



6-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Tenopir, Carol, "Reading Vendor Literature" (1997). *School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works*.

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Reading vendor literature

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Date: June 1, 1997

From: Library Journal(Vol. 122, Issue 10)

Publisher: Library Journals, LLC

Document Type: Article

Length: 1,995 words

Abstract:

Literature from database producers and online vendors can be a helpful starting point in deciding which distributor to select for a library. However, librarians should be cautious of phrases such as 'easy to use' and 'low cost,' as well as misleading descriptions of size.

Full Text:

IF YOU'VE EVER BOUGHT a house you probably learned quickly how to read the hidden meanings behind what real estate agents write in their descriptions. "Cozy cottage" or "dollhouse" means small and cramped; "seasonal stream" describes a drainage ditch that runs through the property.

When I look at online vendor and database producer literature, I feel just as I did when I first learned to decipher real estate lingo. If I take the literature at face value, every company is "the leading producer of," or its product is "the most complete," "easiest to use," or "the best value." I'm strongly tempted to throw them all in the trash.

Still, vendor literature can be useful if looked at with a practiced eye. When trying to decide which of the dozens of electronic reference distributors should be considered in your library, that literature is a good starting point. It helps to focus on those companies that target your type of library; that offer the subjects, pricing options, and titles you want; and that support the platforms you need. You just have to know what they really mean behind the hype and jargon.

"Easy to use" systems?

If every system that claimed to be user-friendly truly was, library instruction classes would be obsolete. Instead, most librarians now do more instruction and answer more point-of-use reference questions. Clearly, even experienced library users need help from time to time with the many "friendly" online and CD-ROM systems the library provides.

Sometimes "easy-to-use" indicates limited power. The easiest options in WilsonDisc and InfoTrac, for example, allow searching only by subject headings. Free-text searching of title words, abstract words, and other fields requires using the more advanced options. Most web search engines are similar. If searchers want to use Boolean operators, for example, they have to know to enter the advanced search mode.

"Easy-to-use" is most often a euphemism for a menu-driven interface. In particular, graphical user interfaces (GUI) and web browser interfaces are described as easy. "Ease" may apply for the simple reason that search and print options are displayed on a tool bar or as an icon on every screen. Users familiar with Windows or Netscape should be able to figure out what to click on to start a new search, print, or go backwards, even if the icons and wording for each function differ.

While consistent menu interfaces may answer many questions for the computer-confident user, some problems go deeper than merely finding a function on the screen. Even in "easy-to-use" systems, it's not easy to know which function is needed next, to formulate a search strategy, to narrow or broaden a search, or to understand the content of a bibliographic record.

Remember, there are still novice users who do not regularly use the web, Windows, or any computer application outside the library environment. For them, ease may lie in consistency, not power: SilverPlatter, for example, recommends local loading so "users can simultaneously search multiple SilverPlatter databases while using the familiar interface, commands, and search methods of their local Z39.50 search systems."

Size matters, right?

Vendors always report the size of a database or an online system in the way that looks best. Thus, it's misleading to compare size. The size of a database may be given as the number of journal titles indexed in a bibliographic database or included as full text. OVID, for example, lists over 80 titles in its full-text medical collections. However, OVID does not report the date each title begins or ends, or how much of a given title is included.

At first glance, most database catalogs imply that the inclusive dates of coverage apply to all titles. Closer reading of title lists may reveal that many titles are not fully included, because as new titles are added, they typically are not loaded retrospectively. Therefore, many titles in a database claiming 20 years of coverage are represented only from the most recent years. Conversely, if a publisher does not renew its contract with a database producer, coverage ceases at that time.

A brochure for UMI ProQuest Direct tries to clarify the matter by explaining "when we count titles in full text, we mean active and current titles" and "at least 75 percent of the publication" is available. IAC's InfoTrac brochure differentiates between titles that are indexed only and those in full text. Academic ASAP on CD-ROM, for example, includes index-only records for 550 journal titles for the current year plus three years and full text for the current year plus two years.

OCLC Reference Services words its promotion carefully. OCLC provides "more than one million ASCII and image articles drawn from approximately 1800 general and business journals." The words "drawn from" do not promise cover-to-cover inclusion.

E-journals are different

Complete journals are rarely transferred wholly from print to electronic versions. The secondary database producer decides which articles are indexed and are scanned or rekeyed for full-text input. Some producers will provide their editorial policies if asked, but these policies are rarely mentioned in promotional literature.

Those editorial policies may dictate that only "major" articles be included (major may be defined by length of the article or column inches) or that certain features be excluded. Editorials, letters to the editor, news, cartoons, advertisements, and book reviews are typically omitted. It is more accurate to claim that bibliographic and full-text databases include selected articles from a given number of journal titles covering a range of dates. If there is a print equivalent, electronic versions most certainly do not contain as much.

While the number of records may be a more accurate database measurement, even that must be interpreted with caution. OCLC claims its OCLC Online Union Catalog database (WorldCat) is "the world's most comprehensive bibliography," with 33 million-plus records. RLIN says its RLIN Bibliographic File (BIB) is "an online catalog of over 80 million items held in over 200 of the world's leading research institutions." These are both shared cataloging databases; the discrepancy is explained in part by the range of materials described in each database and by different policies toward counting local cataloging variations.

Online vendors also play the size game. LEXIS/NEXIS is the largest supermarket vendor if you count the number of files, which for LEXIS/NEXIS means every newspaper, magazine, and other individual title provided, in addition to grouped files. DIALOG is the largest, if you count by terabytes. Dow Jones News/Retrieval, DIALOG, and LEXIS/NEXIS compete for "most newspaper titles," as each regularly adds small regional papers.

More important to most of us is the variety of titles and the availability of useful items. If you don't need regional newspapers, it doesn't matter how many a system provides. If you only want access to Chemical Abstracts, STN's other 100 databases are irrelevant. What's useful is a list of all databases provided, with their prices, update schedules, and date coverage.

In April, Dow Jones News/Retrieval announced it would designate which of its titles included just "selected full text" and which were more comprehensively covered. This helpful designation is "instrumental in establishing an industry standard for a full-text source," observed Ruth Orenstein, editor of Fulltext Sources Online.

It won't cost too much

Most of us know that "lower fat" listed on a carton of ice cream is relative to another brand, or a previous recipe, but it's not diet food. "Low cost" is the similar. Copyrighted information, whether it is in books, journals, or magazines, usually isn't cheap. (Newspapers are the one bargain because they are paid for by advertisers, but archived E-newspapers cost more than the daily paper or web versions.)

You may long for the day when the total cost per copy or per subscription was the same for every library that buys it and was listed in a catalog. A few electronic products still do this, notably CD-ROM versions for use on a single workstation. Chadwyck-Healey's "Catalog of Electronic Publications" states, "In general, we make no charge for networking our databases within a licensed institution on a single site. For some databases there are additional charges for more than a single concurrent user; for others, there is no limit on the number of concurrent users." The American Poetry Full-Text Database on CD-ROM, for example, is listed for a one-time price of \$8,995.

Mix-and-match pricing

However, most often prices are calculated using a complex mix of usage and size of a library's constituency. Brochures now often only state "call for pricing information" or describe how prices are calculated, rather than give precise dollar figures. The most common pricing schemes for online information products are usage (per search, per article/record viewed, per database, or connect time) or fiat fee subscriptions (based on number of simultaneous users or the population size of the constituency). Flat-fee subscriptions are also based on how many databases are selected from an online vendor's complete list.

The best literature clearly lays out each pricing option offered and helps librarians begin to decide which option is best for their library. RLG's Eureka service, for example, offers pricing per search or by flat-fee subscriptions. Search blocks range in price from 88[cts] per search for 1000 searches down to 50[cts] per search for 250,000 or more searches. The literature informs readers it may be more "advantageous" to switch to subscription prices if they buy 25,000 searches or more.

Engineering Information Village provides a clear chart that shows it will provide site licenses based on user population, on concurrent users, or on the number of library stations. For each of these three options, libraries can select access to Ei Village only, to Ei Village and Ei CompendexWeb, or to Ei CompendexWeb only. Prices for each variation are laid out separately for academic and corporate libraries.

An academic library can easily see it would pay \$4250 per year for access to Ei Village only if it has 500 or fewer users in its population. The price goes to \$27,500 per year for a user population of up to 12,000. Site licenses based on concurrent users vary from \$3500 per year for one user to \$14,000 per year for up to ten concurrent users. Access at one library workstation is \$3000 per year. Prices for corporations are higher.

What is and isn't full text

Most online and CD-ROM vendors now provide at least some access to full-text books, reports, and, most commonly, articles. They trumpet "full text" availability, but careful reading reveals they don't all mean the same.

Full text may still mean ASCII only, such as that available from WilsonDisc, DIALOG, and LEXIS/NEXIS. Recently, some companies have begun to enhance texts by standardized tagging or encoding. OVID and Chadwyck-Healey now key in their full texts and encode the texts using Standard Generalized Mark-Up Language (SGML). Web versions provide encoded texts with the SGML subset, HTML. Encoded texts look better in display, and various tagged parts of the texts may be searched.

UMI ProQuest on CD-ROM began with image-only files that required a corresponding index for searching. UMI ProQuest Direct, IAC SearchBank, OCLC FirstSearch, and others now provide a combination of ASCII and image documents, depending on licensing agreements with primary publishers. Any numbers and title lists given in advertising literature must be read cautiously, because there is no guarantee that any one title will be available in ASCII, image, or a combination format. Prices may vary according to formats as well.

With full text, as with user-friendliness, size, and pricing, you should read vendor literature with caution. It aims to grab our attention and to sell, but the good examples also can inform. I want the facts, not the hype.

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Tenopir, Carol. "Reading vendor literature." *Library Journal*, 1 June 1997, p. 35+. *Gale Academic Onefile*, https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.utk.edu/apps/doc/A19525727/AONE?u=tel_a_utl&sid=AONE&xid=0815c308. Accessed 20 Dec. 2019.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A19525727