

Electronic Collaboration: Key to Enhancing Traditional Collections

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ABSTRACT

Academic librarians continue to look for innovative ways to enhance libraries' collections and increase access to electronic resources despite higher costs and tight budgets. Libraries are facilitating electronic access to a wide array of products. How do librarians provide access to traditional and non-traditional resources? Collaborative connections are one way of maximizing access to information. The model described in this paper is an example of how libraries can collaborate with various partners to bring electronic resources to a campus, thus enhancing traditional research collections. There are four steps in this process: (1) choosing partnerships; (2) negotiations; (3) marketing; and (4) training.

Academic librarians continue to look for new and innovative ways to enhance libraries' collections and increase access to electronic resources despite higher costs and tight budgets. In a competitive arena, information is a commodity. Researchers now demand information delivered at their desktop without physically leaving their offices. Libraries are facilitating electronic access to a wide array of products. How do librarians provide access to traditional and non-traditional resources? A survey of 100 libraries in the United States and Canada found that academic libraries' book expenditures have fallen by an estimated ten percent since 1994, while spending for online services and CD-ROM has increased by an average of 12.5% in 1995-96.(1) Cooperative connections are one way of maximizing access to information. Collaborative collection management is formalized for some libraries in defined consortiums. "More institutions are turning to library consortia as a way to combine their purchasing power and win better deals on everything from the electronic version of Encyclopaedia Britannica to databases of poetry and scientific abstracts."(2) For other libraries, informal cooperative ties can be developed. Collaboration might occur with other libraries on a campus. Perhaps there are libraries within a geographic region, for example, another academic, public or special library interested and willing to participate in a joint venture. The library may also team with faculty and/or research centers to increase the number of electronic resources available.

The model described in this paper is an example of how libraries with limited budgets can collaborate with various partners to bring electronic resources to a campus, thus enhancing traditional research collections. There are four steps in this process: **(1) choosing partnerships; (2) negotiating with vendors; (3) marketing electronic resources; and (4) training users.**

Background Information: Getting Started

When the University of North Dakota (UND) began looking for ways to bring electronic resources to our campus there were still many technological obstacles. In 1995, our campus was just beginning to provide access to electronic products in faculty offices. Technological capability has played a major role in decision

making regarding shared resources and has affected all of our collaborative ventures.

Our primary example is bringing, *Current Contents*, produced by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), to our campus. Partnering was important to us, because it allowed us the critical mass needed to undertake this venture. This example emphasizes the importance of finding technological capable partners and illustrates the steps of the collaborative process.

Choosing Partners

In 1995, the MINITEX Library Information Network, (MINITEX) a program of the Minnesota Higher Education Services Office with the mission of facilitating resource sharing among libraries and reducing the cost of providing access to information for residents throughout Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota, invited UND libraries to participate in a trial to access *Current Contents* with ISI. UND Libraries consist of the Chester Fritz Library and two branches, as well as two autonomous libraries affiliated with the professional schools of medicine and law, the Harley E. French Library of the Health Sciences and the Thormodsgard Law Library. Librarians at the Chester Fritz Library and the Harley E. French Library of the Health Sciences began discussing the possibility of collaborating in this venture of providing an electronic networked version to the campus.

At the time of MINITEX's offer, *Current Contents* was loaded on a gopher server at the University of Minnesota (U of M). UND agreed to participate in this trial to access *Current Contents* even though the gopher interface was viewed as cumbersome. During the trial, the Silverplatter Electronic Reference Library (ERL) server/software was being developed which would improve the interface, provide internet access, and would be familiar to our users. Several locally mounted Silver Platter products were available. MINITEX, in the summer of 1995 offered a price to UND during this developmental stage, but UND declined, citing the reasons as costs and a need for a more sophisticated interface. The libraries preferred to wait until *Current Contents* was available on the ERL server at MINITEX.

Even before the MINITEX offer, UND librarians were looking for ways to improve access to *Current Contents*. Two print subscriptions were held by the libraries. ISI was able to provide us with information about departmental subscriptions on campus. Due to the high cost of the product, and the fact that some departments historically paid for it, the libraries felt that departments would benefit from a pooling of resources for this enhanced electronic version. Also, the libraries had successfully used this technique of sharing database expenses with departments. For example, the Chester Fritz Library and the department of Social Work had shared in the cost of Social Work Abstracts.

Our discussions about pricing issues and accessibility thus began with ISI. To help in the negotiation process, we consulted with MINITEX, since they had experience bringing products to campuses. Silver Platter, the vendor producing the software for *Current Contents*, was another aspect of the collaborative process because they were our preferred vendor. These players, faculty and researchers, MINITEX, ISI, and Silver Platter, along with the two libraries contributed to bringing ISI's *Current Contents* database to UND.

The Negotiation Process

While one librarian was the main negotiator, input from faculty, bibliographers, computer services librarians, and administrators played a major role. Faculty supported the purchase of campus wide access to *Current Contents* and several offered suggestions for funding, specifically targeting areas outside the Library and offering to help pay for it.

Negotiations with ISI and MINITEX

ISI's pricing was supposedly based on the user population of a campus, though it was not completely clear if other factors went into determining the price. UND posed several models for ISI to consider. One involved including North Dakota State University (NDSU), who was also interested in offering *Current Contents* to their users. UND and NDSU are both part of the North Dakota University System, and our Board of Higher Education urges collaboration. UND and NDSU are encouraged to work together, yet vendors' views differ. They see multiple campuses within a system and price accordingly. The two campus libraries have tried other collaborative ventures with vendors, but usually the costs are prohibitive.

While UND was speaking directly to ISI, MINITEX also was trying to negotiate a price on our behalf. UND regularly apprised MINITEX of conversations with ISI. Faculty were queried as to the depth of their interest. How much would departments already receiving it be willing to pay for increased access to *Current Contents*? Answers to this question varied for each department. Some departments were not interested at all without the "request-a-reprint" feature. Other departments told librarians how much they were currently paying and estimated what their budgets would support. The diskette version didn't offer searching by keyword in the abstracts. This feature, and online access, became important selling points. For departments with a paper copy or diskette being routed, network access was more efficient. The two libraries worked together to come up with a list of departments and research units that would collaborate.

Negotiations with Silver Platter

It was during this last phase of negotiation that we learned that the ISI price did not include the Silver Platter cost to mount the database on the ERL server. It turned out that ISI was the only vendor where there is a negotiated price through Silver Platter and ISI. When the libraries stepped back from the proposal due to the continuing concern over pricing, the vendor countered with an expanded package. Bill DeJohn of MINITEX considered the negotiation at this time, "a fiscal nightmare."(Personal Correspondence)

Offers continued to be higher than desired, so a counter proposal was made by the libraries to develop a package that would be most cost-effective and yet still profitable to the vendor. It was observed that all of the participating departments were in the sciences. In preparing the counter offer, the UND libraries asked to purchase fewer sections. The vendor did not agree to this proposal. Another proposal was then prepared discussing user population. Since we had an approximate idea of how much we would be able to count on from departments and research centers, we told ISI and MINITEX how much we could afford to pay. This offer was accepted by the vendor.

Marketing

According to Darlene E. Weingand, "Marketing is essential to effective library management".(3) There are philosophical arguments in opposition of whether marketing belongs in libraries.(4) In our case, it was a factor in our success.

In our central example with *Current Contents*, as well as in other experiences, it was important for us to market the database for a number of reasons. There were a number of potential users, individuals not familiar with the database. An explanation of the networked product to experienced users with some other form of *Current Contents* was necessary; and costs need to be explained.

We tried similar marketing approaches in each one of our collaborative endeavors. First we obtained, or in the case of *Current Contents* were offered, a **trial period** of using the database free of charge. This was an effort to develop potential clients as well as market the product. Our aim was to expose as many users as

possible to the database for the trial period. This included the whole campus for *Current Contents*. The campus range of IP addresses was given to MINITEX, our service provider, so that they could set the parameters for access. Originally there was unlimited access for five months. The libraries had it available on workstations, and we initially offered departments desktop availability. This was the main selling point for many. The convenience of the service was important to them.

In determining departmental contributions, we considered how much a department was paying to subscribe to the paper and/or diskette version of this product. Because abstracts are included and are searchable, the electronic format is a "value added" product. The minimum a department paid for the paper subscription without abstracts was \$500.00, therefore, we could ask a department or research center to pay at least that amount. We also wanted to factor in the number of users. The following price scheme was developed.

Subscription Rates

Number of faculty in Department	Cost to Department	
1-6	\$500	ISI assured the libraries that departments with a subscription to any of the <i>Current Contents</i> products would receive a prorated refund or credit for the remainder of the subscription period. This helped persuade departments to participate.
7-12	\$750	
Over 13	\$1,000	

Due to the technicalities in distributing reconfigured software, departments who participated in the trial, but did not commit support were able to continue using the database for several more months. As soon as they were no longer able to access it, a couple more departments agreed to pay for it. Currently, the Chester Fritz Library underwrites the largest portion and the Library of the Health Sciences, eight departments and two research centers share in the cost. The service has been confirmed as being well received. The goal now is to encourage others to join, thus receiving more cost sharing.

Publicity: An Important Component of Marketing

Publicity about the free trial was key to its success. The concept first required support for collaboration. An introductory letter was sent to faculty members explaining the trial and the potential costs should departments decide they wanted to continue using the product after the trial period. Librarians involved closely in the venture looked for opportunities to discuss *Current Contents* with bibliographers, faculty, and staff. The University's Dean's Council and the Chester Fritz Library's Senate Library Committee was briefed about the service. In addition, notices were placed in the university newsletter, information was broadcast across electronic networks, and library liaisons contacted their departments. References to other technological successes the Libraries had undertaken were pointed out, to encourage participation.

Demonstrations and expert training were critical. Sessions were held to demonstrate the product for faculty members. Included in the sessions were a general overview of the product, comparison to similar products or the product in another format (stand alone workstation or print), techniques and methods for using. An expert trainer from ISI came to campus for a day of intensive instruction with the librarians as well as holding some general sessions for faculty and staff. Opportunities to use the database in a hands-on computer lab were arranged. Staff from each of the libraries offered to go to faculty offices to install software and provide individual instruction. All of these efforts were demanding of the library staff but essential for success.

UND libraries were successful in getting departments and research centers to participate in this venture. This marked the establishment of wider and greater collaboration at new levels. The co-mingling of funds across campus had not occurred before.

Training

Now that the initial marketing phase with *Current Contents* and some of the other databases is over, our primary focus is on training our committed users and keeping them satisfied. Training sessions are designed to provide some introductory material in the hope that curious potential users might also attend. We continue to advertise the sessions broadly with that intention.

Staff from both libraries have presented instructional sessions. Rather than work totally independently, the principal trainers meet and discuss strategies. The ideas that are generated reflect the broader experiences of two libraries with a variety of disciplines represented. Drawing on their experience of the past year, the trainers identified key topics. Instructional sessions were developed that cover those main issues yet allow enough flexibility so that each trainer can emphasize those areas of most importance for their users. This strategy has resulted in a generally uniform approach to training that still allows for variability.

In addition, to holding general instructional sessions in both libraries, training for departments has been arranged. Some of these included hands on instruction in campus computer labs close to departments. Individual instruction and consultation continues to be offered. That remains our most utilized effort.

Other Collaborative Efforts

As stated earlier, bringing *Current Contents* to the campus is one of several collaborative efforts that we have experienced. It is not uncommon for the libraries to partner with departments to have access to specific databases in their offices. Often times, departments pay a small fraction of the cost, but contributions from many departments assist the libraries in bringing a greater variety of electronic resources. Departments might pay half of the subscription the initial year or two. Use statistics have been helpful in identifying further continuation of a product.

Libraries have joint ventures to other databases as well. The Harley E. French Library of the Health Sciences, which doesn't have a server, has also partnered with NDSU to provide access to networked Medline, the primary database for UND, while at NDSU it is secondary. The Library of the Health Sciences pays NDSU to mount and maintain the database and both share in the cost of the subscription. Internet access makes the distance between the two schools invisible. The Chester Fritz Library maintains the CINAHL database for the Library of the Health Sciences for no cost except having free access to it.

UND libraries are in the formative period of exploring collaboration as a way to access electronic journals. Project Muse, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, offers over forty electronic journals in largely the humanities and social sciences. UND is participating at a consortial rate through a subscription price negotiated by MINITEX.

Conclusions

Participating in cooperative ventures is necessary in a state like North Dakota where the entire population is only 650,000. The North Dakota University System's fiscal situation is such that redundancy is not acceptable. Clearly, there is a mandate to pursue collaborative ventures. The good news for us is that consortia can significantly extend the reach of electronic information.(5)

As explained, one of the most difficult aspects of the negotiation process was determining the pricing variables. As Kate Nevins, Director of SOLINET said, "Libraries prefer pricing to follow logical variables, like population served, or to be available 'by the drink'."6 In our case, pricing seemed arbitrary.

Our assessment of collaborative ventures thus far reveals several advantages and disadvantages. Overall, we would rate them as positive experiences, not only for us, but also for our users. In most cases, we could not have provided such broad access to these databases as individual libraries. **Advantages** include the following: **(1) desktop availability; a greater variety of databases are available on campus and at individuals' desktops when they need it; (2) searching capabilities have improved**, especially in the case of *Current Contents* where the abstracts are searchable; **(3) users are more aware of the costs of providing services; (4) collaborative ventures provide opportunities to interact with other professionals; (5) library is proactive in its quest for providing access to information.** There are also **disadvantages** to collaborative ventures in that they are **time consuming and staff intensive**. It is difficult to measure financial benefits.

The future for collaborative endeavors remains strong in our libraries. As the electronic horizon expands, it will be difficult for individual libraries to negotiate affordable access. Librarians need to be businesslike in negotiations with vendors recognizing their profit-oriented philosophies.

We realize that a necessary component in this collaborative environment is one of trust. Our experiences have allowed us to build trust in each other. Collaboration in the electronic environment presents many challenges and far greater opportunities.

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NOTES

1. "Late Bulletins," *Library Journal*; 122, no.3 (February 15, 1997); 89.
2. Thomas J. DeLoughry, "Purchasing power: cost sharing efforts help college libraries finance electronic acquisitions," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; 42, no.22 (February 9, 1996):A21.
3. Darlene E. Weingand, "Introduction"; *Library Trends*; 43, no.3 (Winter 1995); 289.
4. Diane Tobin Johnson, "Focus on the Library Customer: Revelation, Revolution, or Redundancy?"; *Library Trends* 43, no. 3 (Winter 1995); 318.
5. Kathy Miller, "Library Consortia Change the Rules"; National Federation of Abstracting and Indexing Services conference, *Computers in Libraries*; 16, no.10 (November-December 1996):20.
6. *Ibid.*, 21.