

New ways to acquire old books

Adding out-of-print titles to the library's collection

by Patrick M. Bickers

One of any faculty member's greatest frustrations with library service is learning that a book needed for an upcoming course is out-of-print. It forces last minute changes to carefully planned course outlines. It deprives students of a potentially important source of information. It damages the faculty's perception of the library's usefulness. In fact it hampers the library's ability to serve its patrons. None of these outcomes is to anyone's benefit.

Yet it is a fact of life that books are going out-of-print (or out of stock indefinitely) more quickly than in the past. Publishers, with a keen eye to their bottom lines, are producing shorter print runs of most types of books. To acquisitions librarians, this trend has been apparent for several years. It has also been a source of frustration for them. With the university community dependent on acquisitions units to supply the academic materials necessary to support the curriculum, acquisitions librarians must become more adept at navigating the "underground world" of out-of-print books. Fortunately, this is not as difficult as it was a few years ago.

In the days before the Internet, acquiring out-of-print books was time-consuming, labor-intensive and often futile. Librarians were understandably reluctant to pursue the matter with much vigor. As with virtually every

facet of the library profession, however, pre-Internet criteria and standards no longer suffice. Expanded opportunities offered by advancing technology have increased the librarian's opportunity to fill many of these purchase requests.

The Internet factor

The Internet has revolutionized the way we acquire out-of-print materials in several ways. First, it has pulled together names and addresses of used and rare book dealers from coast to coast into one virtual marketplace. Where librarians previously relied on personal contacts, and even blind luck, to locate such dealers, many are now just a search engine away. Second, e-mail has made contact with out-of-print book dealers faster and more convenient. Buyer and seller can arrange for purchases *in writing* within a matter of minutes or hours, rather than days or weeks through conventional mail. Third, many dealers of rare and used books have their own Web sites which librarians can browse and from which they can order directly.

Among the Web sites for out-of-print books, some of the largest and best known are 21 North Main Street, Alibris/Bibliocity, Advanced Book Exchange, Bibliofind, and Bookfinder. Each site operates in a similar manner. Searches may be executed by au-

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thor or title and sometimes by key words. Unfortunately, searching by ISBN is less common. Most sites also include helpful FAQ pages. Briefly, each has the following characteristics and capabilities.

- **Alibris/Bibliocity** (www.alibris.com).

With the merger of these two entities, this site now boasts more than 3 million used, out-of-print, rare, and antiquarian books. It supplies photographs, autographs, manuscripts, and prints, as well as rare books. Searchers may open an account with Alibris/Bibliocity and maintain a "want list" for titles not currently on hand.

- **Bibliofind** (www.bibliofind.com).

Boasts of access to more than 20 million out-of-print, used, and rare books, as well as journal publications. In addition to author and title searching, this site also accommodates key word searching.

- **Bookfinder** (www.bookfinder.com).

Cooperates online with more than 15,000 booksellers across the United States to give potential buyers access to more than 20 million used, rare, and out-of-print titles. Bookfinder can be particularly helpful because it also searches some of the other out-of-print search sites, such as Advanced Book Exchange and Bibliofind.

- **Advanced Book Exchange** (www.abebooks.com). This Canadian-based company allows users to search for more than 25 million books offered by 7,000 booksellers. Its Web site also permits users to create and maintain a want list for books that cannot be found from any source. Want lists should be monitored periodically, as ABE does not remove books from the list once they have been located and purchased.

- **21 North Main Street** (www.21northmain.com). This new arrival to the used, rare, and out-of-print books arena offers some unique features that should be of interest to acquisitions librarians. The company is geared specifically for the needs of libraries and other institutions. Unlike other out-of-print sites, 21 North Main Street serves as the vendor of record for the purchasing library, rather than simply referring buyers to prospective sellers. Placing orders on their site is easy and can include the use of purchase order numbers. They pay the originating book seller and the library in effect repays the company. Record keeping is made

easier because the library need not create a vendor file for each individual bookseller from whom it acquires books. And despite the "brokering" service provided by 21 North Main Street, their book prices are very comparable to those of other out-of-print services.

Traditional vendor service

Traditional book vendors have also responded to the growing demand for out-of-print books. Jobbers, such as Midwest Library Service, Blackwell North America, and Ambassador Books and Media, offer to search the out-of-print market when a title ordered from them is no longer in print. This is a useful service to librarians with insufficient time and resources to do the search themselves. Typically, the vendor keeps an order open for an agreed-upon length of time, six months, for example. If the order is not filled during that interval, it is then canceled. Interested acquisitions librarians should talk to their vendor representatives about establishing such a service as part of their business relationship.

UMKC's procedure

The University of Missouri-Kansas City's (UMKC) Miller Nichols Library saw the need for establishing a system for filling purchase requests for out-of-print books. No such procedure had previously existed, while faculty requests proved to be out-of-print with increasing frequency. Therefore, we accepted this challenge as part of our mission to serve the university community.

As we implemented our new procedure, we noted some significant differences between purchasing out-of-print books and traditional firm ordering. The out-of-print market is quite volatile, as price, availability, and condition of a given book cannot be guaranteed. Booksellers of used and rare books sell on a first-come-first-served basis. We understood that despite our efforts, some out-of-print titles would not be available from any dealer. This may be particularly true of very old titles and, ironically, recent titles which had only just gone out-of-print but had not yet circulated into the used book market.

Also, unlike traditional book purchases, pricing for the same title can vary considerably among sellers. Most dealers on the Web give brief descriptions of the general conditions of their merchandise. The better the

condition, the higher the price, and hardbacks generally sell for more than paperbacks.

Once a bookseller has posted a title with an Internet site, it may be bought at any time. Accordingly, when one finds a book in an acceptable condition and in price range, *immediately* is the best time to e-mail or telephone the dealer!

We at Miller Nichols Library set an initial goal of 75 per cent fulfillment for out-of-print orders. That figure was not based on any empirical evidence in our possession; it merely seemed a reasonable threshold for a successful project. We were fully prepared to raise or lower the standard as the resulting data warranted.

When our monographic acquisitions unit discovers that a requested book is out-of-print (or out of stock indefinitely) we take the following steps:

- The requestor is notified of the fact that the book in question is out of print.
- The title is searched on an Internet used/rare book site, usually 21 North Main Street first because of its ease of use. If they fail to locate a copy of the book, however, Bookfinder is the next choice because it performs a metasearch of several out-of-print book sites simultaneously.
- If the title is found nowhere among the many used booksellers on the Internet, then it is placed on our want list, which we maintain with Academic Book Exchange.
- If, as more often happens, appropriate "hits" are scored, we consider the price range and physical condition of the books available to determine our best option.
- We then contact the bookseller directly, telling them of our interest in purchasing the book and including what we understand to be its price and general condition.
- The bookseller typically acknowledges our message within 24 hours, confirming or correcting our information (usually the former).
- We give our purchase order number to the seller, as well as the shipping and billing address and any special instructions, such as rush delivery.

At this point, the normal receiving and invoicing procedures are followed. Paperwork on each out-of-print order is kept in a separate file, which allows us to analyze our progress.

During periods of heavy firm ordering, purchase requests for out-of-print materials are usually set aside until the period of intense firm ordering passes.

From March 1, 1999, when this procedure was put into effect, to February 15, 2001, 54 library purchase requests have been identified as out-of-print. The following table shows statistically the current status of our out-of-print requests:

Orders placed and successfully filled:	33 (61%)
Requests pending on "want lists":	14 (26%)
Requests withdrawn by requestor:	4 (7%)
Requests still to be addressed:	3 (6%)

Total O.P. purchase requests	54 (100%)
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As this table indicates, the monographic acquisitions unit has been able to fill more than 60 per cent of purchase requests for books which proved to be out-of-print. Most of the remaining purchase requests remain on want lists with out-of-print Web sites. In four instances, the requestor withdrew the purchase request once notified that the book was out-of-print. Acquisitions did not pursue those requests from that point.

The median interval between the order and received dates for the 33 completed out-of-print orders was 14 days. This illustrates the speed with which an out-of-print title can be added to a library collection once a dealer has been found. The distribution of turn-around times for the 33 orders reveals that while some of the sought-after books could be located quite quickly (14 orders were completed in 10 days or less) others required an extended period of time (four orders required more than 100 days to fill, including two that required more than 400 days). Following is a breakdown of turn-around times for the completed out-of-print orders:

Number of orders completed in:

Less than 10 days:	11
10–19 days:	8
20–40 days:	6
41–100 days:	4
More than 100 days:	4

For the orders that took a long time to fill, difficulty in finding a dealer with the item in
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Strategic Direction 5.0: ACRL is a national and international interactive leader in creating, expanding, and transferring the body of knowledge of academic librarianship.

Appointed Charles Schwartz for a five- year term as editor of ACRL's Publications in Librarianship series. Following a one-year term as intern under the current editor, John Budd, the term will begin following the ALA Annual Conference in 2003.

Reappointed Lisa Browar and Marvin Taylor to a second three-year term as coeditors of *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* that will begin at the close of the ALA Annual Conference 2002.

Strategic Direction 6.0: ACRL is an effective and a dynamic organization that continually enhances its capacity to create its future and assess and improve its performance in carrying out its mission.

Approved the 2001–2002 ACRL Performance Indicators.

Approved the revised AFAS bylaws for placement on the Spring 2002 ballot for vote

by the membership.

Approved the revised ARTS bylaws for placement on the Spring 2002 ballot for vote by the membership. ■

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stock was the main problem. These items spent a long time on our Advanced Book Exchange want list. Once the company located a seller for us, the process moved forward quickly. These facts underline the importance of notifying purchase requesters when a title they want is out-of-print and also of advising them as to what that might mean for the expeditious receipt of the book.

Our findings also indicate that, in the realm of out-of-print orders, "rush order" takes on a somewhat different meaning than it has for regular firm orders. Eleven of our 33 completed out-of-print orders were marked rush. The median turn-around time on these orders was 8 days—six days shorter than for the entire group of order. This is because UMKC paid the additional charge for overnight or second-day delivery. However, also among these 11 rush orders were 3 books which took more than 100 days to locate and purchase, including one which took 435 days. In fairness, it should also be added that we still have two "rush" out-of-print orders which remain open. One of these orders was first attempted in August 2000 and the other in August 1999. Rush order or not, the library can not purchase what has not been found. The pursuit of these books, however, continues.

On balance, it is satisfying to know that we have been able to fill 61 per cent of requests for out-of-print books. It indicates that our procedure for routinely handling such purchase requests is very promising. Naturally, UMKC continues to strive for improvement; seeking ways to make the system more effective and more efficient. Nevertheless, a sound beginning has been achieved.

Conclusions

Acquisitions librarians need no longer accept that an out-of-print book is also an unavailable one. Neither need we explain to faculty members and colleagues that locating a source for such a book is too time-consuming and too labor-intensive to pursue. UMKC's Miller Nichols Library is proving that the opposite is in fact more often the case. Joining our commitment to public service with our use of digital technology, we are adding books to our collections which once might have been considered virtually impossible to acquire. While allowances must be made for the fluid nature of the out-of-print market, we have entered it with a well-founded hope of success. ■

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