried out in the library. Even so, conditions for libraries in some countries can make it cost effective, and it does virtually eliminate the missing issue problem. The journals are posted to the agent's address, they are checked in, missing issues claimed, the contents of each parcel listed electronically, and the library notified that the consignment has been sent by airfreight, together with the details of the airway bill, flight number, etc. This service is particularly popular in countries where there is a lack of expertise and trained staff, rather than a shortage of money.

The agent has to make a handling charge plus the cost of airfreight. It is a labour-intensive service requiring extensive premises and staff. In some developing countries this is the only satisfactory way for a library, and it saves publishers from big claim problems. Even in the UK many libraries are moving to consolidation as part of the general drive to outsource. Although mailed to the agent, most publishers insist that they know the ultimate destination, particularly important in view of the e-component, and that the appropriate subscription rate is charged.

Tendering/bidding

Tendering for subscription services is becoming more commonplace, as libraries and their controllers seek to obtain the best value for money and in some cases to meet regional and national regulations. While agents have no qualms about competitive tendering, they are concerned about the increased workload being required for less return and often later payment.

Periodicals are different from other commodities and consumables familiar to purchasing officers. It is almost impossible to obtain quotations based exactly on the same criteria. This is often because of price changes and currency fluctuations, but there are other difficulties. It is most important for the librarian to be in control, and aware of the amount of work involved in preparing, evaluating, implementing and monitoring. It can be argued that asking several agents to price large lists is a waste of time for all concerned, because they will not be like for like. Perhaps a better alternative is to invite the agent to explain his pricing policy, and to price only a sample selected by the library.

Advantages for libraries: a summary of the services offered

Administrative:

- A single source of all orders, claims and renewals, for both print and online
- Detailed bibliographic and management information
- Simplification of the renewal process by provision of single checklists
- Online claims and ordering systems

- Reporting service on the status of all orders, claims, cancellations and queries
- Provision of bibliographic tools like agents' serials catalogues
- Consolidation services for the complete collection, check-in and delivery of issues
- Checklists split by budget and cost centre codes
- Query handling.

Cost-effective:

- Minimal invoicing in a single currency for a complete collection
- Discounts associated with invoice pre-payment
- Local point of contact for telephone or written communications.

Technological:

- Provision of e-journal access and authentication systems
- Online access to agents' databases for bibliographic data
- Agents are working with the major library systems suppliers in the area of EDI
- Provision of content hosting services to publishers – saving cost and administration.

A critical look at publishers, agents and libraries

If the common aim is to get the right journal to the right reader as quickly as possible, what are the factors working against this?

In the publisher's office:

The problems are only compounded when they introduce a new computer system, which is badly designed and poorly implemented. Even now, extraordinary things still happen, like the company who had their new system designed by a software house who forgot to consult the manager of the subscription department! It is not surprising to find in these circumstances a system which is accessed by a unique number rather than the name of the subscriber. It is not unknown for the unique numbers to contain up to twenty digits. The absence of a link between the payment and the subscription records means that claims can only be satisfied if the agent or subscriber produces proof of payment in the form of a copy of a cancelled cheque.

Increasingly in the USA publishers are using fulfilment houses. All too often this is a misnomer. Although keeping control of the editorial and production processes, the publisher appoints a fulfilment house to maintain the mailing list and distribute the journal. The more popular mass-market magazine publishers have used this method for some years. Recently it has spread to the more academic and technical type of journal, which is regrettable. The publisher loses control of this vital part of the business. All the evidence seems to be that there is a degradation in the service and an increase in the number of claims and queries. Other problems can be caused by the appointment of a sole distributor, who does not hold stock and merely acts as a forwarding agent. The prices charged may also be inflated. It is most important for new subscription rates to be fixed by the end of August in time for the autumn renewal run. Very often the publishers' systems for dealing with incorrect payments are slow and cumbersome.

Librarians are particularly irritated by the following:

- Only printing enough copies for the current mailing list, then being unable to satisfy claims and back date new subscriptions and late renewals
- Slowness in starting up a new subscription
- Producing extra volumes during the year for which additional payment is required; varying the number of issues in a volume
- Automatically supplying expensive supplements or CD-ROM versions without first seeking confirmation that they are required

- Variable policy for issuing title page, contents list and index
- Unsympathetic, rigid cancellation policies – there are often genuine reasons for late cancellation, particularly in a time of sudden budget cuts
- Price increases greatly in excess of the average
- Unrealistic claims policy which does not take account of distance
- Accepting payment in advance, and then falling severely behind with the publishing schedule; sometimes trying to catch up by publishing double numbers
- Failure to check mailing list for garbled addresses, and duplicate entries
- Sending first, second, third reminders to subscribers who order through agents
- Using cheap wrappers which tear, fall off and do not offer any protection from possible damage
- Making title changes at the whim of an editor, and being blissfully unaware of the extra work this causes serial cataloguers and subscription agents.

In the agent's office:

Just as publishers vary in size and sophistication, so do agents. Almost certainly the 80-20 rule applies, i.e. most of a publisher's business will be with members of the ASA, but most of the trouble will be with other small agents and libraries that deal direct.

In particular a bookshop without a proper subscription department is unlikely to be efficient. There will almost certainly be delays in payment, particularly if foreign currencies are involved. Too many orders will be referred back as 'unable to trace, please let us know the address of the publisher'. The work is, as everyone knows, very seasonal and if the agent still uses a manual system very substantial backlogs will be inevitable in the autumn. Failure to keep accurate journal records will lead to incorrect payments and the inability to record vital information correctly. If periodicals are only a sideline for the bookseller, it will almost certainly be a Cinderella department, run on a shoestring. At the other end of the scale, there is a danger that very large agents may neglect personal service and fail to communicate satisfactorily with their customers.

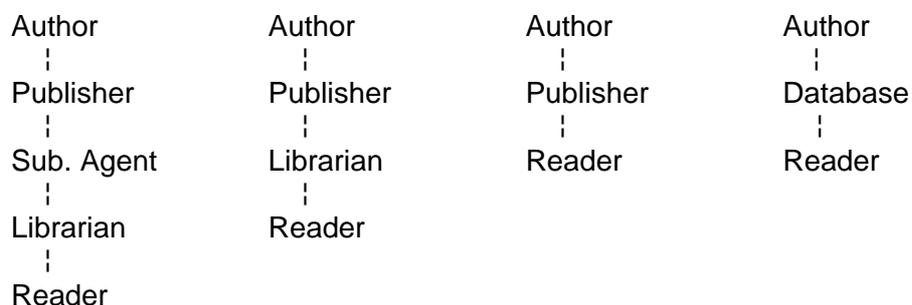
In the librarian's office:

Problems are caused by:

- Frequent change of agent or not actively working with the agent to communicate issues
- Annual tendering/bidding. Subscriptions to periodicals are different from other goods. If the librarian is not in control, great problems can arise.
- Obtain multiple subscriptions from different sources
- Paying an invoice direct, when the standing order is with an agent
- Poor checking-in, leading to unnecessary claims. This job is not suitable for temporary, inexperienced staff.
- Poorly designed and implemented automated serial control systems
- The status of the periodicals department varies from library to library; generally much of the routine work is done by inexperienced part-time, or very junior staff and the error rate is high
- Mis-shelving
- Late cancellations
- Allowing the 'query' pile to get out of hand
- Failure to claim promptly
- Failure to renew on time
- Failure to monitor the periodicals regularly
- Failure to notice title changes
- Failure to update Library Systems with current information.

The Future

There are a number of variations in the information chain:



At present serials are still the most dynamic force in the information chain and are the sharp edge for the advancement of knowledge, which is later consolidated into book form. Much debate is taking place about the future of the hard-copy journal, and whether or not it will be replaced by electronic versions and document delivery services, etc. Our view is that it is here to stay for a good many years, but increasingly will be complemented by new formats. It is convenient, cheap and easy to provide reading spaces for readers to study journals and, as is often required, several journals at a time. There is the advantage of portability, whether the reader is at home, on a train, or in a library. The hard-copy journal can also reach the most out-of-the-way parts of the world where even a typewriter would be regarded as advanced technology. We do, however, believe that there are certain fast-moving subject areas producing a wealth of information where online journals and databases have already come into their own. We believe that whatever the method used for the transfer of information – hard copy, or online – there is a role for the expertise and adaptability of the subscription agent.

Finally, we emphasise that the supply of periodicals relies on mutual trust and respect between librarian, agent and publisher. We must all work together and not be afraid to take part in frank and constructive discussions, which is why members of the ASA are keen to participate in conferences, seminars, workshops, etc.

Whatever your role in the information chain, we believe there are four key criteria for success which are:

- Expertise
- Technology
- Service
- Commitment.

John Merriman (written when John was Secretary of the ASA and updated in 1997)

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