

A Retrospective Approval Plan as a Collection Development Tool

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The approval plan is a familiar acquisitions device to most collection development specialists. A finely-honed profile with a vendor brings a weekly shipment of currently published books to the library. This paper's objective is to discuss the application of this concept to the acquisition of older materials, i.e. a retrospective approval plan. The article will focus on a plan provided by Blackwell North America, (abbreviated B/NA), the well-known book wholesaler, at the University of Texas at Dallas (where the author was Associate Library Director for Collection Development prior to joining Indiana University's SLIS faculty).

Approval plans have been covered fairly extensively in the library literature and should be familiar to most collection development and acquisitions librarians. Rossi's annotated bibliography lists 77 items concerning the subject.¹ Cargill and Alley²; McCullough, Posey and Pickett³; Spyers-Duran and Gore⁴; as well as Spyers-Duran and Mann⁵ have prepared books about approval plans. However, only a minute amount has been published concerning retrospective

approval plans.

Cenzer describes the use of the B/NA retrospective database to acquire more than \$300,000 worth of books at the University of Florida Libraries during the 1977/78 fiscal year.⁶ Childress and Gibbs describe a smaller-scale B/NA plan implemented at the Auburn University Libraries in the mid-1980s covering Southern history, aviation history, crime and criminology, and public administration, social sciences plus exercise physiology and biomechanics as well as 30 subject areas within the humanities.⁷

The Blackwell North America Retrospective Service

Blackwell North America officially advertises the plan as its "Retrospective Collection Development Services." To summarize the procedure used, a participating library's approval profile is run on a computer against B/NA's database of titles included in their approval plan coverage, extending back to 1970. This step identifies the retrospective books which match the profile. If a participating library's catalog is in machine-readable form,

a "deduping" option is also available. In that case, the computer program compares the file of profile matches to a tape containing the library's catalog records to eliminate duplicates already in the collection. Notification slips are then generated and mailed by B/NA to the library. The components of this process will be discussed at greater length in the following paragraphs.

If a library has a B/NA approval plan, the current profile can be used for the retrospective plan. Alternatively, a separate profile can be designed, as was done at the University of Texas at Dallas. Or some combination of these two options can be used, such as modifying an existing profile.

The notification forms, generated for each non-duplicate profile match, are issued in six parts. Each contains a bibliographical description of the book using AACR, the DDC and Library of Congress classification numbers, and appropriate subject headings from the B/NA thesaurus. In addition, the academic level, language, geographical coverage and price are included. The forms (illustrated on the front cover) are identical to the ones used to supplement a regular B/NA approval plan except that the library code — "XUTD" at the top of the form's upper right quadrant — is slightly altered to distinguish retrospective forms from ones received on a current plan. B/NA advertising literature states that as an alternative to forms, one can receive the references in a list format, which provides author, title, publisher, series, publication date and price.

The database, which contains roughly 1,500,000 items, dates back to January 1, 1970.⁸ It contains most U.S. and Canadian imprints as well as foreign-published titles

distributed in the United States. Entries are based on examination of the book itself rather than Cataloging in Publication information.⁹ The database includes all the items treated on B/NA's approval plan since the company's founding in March 1975, as well as the items offered on approval by the Richard Abel Company since 1970.¹⁰ B/NA was founded when B. H. Blackwell, its parent company located in Oxford, England, took over the defunct Abel Company's approval plan operation.¹¹ It should be noted that B. H. Blackwell must be contacted directly for its British imprint retrospective service, utilizing a database covering items published from 1979 to the present.

B/NA does not charge for performing this service, but there is a gentleman's understanding that all books identified through this process will be ordered from Blackwell's. The University of Texas at Dallas Library did incur a \$250 charge from Brodart to have our catalog tape copied and mailed to B/NA. Also, a hidden charge existed in the sense that most of the identified titles could have been purchased from the Texas state contract vendor, Baker & Taylor, at nearly a 20% discount, whereas Blackwell North America supplied them at list price.

The mechanics of writing a retrospective profile are almost identical to writing a current one. Appropriate terms matching the subject areas to be covered are selected from B/NA's Approval Plan Subject Thesaurus of roughly 5,000 subject descriptors, organized in a hierarchical structure similar to the Dewey Decimal system.¹² One also selects the desired non-subject parameters covering such factors as academic difficulty level, audience, type of library, language, type of

publisher, country of publication and treatment of subject. The primary difference is that in a current profile the library has the option of receiving either books or notification slips while in a retrospective profile only notification slips (or a list of titles) may be received.

Use of the Plan at The University of Texas at Dallas Library

The University of Texas at Dallas (abbreviated UTD) is an upper-division university founded in 1969. Ph. D. programs are offered in political economy, management science, communication disorders, humanities, and most of the pure sciences, so a strong need exists for in-depth research materials. Only in the mid-1970s were undergraduates admitted and the bulk of the faculty hired. The institution's relative newness in conjunction with the fact that funding for library acquisitions had been very uneven in the early years inevitably resulted in a collection with significant gaps in the retrospective monographic holdings.

A request from the social sciences faculty for a method which would allow them input into collection development without requiring the laborious effort of scanning the standard selection tools provided the original impetus for the plan at UTD. The social science faculty liaison person was quite receptive to my suggestion that a retrospective approval plan might meet their needs. In April 1985 a B/NA representative visited UTD in order to write retrospective profiles (in consultation with the faculty) for the major social science disciplines, e.g. political science, economics and sociology. A sum of \$7,500 was reserved from the 1984/85 fiscal

year social sciences faculty allocation (when the plan was initiated) to be expended during the 1985/86 fiscal year after the slips had been received. (It should be noted that in the Texas system a new fiscal year begins on September 1).

Because we definitely wanted the "deduping" option, the next step was to request that Brodart (the vendor for UTD's COM catalog) send an extra copy of UTD's catalog tapes to B/NA. By the time B/NA had run UTD's retrospective profile against their database (to identify matches) and the resulting file against UTD's catalog tape (to eliminate duplicates) several months had elapsed. Thus, the first slips were not available until the late summer or early autumn of 1985.

During the 1985/86 fiscal year the social science faculty expended the entire \$7,500 reserve on items selected from retrospective slips. This initial year's activity was viewed as an experiment to test the service's suitability for meeting the library's retrospective collection development needs. The judgments by the social science faculty and the collection development librarian were both positive, so it was decided to expand use of the program the following year.

Funding was especially generous during the 1986/87 fiscal year due to a special allocation from the Permanent University Fund.¹³ Thus, the retrospective profile was revised and expanded in consultation with the UTD faculty during the spring of 1986 so that the slips would be ready by the beginning of the new fiscal year. Because of the large number of slips generated by the revised profile, the collection development librarian, i.e. the author, began screening the forms to filter out the most promising titles

to turn over to the social science faculty for final selection on their regular faculty allocation. Also, a special fund was established for directly ordering the collection development librarian's personal selections during the 1986/1987 fiscal year.

Precise statistical data are not available concerning the plan's use at UTD. However, as an ex-post-facto approximation the author estimates that roughly 3,500 of the 35,000 slips, i.e. 10%, reviewed between 1985 and 1988 were selected, costing approximately \$60,000 to \$70,000. For comparative purposes, Cenzer reveals that at the University of Florida libraries, 19,119 volumes were acquired from 55,000 generated slips, i.e. 34.8%,¹⁴ while Childress and Gibbs indicate that about 20% of the slips were selected at Auburn University.¹⁵ Moreover, at UTD only a negligible percentage of selected items were already held in the collection, verifying the accuracy of B/NA's tape match for duplicates. (Based on information provided by the B/NA representative, the tape match should eliminate 97% of duplicates).¹⁶

Advantages and Disadvantages

In theory, many of a retrospective approval plan's advantages are the same as for a current approval plan. Automated technology can be applied to identifying titles that match the library's collecting needs thus saving selectors from the labor intensive task of reviewing catalogs or other selection tools to choose items on a title-by-title basis. Moreover, the process of writing a profile represents an opportunity to plan for the collection's overall growth and development.

Another advantage lies in the

plan's flexibility. It can be either broadly or narrowly focused depending upon a library's needs. Profiling can cover the entire collecting spectrum, a group of related disciplines, a single discipline or even a subdiscipline. A type of publisher, group of publishers, or a single publisher can be targeted. Likewise, other non-subject parameters, such as readership level or language, can be focused upon. Finally, the library is not committed to spending a predetermined amount of money within a specific time period. The notification forms can be used to build a desiderata file or the entire lot saved for future selection when more funding is available, although one, of course, risks that a higher portion of items will be out-of-print with the passage of time.

Unlike a regular approval program, a retrospective plan does not save labor by the Acquisitions Department staff. Each slip submitted by a selector must be duplicate checked and processed like a firm order. Also, it is questionable how much selectors' time was actually saved at UTD due to the vast number of slips generated.

The use of a retrospective approval plan will be particularly advantageous in some circumstances, but much less so in other situations. It is often used by libraries that have received a sudden increase in their book budget (or a large one-time allocation). A retrospective plan would also be particularly useful for new libraries, libraries beginning to collect in new subject areas or libraries with a history of uneven collection development resulting in significant retrospective gaps.

If a library has already had an adequately-financed approval plan over a considerable time span without any major changes in its

collecting priorities, use of a retrospective plan would probably be considerably less beneficial. One would then presume the most important books had already been received through the original plan and that the retrospective profile would identify material of lesser interest that was not significant enough to be included originally.

Another potential drawback lies in the fact that titles identified through this process are not guaranteed to still be in-print. The B/NA database of books originally treated on their approval plan is not adjusted by deleting titles as they go out-of-print. Consequently, titles selected through this program must be verified as in-print (through use of *Books-in-Print* in hard copy or the CD-ROM format). The B/NA approval plan representative informed us that the experience of other libraries indicated roughly 70% of the selected titles would still be in-print.¹⁷ Based on test samples, a somewhat higher percentage of items selected at UTD were still in print.

If a library's catalog records dating to 1970 have not been converted to a machine-readable format, it would be impossible to eliminate selections which duplicate present holdings by running the profile matches against the library's catalog. In my opinion, this would seriously reduce the program's efficiency as a vast amount of labor-intensive manual duplicate checking would be required. Alternately, selectors' time would be wasted reviewing notification forms for items already held in the collection. Ironically, B/NA reports that a majority of participating libraries do not utilize the "deduping" option.

Conclusions

In the final analysis, a retrospective approval plan is a hybrid between the conventional approval plan and firm ordering, resembling a customized slip notification service for retrospective publications. Selection is based on perusing notification forms rather than direct "hands-on" examination of the book. The library is not required to select a set percentage of the slips unlike a formal approval plan which often mandates that roughly 88% to 90% of the supplied books be retained. The selected items are then firm ordered from the vendor without return privileges as on a true approval plan.

This concept represents a relatively new approach to collection development made possible by computer technology. It is true that roughly 1,200 libraries have used the B/NA service since 1975,¹⁸ but many librarians still seem to be unaware of this method. The author firmly believes this plan worked well for the University of Texas at Dallas Library, but is not explicitly recommending a retrospective approval plan for all libraries. Its value will vary, depending upon a library's purpose, clients, unique needs and collecting history. But the author does feel that all collection development and acquisitions librarians should be aware of this retrospective collection development tool.

References

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7. Childress, Boyd and Gibbs, Nancy. "Collection Assessment and Development Using B/NA Approval Plan Referral Slips," *Collection Management*, vol. 11, nos. 1/2, 1989, pp. 137-143.

8. From a B/NA advertising brochure.

9. From a conversation with Scott A. Smith of B/NA on January 6, 1990.

10. From a telephone conversation on November 13, 1989 with Kevin Coyle, B/NA customer service representative.

11. *Library Journal*, vol. 100, no. 4, February 15, 1975, p. 353. See also

Newlin, Lyman W. "The Rise and Fall of Richard Abel and Co., Inc.," *Scholarly Publishing*, Vol. 7, No. 1, October, 1975, pp. 55-61.

12. Blackwell North America and B. H. Blackwell, Ltd. *Approval Plan - Subject Thesaurus. Hierarchical Arrangement*. (n.p.: B/NA-BHB, 1987).

13. The Permanent University Fund is an endowment fund generated by leasing oil wells and earmarked exclusively for capital expenditures in the University of Texas system. It is the source of the so-called "oil money" for which Texas universities are famous.

14. Cenzer, *op. cit*, pp. 80, 82. The proportion of slips actually selected would have been somewhat higher as B/NA was able to provide 92% of the selected items.

15. Childress and Gibbs, *op. cit*, pp. 139-140. Specifically, 50% were selected from 112 slips on air warfare and Southern history; 19% of 1454 slips on Southern history, aviation history, crime and criminology, and public administration; 20% of 130 slips on exercise physiology and biomechanics; and 21% of 1696 slips concerning social sciences.

16. Letter from Dana L. Alessi to Tom Nisonger, April 16, 1985.

17. From a conversation with Dana L. Alessi in April 1985.

18. This figure is an estimation given by Scott A. Smith of B/NA to the author on January 6, 1990.