
Building a Usable Library Collection

Harry Tuchmayer

Librarians have lost touch with their collections. When new advances in management theory called for participatory management practices that took the employees' needs into account, librarians were quick to become "personnel managers." When automation continued to blossom, we became "information scientists." And it should come as no surprise to see that as those in education return to basics, we too find ourselves thinking along similar lines.

But does a return to basics in the library world really mean returning to the three Rs? Libraries are, above all else, a place for books. But what kind of books should be there? In the past, conventional wisdom had it that libraries should be the storehouses of great literature and impeccable scholarship. Our mission was to educate society and offer to the community a place where those who wanted to could familiarize themselves with "high culture," as a means towards self-improvement. Paperbacks were unheard of and pulp novels rarely raised their "trashy" heads in the stacks. We wanted readers—but we wanted them on our terms. Somehow, we were more concerned with building a collection that we as professionals could be proud of than we were with building one that could and would be used.

Today all libraries, not just public libraries, are at the crossroads. We are faced with a demanding clientele and a publishing industry that is producing more and retaining less. We need to be responsive to these demands by supplying our customers with the books and materials they want and need when they want and need them.

Cornerstones to Collection Building: Identifying Your Users and Their Needs

Each library serves a distinct community of users. Identifying who these users are and what their needs may be is not an easy task. However, it is the necessary first step in attempting to build a

usable library collection. How do we identify user needs? How do we assess strengths and weaknesses of a library collection geared towards serving these needs? Certainly such methods as community surveys, user surveys, and analyzing circulation records will all have certain bits of information that can be used to build a library collection, but we need to do much more than that. We need to pinpoint areas both in nonfiction and fiction where customer demand is present. Business libraries have successfully identified their customers' needs by utilizing SDI services (selective dissemination of information) as a way of earmarking new information and routing it to those people who would be most interested in hearing about it. They have succeeded by knowing what projects certain employees are working on and where their fields of interest lie. Libraries, both public and academic, should do similar things. Branch librarians, for instance, instinctively offer this type of service when they inform regular customers of the publication of Harold Robbins's latest novel or the arrival of an interesting historical biography. Shouldn't we use this approach—our knowledge of all our customers' reading habits and interests—in deciding on the purchase of titles? We need to build viable nonfiction collections in areas of interest to our clientele. This means buying multiple copies of good how-to books for the public library. It means buying multiple copies of the standard scholarly source for the history student at the undergraduate institution. The fact remains that somewhere in the backs of our minds, we have always been able to identify the needs of our customers. The problem is that we have been "unwilling" or "unable" to supply them. Unfortunately, many of us believe, or were taught to believe, that the quantity of titles is more important than the appropriateness of the volumes we have.

Traditionally, academic libraries, especially the four-year institutions, have shied away from multiple copies of a particular title. The incentive has always been to buy as many distinct titles as possible. But does this really serve the clientele? Does it do the undergraduate any good to find an

Harry Tuchmayer is Head of the Technical Services Department of the New Hanover County Public Library in Wilmington.

esoteric title on the American Revolution when any one of three standard sources would have been perfectly acceptable for the report he needed to write? Keeping up with the scholarship in the field, communication with instructors, figuring out what courses are offered, and what requirements are being asked of the students, all play an important part in helping the librarian decide which materials to purchase. Similarly, in the public library, numerous areas can be identified as being "bottomless pits"—areas where an unending number of titles could be provided to a multitude of customers. The question becomes, "Should we provide multiple copies of good sources or look for one more copy of one more title to fill this need?" Librarians ought to spend the time necessary to select standard titles in these areas and then purchase multiple copies of them. This will ultimately provide the customer with a better selection of materials and a greater likelihood of obtaining them. Quality service results from quality collections, and quality collections are built not by the number of titles held but by the usefulness of the titles in the collection.

Building a collection that meets customers' demands does not mean buying "trash." Rather, we should look at collection building in much the same way as any major department store looks at merchandising. Quality stores exist and thrive when their stock meets the varying needs of the customer. In the same fashion, the library has an obligation to provide its customers with all of their literary entertainment and information needs. The local department store has no problem carrying Pierre Cardin and Liz Claiborne clothing on racks across the aisle from Levis and "designerless" brand labels. Why should we in the library world see a problem with multiple copies of *In Search of Excellence* and *Come Love a Stranger* coexisting on the new book shelf? Building a usable collection is synonymous with developing a quality collection. It requires a commitment on the part of the library to actively purchase and collect from the entire range of published materials.

Process of Collection Building: Selection and Acquisition of Materials

Identifying what your customers want is only the first (and perhaps easiest) step in building a usable collection. Selecting the appropriate material and guaranteeing its prompt delivery and speedy access by the customer complete the process.

What we select has a direct bearing on how well our library is used. Unfortunately, in many libraries the selection process is far removed from the demands of the customers. In many academic libraries, faculty selection constitutes the bulk of the monographic selections; in many public libraries, selectors are enticed by salesmen and seduced by reviews. Nowhere in this process are the concerns of the primary users of material placed at the forefront of the selection process.

Reviews in such publications as *Booklist*, *Library Journal*, and most scholarly journals offer competent and sound advice concerning the "quality" of the items in question, yet they provide us with this information months after the date of release. Add to this the lag time involved in the ordering and processing procedures of most libraries, and we are confronted with delays in receiving "new" materials that reach upwards of six months. Does it benefit any of our customers when they wait months for the next Robert Ludlum bestseller or an academic work by the leading scholar in the field?

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Of course, libraries have developed "mechanisms" to deal with this, so we buy bestselling authors without the benefit of reviews and establish approval plans and blanket orders for books by renowned publishers in specified disciplines. Why the dual standard? Why subject the rest of our collections to this standard of "quality" when we turn our heads in the case of some of our most heavily used, or most extensively purchased, materials? Part of the answer is knowledge—we intuitively know what our customers are looking for. And part of the answer is time and the recognition that speed matters. It matters because our customers demand it and the publishing industry requires it.

Short publishing runs and the ever-increasing demands for timely information on the part of all library customers have changed the ground rules for the selection of materials. We must order materials based upon prepublication announcements and reviews; speed up the selection process by creating selection "teams" or committees that are responsible for the selection of materials for

the entire system; streamline the ordering process by centralizing the selection process; and reduce the time it takes to process materials by recognizing that Technical Services is, first and foremost, a public service.

How do we accomplish this? First, let us demand that the periodicals that supply us with reviews shift their emphasis to prepublication. Vendors have already recognized this need by publishing monthly magazines that "mirror" *PW*.¹ Why not insist that *Choice*, *LJ*, *Booklist*, and others offer prepublication reviews? Why not request that scholarly journals run their own reviews from galleys? Use the prepublication sources that are available and use them heavily. Advertising budgets, author tours, and publication runs inform us of the potential demand any title will see. We should stay attuned to these demands, both real and potential, and devise alternate sources of information on books. Keeping in touch with what the local bookstores sell is a good starting point. Local talk shows, popular magazines and upcoming community events also reflect your clientele's interests.

Let us revamp our selection processes to best meet these challenges. First, the public library should create selection teams that meet regularly and decide the fiction and nonfiction book selection for the entire system. The team should be of a manageable size (three to four maximum), meet once every three weeks, and represent all areas of library service, openly soliciting and encouraging suggestions for purchase from all interested staff. Allocate a specific dollar amount to be spent solely on mass market paperbacks. Make this the primary responsibility for each branch librarian. This will allow them to immediately satisfy demand for current literature—a demand that already exceeds 20 per cent of most public libraries' total circulation.² Otherwise, do away with hard and fast budget allocations for each branch and instead purchase to meet demand. Reasonable guidelines should be established, depending on the library's budget and service requirements. Cut down on time-consuming bibliographic checking by staying ahead on orders, centralizing the process of selection, and utilizing different channels for ordering items. Make arrangements with local bookstores to buy paperbacks at a maximum discount. Use your standard high discount vendor for all current purchases and establish different procedures for those items earmarked as collection redevelopment.

Priority must be given to processing new material quickly. Stop relying on technical services departments as backups to traditional public

services and instead realize that fast turnaround time is a public service. Providing new material to your customers before, or at least at the same time as, the local bookstores do informs your clientele that the library does service their needs. (It also reduces the need to buy additional copies of many titles by getting a head start on the reserve list.)

Making the selection of material a priority operation of library services is the ultimate goal of the process of collection building: the emphasis should be placed upon staying current, providing

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your customers with the information that they want, when they want it.

Collection Building as a Total Library Policy: Guaranteeing That the Books Get Used

Buying current material that is in high demand is only part of the process of building a usable library collection. Oftentimes, needs change and holes develop in our collections. Or, as is more often the case in heavily used sections of the library, our collections either cannot support the demands of the customer or have lost a good percentage of the material through attrition. For whatever reason, it is important that the entire collection, both nonfiction and fiction, be examined and evaluated on a regular basis. The objective is to identify strengths and weaknesses in the collection and to make recommendations for weeding and purchasing of materials in order to update the holdings.

Each member of the professional staff should be assigned specific areas of the collection. A major part of each person's responsibility would be to personally examine the holdings and look at the changing activity of the items in that section. Then a detailed report could be prepared to identify which specific areas need to be weeded, where the collection appears to be strong or weak, what areas contain sufficient materials to meet apparent demand and what areas need further strengthening. These reports should be organized around specific LC or Dewey class numbers and a priority ranking of areas deemed most in need of material should be provided. The collection development

librarian could then review these reports against circulation statistics broken down by specific class number. Then some final recommendations concerning where the library should begin its collection redevelopment process can be made.

The by-product of this detailed attention to the collection is three-fold. First, it aids in the purchasing of new materials by reaffirming areas of high demand. It also indicates to those responsible for certain sections why the library *does not need* to purchase just another good title in an area of low demand. New purchases in these areas can therefore be tailored to meet various needs and a realistic attempt at developing a truly "balanced" collection—one where the library has the *appropriate* amount of good material available in all areas of the collection—can be made.

Second, it reminds us that library collections are not static. Unlike our own personal collections of books, library material has a high level of attri-

Why not insist that *Choice*, *LJ*, *Booklist*, and others offer pre-publication reviews?

tion. One cannot reasonably expect all the materials we have purchased over the years to either still be available (items do get lost, stolen, or deteriorate beyond use), or be worth having in the current collection.³

Finally, it brings the entire professional staff back in touch with the primary purpose of the library. Librarians not only need to be aware of what our customers want—we need to be constantly aware of what we have to offer them. This type of attention to the collection is not designed to produce better librarians but better libraries. A nice by-product, of course, is that it *does* produce better librarians.

Our goal, as professionals, is to build a usable library collection that meets the needs of our customers. This goal is our overriding objective, and we must accomplish it with the same zest and enthusiasm we have put into automation and managerial concerns. This is not to say that positive trends in personnel management and automation have not been beneficial to the library world. They have, but the emphasis needs to be shifted to make them beneficial to the process of collection building. Let us restore the importance of this activity to the profession. Library schools must stress collection development as the corner-

stone of the profession; library administrators must emphasize this activity among their staffs; and reference and technical services librarians must devote as much time and energy to this as we have to automation. Libraries can meet demand and build quality collections at the same time. It doesn't necessarily take money; but it does take time and commitment. Only when we approach collection development with this commitment to excellence will we begin to develop a truly usable collection.

References

1. Ingram's *Advance Magazine* offers the best example of this trend. Other vendors, such as Brodart's *T.O.P.S. (Titles of Prime Selection)*, Baker & Taylor's *Forecast*, and Waldenbooks' *Best-seller*, carry similar publications.
2. New Hanover County Public Library circulation statistics for the year 1984 show that over 22 per cent of the main library circulation figures are a result of mass market paperbacks. Figures for the branches exceed 50 per cent.
3. Active weeding is recommended for all libraries, academic and public, with the exception of those libraries truly designed to support major research operations, primarily Ph.D.-granting institutions.

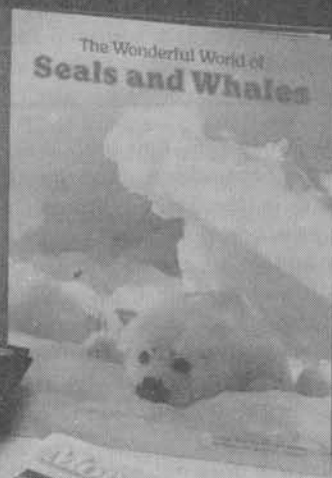
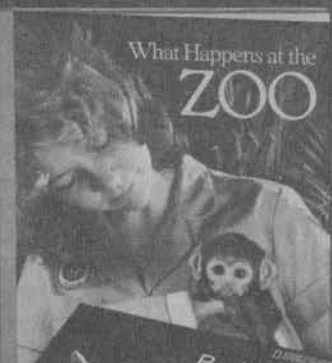
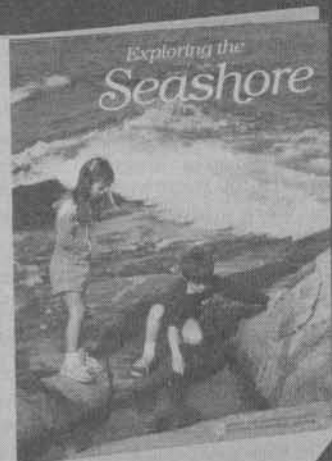
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