

REFERENCE BACKTALK

À la Carte, not Buffet: A New Vision for E-Resources

By Peter McCracken

The constantly falling costs of creating electronic resources have made it possible for just about anyone to build a service that might be useful to librarians and their patrons. My brother and I have done that with *Shiplindex.org*, a site that helps people do research on specific vessels. It tells historians and genealogists what books, journals, CD-ROMs, databases, websites, and more mention the ships they're researching, and there are currently over 1.5 million citations in the premium database. As my brother describes it, "It's a niche product that has wide application."

But with a plethora of small online resources available, how can a reference librarian be expected to know which relevant databases exist and how to use them? Even a decade ago, lists of subject-appropriate databases were a poor way of getting patrons to the appropriate resource; with a much larger collection of resources on the market, that option is completely untenable.

I believe there is a better way. I envision per-use fees for select databases in next-generation discovery layers, such as Serials Solutions's *Summon*, EBSCO's *Discovery Service*, Ex Libris's *Primo Central*, and others. (Though I cofounded *Serials Solutions*, I left 18 months ago and have no role in the development or promotion of *Summon*.) In a nutshell, this is an à la carte approach to electronic resources, rather than today's buffet approach. For low-use databases, libraries would pay for the actual content they use instead of unneeded unlimited access. Content from these databases would only be available through the discovery layers, which would track usage. Those choosing unlimited usage would still have access to the vendor's primary interface, which may remain quite valuable to them. That content would, as always, also be available via the discovery layer.

Partners in access

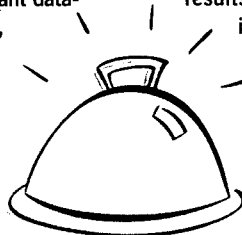
I see three partners in making this work: the discovery layer, the content vendor, and the library. The discovery layer vendor negotiates agreements with content providers to offer their content to libraries. When content from a vendor is found to be relevant to a patron's search, the content is offered via the discovery layer's interface.

The discovery layer tracks views of the content and collects payment from the library on behalf of the content vendor. Only the content that is delivered is paid for. Libraries can add a nearly unlimited number of databases to their offerings through the discovery layer; they'll only pay for what their patrons use. In addition, there is a single place where their patrons will uncover this data, which removes the need for learning (and remembering) numerous products and interfaces.

The discovery layer then takes on a new role, as payment manager. When a result from a niche database (such as *Shiplindex.org*) is served to the patron and the library does not subscribe directly

to the database, then the discovery layer software will track the result, credit the vendor's account, and debit the library's account plus a small service fee. If the patron clicks on the vendor's result, then an additional credit will go to the vendor and an additional debit (and fee) will go against the library. Software used to track advertisement impressions served and click-throughs could easily be converted to track this delivery.

The result, in an ideal world, is that a search done at a research university would return the same results as the same search done at a community college. Serving up the results would cost the community college more, because it subscribes directly to far fewer databases than the research university does. But it is worth it. The community college isn't subscribing directly to as many databases, so it has more money available for this patron-informed resource acquisition.



Outstanding issues

Of course, cost-management issues must be addressed. Would libraries be willing to share control of spending on e-resources with patrons? This is quickly becoming the norm for ebooks, and what is interlibrary borrowing but patron-informed resource acquisition?

A larger concern comes with an ethical question: what if a library with lots of content available in this manner finds that its resource budget is being used up more quickly than it expected? It could manage how much is being spent via the discovery layer interface and request that fewer high per-cost results be returned. Again, this kind of ratcheting down is easily done with advertising-management software. But it means that a search done at the end of the month would have fewer results than a search done at the beginning, and that's clearly a problem that must be carefully addressed.

This approach has problems, not the least being that it hasn't yet been built. But the benefits it would provide are significant: it's good for small vendors that might not be able to otherwise get their products into libraries with limited budgets. It's good for small libraries that can spend their resource dollars much more efficiently. It's good for large libraries that will find many places to save money. It's good for discovery vendors as a new product they can offer—one based directly on usage. But most important, it's good for patrons and librarians, as it gets the best possible information to the largest number of people in the most efficient manner.

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