

Out-of-Print Booksearching

This study compares various methods of out-of-print booksearching and discusses problems related to the evaluation of quotations, means of selecting and comparing dealers, library-dealer relations, and the role of advertising in locating desiderata. It sketches a program of booksearching applicable to the needs of a large and complex research library.

ONE OF THE MOST curious features of this era of unprecedented library expansion is the comparatively slight attention that is being given to the problems and procedures of out-of-print booksearching. No matter how much one may subscribe to the argument that research libraries must give primary emphasis to the acquisition of in-print materials,¹ out-of-print needs cannot be ignored. Whether the desideratum is required immediately for course reserve or less urgently for research purposes, whether it is a single issue of a periodical needed for binding or a long run to fill in an important back set, its acquisition is of concern to the library.

Nor can these needs be substantially answered, either now or in the foreseeable future, by photocopy or reprints. Publication delays, insufficient coverage, and expense are continuing problems with the latter, while technical difficulties—particularly in the area of library application—inhibit the utility of the former. As Shirley Heppel has noted, “a startling number of titles must still be sought on

the o.p. market, and the millennium when every title is available at reasonable cost is still distant.”²

Consequently, research libraries must rely primarily on the antiquarian market to meet their out-of-print needs. With the increasing competition of new libraries and burgeoning graduate programs, the “catch-as-catch-can” search procedures which still prevail in most college and research libraries,³ must give way to rational programs.

The present article proposes guidelines for such a program, based on the experience of one large research library. During 1966-67, the search division of the University of California at Berkeley listed almost forty thousand wants with dealers and acquired almost six thousand desiderata. These included many kinds of materials—monographs, serials, documents, maps—published throughout the world. It is not a rare books acquisition program, although many of the items sought are quite obscure. It is designed to meet the day-to-day out-of-print needs of a large and complex library.

Carter and Bonk have noted that the generally accepted means of out-of-print booksearching can be grouped into two categories: those in which the library

¹Perhaps the best exposition of this view is J. Periam Danton, *Book Selection and Collections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 122-24, 140.

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²“A Survey of OP Buying Practices,” *Library Resources and Technical Services*, X (Winter 1966), 28.

³*Ibid.*, 30.

acts as searcher and those in which it entrusts the actual searching to dealers or search services.⁴ On the basis of cost per item and rate of return, the UCB search division has found the first category to be more costly and less efficient.

The primary means utilized by a library in conducting its own out-of-print booksearching are checking dealers' catalogs against its desiderata file and sending librarians or faculty members on buying trips. The advantage most frequently cited in favor of these methods is cost. It is assumed that the price of a book listed in a dealer's catalog or found in his stock is appreciably lower than the price of that same item if it were supplied by a search service in response to a request. Of course, the argument is quite reasonable: in the first instance, the dealer is trying to dispose of material on hand, without any certain knowledge (in many cases) that it is definitely wanted by anyone; in the second, he is offering something that he has been requested to locate and which has cost him time and effort to secure.

Investigations by the UCB search division have shown that, in terms of purchase price alone, books do cost less when ordered from a catalog rather than a search dealer. A study of all of the division's orders placed from December 1, 1966, through May 31, 1967, revealed a 20 per cent difference in favor of catalog orders.⁵

When total cost was studied, however, it became evident that desiderata found in catalogs were actually much more expensive than those supplied by search dealers. The extensive checking involved in catalog ordering required an investment of approximately six times the labor

cost per order that was necessary to acquire an item by quotation—even when the entire search routine of listing wants, evaluating quotations, and writing orders was included. Finally, when the much higher cancellation rate of catalog orders was taken into account, the cost difference rose even further.⁶

Buying trips have proved no more practical than catalog ordering as a means of obtaining specific desiderata. During the past several years, the UCB search division has prepared special lists for librarians and faculty members to take with them on book-buying trips. In no case has such a trip yielded as much as a 5 per cent return. Moreover, during the course of these trips, the division has had to refrain from submitting any of the titles included on these lists to its regular dealers, in order to avoid duplication. This has caused a delay in acquiring needed items.

On the other hand, when the UCB search division has utilized search dealers, total cost has been less and the return has been much greater. During 1966-67, the division acquired 15 per cent of the items that it requested from dealers. When one recognizes that this searching is being done on a worldwide basis, this figure becomes even more impressive. For example, United States, Australian, Greek, and Arabic requests yielded a return well above 20 per cent, and Portuguese, Danish, and Italian exceeded the general average. Consequently, the division depends primarily on search dealers to secure its out-of-print needs.⁷

⁶ A study of the division's cancellations during April and May, 1967, showed that 71 per cent of the catalog orders had been cancelled, as opposed to only 7 per cent of the orders based on quotation.

⁷ While dealer-catalog review and buying trips have been largely eliminated from the UCB search division's procedures, they have not been eliminated from the library's total acquisition program. The UCB library continues to acquire a substantial number of out-of-print materials by both these means. However, this is a combined selection-acquisition program; it does not involve the use of a pre-selected desiderata list.

⁴ Mary Duncan Carter and Wallace John Bonk, *Building Library Collections* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1964), 218.

⁵ An earlier study, conducted by the search division in 1964, showed only a 10 per cent price difference, in favor of catalog orders.

Even after a library has decided to conduct its booksearching through dealers, a number of problems remain to be solved. For example, can a large research library, with an extensive file of wants, follow Lyle's advice and use one or two dealers only?⁸ If not, how many should it use? Should it send the same want list to several dealers at once or attempt to circulate its requests at intervals? How should it evaluate the quotations it receives? Should it reject any? If so, on what basis? How should it select the dealers it uses?

Recently, Frederick Altman and Dominick Coppola, speaking as dealers, stressed the importance of mutual respect and close cooperation between dealers and librarians.⁹ It is particularly important that a search librarian who has decided to utilize dealers in securing his wants recognize that he is entering into a cooperative venture which must serve the needs of both parties in order to succeed. Furthermore, he must understand what those needs are. The librarian wants to acquire as many books as possible, as quickly as possible, within the limits of his budget. The dealer wants to make a fair profit, to have most of his quotations accepted, not to be pitted against his fellow dealers, and to secure prompt payment.

One of the complaints most frequently voiced by search dealers about libraries is that they "broadcast" their wants. That is, they send the same want list to a number of dealers at the same time. This places the dealers in direct competition with each other, leads to a rise in

prices, and results in the rejection of many legitimate offers (only the first or cheapest is accepted, unless multiple copies are wanted). Most search dealers are unwilling to invest time, money, and effort on behalf of libraries which follow this procedure.

On the other hand, it is quite understandable that a search librarian should be reluctant to send a want to only one dealer and leave it with him indefinitely, whether he finds it or not. No matter how successful a dealer may be, he is going to locate only a percentage of any group of wants, and sooner or later he will turn his attention from the hard-to-get items to concentrate on the newer requests that continue to come to him. Yet many of those books that he has been unable to locate may be needed urgently by the library.

The answer that the UCB search division has found to this problem is to send each desideratum to only one dealer at a time, but send it on to other dealers at specified intervals. These intervals must be long enough to provide adequate search time for each dealer but not so long as to allow extended dormant periods, when the book is not being actively sought.

In an effort to determine the optimal duration of such intervals, the search division analyzed a random sample of 746 titles purchased during 1963-64. The study showed that a majority of these items were quoted by dealers less than two and one-half months after they received the library's request, and that 90 per cent were quoted within less than six months. On the basis of this study, the division decided to circulate its wants at regular six-month intervals.

Fortunately, the established routines of the UCB search division were such that the new procedures could be instituted with a minimum of reorganization. It had been the division's practice to

⁸ Guy R. Lyle, *The Administration of the College Library* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1961), p.255. This preference for a single dealer has been echoed recently by Joseph L. Treyz in "The OP Market," *Choice*, II (July-August 1965), 283-84.

⁹ Dominick Coppola, "The International Bookseller Looks at Acquisitions," and Frederick Altman, "The Antiquarian Reprint Dealer Looks at Acquisitions," *Library Resources and Technical Services*, XI (Spring 1967), 203-10.

review its desiderata files completely every two years. The cards listing the bibliographical information for each item, which have a record of its search history (the dealers who have been contacted) on the back, were examined and the next dealer to be contacted was assigned. The bibliographical section of the card was photographed in a frame which gave the library's name and address and information to the dealer on quoting procedures. This was, of course, done in groups, and these groups of photostats were sent to the various assigned dealers. The dealer's name was noted on the back of each bibliographical card, and that card was refiled in the desiderata file, awaiting a quotation or the next review.

When the division decided to circulate its wants on a six-month basis, it recognized that the desiderata file (containing approximately thirty thousand items) could not be reviewed this frequently. The obvious solution was multiple assignment: decide on several dealers at each review. This is the procedure that is presently being followed. Each day, all new wants and a portion of older wants from the desiderata file are examined. Three dealers are assigned for each and three request slips are photographed, but only the first slip is mailed. The others are postdated by six months and one year, and they are filed under those dates in a special file. Since this practice was initiated, a substantial number of postdated slips have accumulated in this file. Each day, the slips filed under that date are removed, added to slips which have just been photographed, and mailed to dealers. The assigned dealers were noted on the postdated slips before they were filed, and all three dealers and their respective mailing dates were noted on the back of each bibliographical card at the time of assignment. When a quotation is received from a dealer, the back of the biblio-

graphical card is checked before the order is placed and any postdated slips requesting a quotation on that book which are still in the files are removed and destroyed. Complicated though this may sound, it has been reduced to a matter of strict routine and functions very quickly and smoothly.

The division decided to assign three dealers at each review—rather than, say, four or five—for several reasons. First, it was hoped that the desiderata file could be completely reviewed every eighteen months, and a triple assignment at six-month intervals would coincide perfectly. Second, it was felt that the file should be reviewed as frequently as possible, since this review also provides an opportunity to consider the utility of further search, the possibility of photocopy, and other alternatives. Finally, the dealer situation is constantly changing, and the division decided that it should not commit itself to specific dealers farther ahead than was necessary to guarantee the continual circulation of its wants. Even under the present practice, some slips have to be reassigned when their mailing date comes up because the dealer who was originally chosen has gone out of business or has proved unsatisfactory.

The success of this procedure can be seen from a recent study of the search division's orders. Of 601 orders currently outstanding on September 13, 1967, 193 were quoted by the first dealer contacted, 182 by the second dealer, 122 by the third dealer, 62 by the fourth dealer, and 42 by fifth through twelfth dealers. This indicates that a frequent turnover of dealers will yield a high return at least through the third dealer contacted.

While the perceptible drop in response after the third dealer seems to suggest that searching should be discontinued at this point, some mitigating factors have to be considered. This procedure was instituted less than three years ago.

Although the preassignment system has worked quite well, assuring that each item reviewed will go out to three dealers within an eighteen-month period, it has not been possible to review the desiderata file every eighteen months. Consequently, many fewer requests have gone to four or more dealers than have been sent to three dealers during this period—most of the items in the study group had been assigned to three dealers only. It is inevitable, therefore, that a preponderance of the replies should have come from the first three dealers.

Most of the search dealers utilized by the UCB search division have been quite satisfied with the six-month semi-exclusive period provided under the present system. However, it has caused a rise in the percentage of rejections to the few who continue searching actively for more than six months. Even in these cases, the division has been able to keep its rejections to 5 per cent or less of the items offered (approximately another 5 per cent are refused due to price, condition, variant edition, the receipt of gifts, the return of lost copies, etc.).¹⁰ When dealers are troubled by this figure, the division has learned that a frank explanation of its procedures and its own willingness to extend the exclusive period in exceptional cases has usually worked out well for the dealer and library.

Another difficult problem for the search librarian is the evaluation of dealers' quotations. This lies right at the heart of the librarian's difficult position between the dealer's requirements and the library's interests. Should the librarian lean in one direction and accept all quotations, regardless of price, or should he lean the other way and scrutinize all quotations closely?

As a general principle, it is probably best to reject very few quotations. After all, it is difficult to obtain the kind of price information that allows for a fair evaluation of a quotation. The prices that are readily available are largely seller's prices, taken from catalog listings, and are not particularly applicable to out-of-print searching, where a dealer has been requested to invest time and money uncovering a specific title. No search librarian can tell how much this investment is in any given case. Moreover, if a library requests a dealer to obtain a book and then rejects his offer, the dealer is not only out whatever he has invested in searching but also the price of the book if he has already secured it. When a library begins to reject a large percentage of his offers, a dealer is likely to turn to other customers. This, of course, will defeat the library's entire purpose.

Certainly, this does not mean that a library is required to accept all offers. Expensive quotations—say \$25.00 and up—demand some evaluation and even substantiation, and dealers should appreciate this. On the whole, however, the search librarian must find other means than the rejection of specific offers to insure that his library gets its money's worth.

The means worked out by the UCB search division is a semi-annual review of dealers' prices. This has been made practical by the fact that the division's regular order procedure involves the use of IBM card records. An extra statistics card is punched at the time of order and filed away. At six-month intervals, these cards are removed from the file and run by dealer. The dealer groups are reviewed and average prices computed. These average prices are then compared—art book dealers with art book dealers, general American dealers with general American dealers, Slavic dealers with Slavic dealers. On the basis

¹⁰ This second figure is an over-all average. With a few dealers, who offer many variants or who deal in very expensive materials, the percentage of refusal sometimes becomes unfortunately high.

of these comparisons, the division is able to channel its requests to the least expensive dealers, and to secure its desiderata at the best available prices.

This evaluation has proved much more reliable than the previous subjective approach, which was based solely on daily impressions of quotations. Under this latter system, one or two expensive offers can unduly overbalance a number of inexpensive ones. Furthermore, it provided no basis for an accurate comparison of competitive dealers.

The IBM statistical file has also been used by the search division to compute dealer response. The division keeps a running tally of requests submitted to each of its dealers. When the statistics cards are reviewed every six months, the amount of response is totaled and compared with the number of requests sent out during the same interval. On the basis of this comparison, a percentage of response is computed for each dealer. As with price averages, response percentages of similar dealers only, are compared. The differences among these dealers is enormous. For example, the response of general American dealers between December 1, 1966, and May 30, 1967, ranged from a high of 33 per cent to a low of 3 per cent. The average response of all such dealers was 24 per cent.

Before this evaluation was instituted, two years ago, response, like cost, was a matter of subjective impression, and was characterized by the same weaknesses. A large batch of offers, received occasionally, from one dealer might overbalance the more frequent return of a few at a time from another—although the latter might send in both a greater volume and a higher percentage. Now the division is better able to channel its requests to those dealers who are most likely to respond.

Of course, the search librarian of a

large library, with a sizable desiderata file, needs a good many dealers if he is going to turn over his file regularly. This means that he must continue to develop new dealers, and that he must give them ample opportunity to demonstrate their abilities before ceasing to use them. He should try each one over a period of several months, with as great a variety of desiderata as the dealer's interests and the library's needs allow. Also, each dealer should be given a fair share of new items—material just referred to search and being sent out for the first time—as well as older wants which have been sent out to many dealers. It is not fair to any dealer—except, perhaps, the very expensive ones—to send him only requests for material that has already been searched extensively.

Finally, something should be said about the utilization of specialist as opposed to general dealers. As a rule, specialists seem to charge more for an equivalent book, and a good general search service can cover most of the specialties. On the other hand, the UCB search division has found that specialists should not be overlooked. It has had considerable success with dealers who limit themselves to criminology, economics, international relations, and natural science. Fields such as art, music, and documents seem almost to demand specialization.

The question as to whether or not a library should advertise its wants has been left until the last, as this is a rather unique problem. A library with a very small desiderata file may find this approach best, as it circulates wants to a large group of prospective suppliers at the same time without committing the library to purchase. After all, none of these dealers is being asked to search. He simply reviews his stock and quotes by postcard. If his quotation is refused, he has lost very little. In this way, a library which cannot invest a substantial

portion of labor time searching is able to reach a maximum of potential sources. While it has been suggested that advertising may increase the cost of desiderata, the investigations of the UCB search division have shown that this does not seem to be the case.¹¹

The use that a large library, with an extensive desiderata file, can make of such media as *TAAB* is quite limited. If thousands of books are being sought, obviously only a small portion can be listed. Therefore, such advertising must be quite selective. The UCB search division has based its selection on two principles. First, it advertises for material that is urgently needed for course reserve. Second, it advertises for items that its

regular dealers are not supplying. For example, the division was having difficulty locating anthropology books. It began to list them in *TAAB*. As a result, it not only obtained material that its normal suppliers were unable to locate, but also heard from dealers who specialize in this field. Some of these dealers have been contacted about searching and have responded. In this way, advertising has proved to be an excellent means of uncovering new dealers.

Out-of-print searching can be an attractive speciality for librarians. It is an important and interesting area of library acquisition activity. It brings the librarian into close and continuing contact with the antiquarian book trade. It enables him to play a unique and significant role in the development of his library's collection. Finally, with the need to discover new procedures and refine old ones, it enables him to contribute to his profession. ■ ■

¹¹ This opinion is mentioned by Robert W. Evans, "The OP Market," *Choice*, II (July-August 1965), 285. A study by the UCB search division found that the average price of a book secured through a *TAAB* advertisement was about 2 per cent less than the average price of similar books secured through quotation.

