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Journal subscriptions: through the agents or not? Cost-benefit calculation and new perspectives towards the electronic format.

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Abstract

The Library of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità – ISS (National Institute of Health) is the most important biomedical library in Italy. The ISS Library different collections cover multidisciplinary areas (from health physics to pharmacology, veterinary sciences, environmental sciences and so on). Nowadays, journal titles held by the Library are about 9000; the current ones are about 2250 of which the foreign journal subscriptions at the moment (without considering materials such as advances, progress, etc.) amount to 1330. Since the first beginning these journals have been made subscribed by the Library through the agents. An analysis of the cost-benefit calculation is given in order to understand, from the experience, whether or not this kind of acquisition is convenient. There will be a presentation of statistical data from the last three years concerning the journals prices fixed by the publishers compared to the costs of the intermediaries. At the same time, the efficiency and the effectiveness of the services offered by the agents are illustrated and evaluated. Finally, it will be analyzed if the present situation can be challenged by the electronic format which seems to be a compelling alternative in forcing down subscription costs (consortia and/or special agreements with the publishers).

Introduction

The provision of information by libraries is essential to the scientific activity. In particular, biomedical libraries are the prime access route to the basic knowledge for most scientists and act as the paramount medium for accessing original articles. Consequently, journals handle accounts for almost one-third of the work faced by the libraries, especially the large ones. The first step of this work, in order to manage the storage and the dissemination process, is the acquisition manner. In this framework, journals purchasing through the agent, the actual acquisition policy carried out by the ISS Library, will be analysed and discussed.

Background

The Library of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità – ISS (National Institute of Health) is the most important biomedical library in Italy. The ISS Library collections cover multidisciplinary areas (from health physics to pharmacology, veterinary sciences, environmental sciences, life sciences and so on); at the moment, journal titles held by the Library are about 9000. Since the first beginning the current journals have been subscribed through the agent. Nowadays, current titles are

2250 of which the foreign journal subscriptions, at the time being, amount to 1330. The overall expenditure for these subscriptions increases of about 14% per year and in 2001 it exceeded 3.000.000.000 of Italian Lire.* In this context, the cost of journals published in the United States and United Kingdom has a big repercussion over the global expenditure: from 1999 to 2001 the incidence of the American and Great Britain journals purchasing grew from 38% up to 48% of the annual budget. That happened not only because of the number of American and Great Britain subscribed periodicals or the physiological annual rising price, but also for another reason: the fluctuation of the exchange rate. American and Great Britain journals are paid in US dollars and GB pounds respectively: over the last three years the exchange rate of these foreign currencies versus the domestic currency (ITL) rose exponentially. So, while in 1999 for one dollar it was needed 1676,81 Italian Lire, in 2001 it cost 2234,07 Italian Lire; in the same time, one pound that in 1999 cost 2865,5 Italian Lire in 2001 rose up to 3460,71 Italian Lire. The situation described above is better explained looking at the tables below (tab. 1-2) where the cost of some Great Britain and American titles that did not change their cover price in the past three years, is compared to the amount paid in Italian Lire for the same number of titles.

Tab.1 - Great Britain journals unchanged cover price.

Titles	Cover price (£) 1999/2001	ITL cost 1999	ITL cost 2000	ITL cost 2001
Animal Welfare	70	203.330	218.190	246.983
Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health	64	185.903	199.488	225.802
Nerve and Cell Biology	125	363.091	389.626	381.065
New Scientist	105	304.996	327.286	370.475
Tropical Medicine and International Health	416	1.208.365	1.296.674	1.467.743
World Hospitals and Health Services	75	217.855	233.775	264.635
Total	855	2.483.540	2.665.039	2.956.703

*All the values are expressed in Italian Lire (ITL) because referred to a period previous to the adoption of the Euro

Tab.2 – American journals unchanged cover price.

Titles	Cover price (\$) 1999/2001	ITL cost 1999	ITL cost 2000	ITL cost 2001
Bioscience, Biotechnology and Biochemistry	360	588.380	674.230	819.948
Demography	85	144.480	165.561	193.604
Drug Information Journal	225	395.158	438.249	512.484
Food Chemical News	1295	2.201.192	2.522.370	3.177.325
International Journal of Leprosy and other Mycobacterial Diseases	120	203.972	233.733	273.323
Journal of Biochemistry	250	408.597	468.216	569.414
Journal of Cosmetic Science	200	339.952	389.555	455.531
Journal of Health and Social Behavior	120	203.972	233.733	318.880
Journal of Nutritional Science and Vitaminology	145	236.986	271.565	330.253
Library Trends	85	161.350	165.561	209.534
Microbiology and Immunology	255	416.769	477.580	580.810
Stem Cells	195	331.454	379.817	512.484
Total	3335	5.632.262	6.420.170	7.953.590

Agent's policy analysis: prices

During the examined time period (1999-2001), the offer by the agent has been different. While in 1999 and 2000 a discount of 2,50% has been applied by the agent to the cover price, for 2001 a commission of 1,94% has been fixed. A selection of the sharing titles within 1999–2001 has been considered in order to compare the final price requested by the agent versus the publisher's one. The result showed that the purchase through the intermediaries implied a considerable saving for the first two years (1999 = ITL. 22.242.461; 2000 = ITL. 28.219.334) and an additional expenditure of ITL. 29.019.217 for the last one.

Agent's policy analysis: additional services

Besides the economical offer, the additional services provided by the agent should be evaluated. According to the rules stated by the contracts, during the analysed three years, the agent has been in charge, at no additional cost for the Library, of the following duties: consolidation service, anti-theft strips handling, missing issues claim. Consolidation service showed a reliable and time-saving alternative to the conventional manner of receiving and managing journals in the Library. In fact, the weakly delivery of expected issues directly from the agent through a fast post service, allowing to planning the arrivals flow, implied a radical change in work organisation. Furthermore, another benefit came from the availability of all issues providing with magnetic strips: not less than 390 hours of work have been saved per year. Last but not least, the monitoring and check of missing issues in charge to the agent that was responsible for claims, returned a general decrease of missing issues in the collections (less than 0,5% per year).

Conclusion

The subscription to the print journals, through the agents, seems to be, at the moment, the right answer for those libraries that process and manage not less than about a thousand current journals per year. A large number of titles allows, indeed, to absorb commission costs and to keep them at a low rate: the prices fixed by the intermediaries are thus more convenient than a direct purchasing through the publishers. Besides, additional services, improving efficiency and effectiveness, play a positive role to the cost-benefit calculation. Nevertheless in the future, a corner stone could be represented by e-journals, the new frontiers of publishing model. Despite the fact that many problems concerning electronic format have still to be resolved, it is a long-term strategy at the ISS Library to move gradually to the electronic access. The first step in this way has been to join the consortium carried out and managed by the University of Rome La Sapienza (Caspur), for the access to the Elsevier Science Direct data base. This agreement allowed the on-line access not only to the titles subscribed by the ISS Library, but also to the ones subscribed by the other members of the consortium, without any further expenses.

This has then implied an increasing of the on-line accessible titles and in the 2002, with the renewal of the contract, the availability of the whole Elsevier and Kluwer e-journal archives. Additional projects in this direction were foreseen and are already on going in order to reach a further saving on the budget.

This trend will have to be gradual and weighed up (the technical/retrospective archiving problems are to be considered) so that the print subscriptions are and will remain a starting focal point for a careful policy of scientific periodicals acquisition.