

Directly to the Source: Will Academic Libraries Become Wholesalers of Information?

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Introduction

As libraries begin addressing growing numbers of remote (although not necessarily off campus) users, technology has and will continue to play a primary role in how information is conveyed to this new class of library users.

While remote access to library catalogs has been around for years, the growing number of traditionally print indexing and reference tools available anytime, anywhere, represents an interesting paradox in the extension of library resources and services. The monopoly position of the library as the institutional information provider could appear to some users as being broken by increasingly seamless computing and communications technology. If it is viewed as such, what happens to the position of the library in the information hierarchy of our users?

While today's talk isn't intended to be highly scientific or densely packed with reams of survey data, it is intended to get you thinking about what may happen after all of the resources and services that libraries have historically provided become available "out there."

Utilizing the competitive intelligence process, I'll attempt to extrapolate some possible "answers" to this presentation's primary question "Will academic libraries appear to become wholesalers of information?"

The Competitive Intelligence Process

What? Competitive Intelligence process? Why? The 'CI' process is a simple four step process (that could be continuous) that anyone can use to help them think about and formulate possible courses of action (hopefully) in anticipation of developments that are going to warrant *some* type of response. The four-step process as outlined by Larry Kahaner, in his recent book *Competitive Intelligence*¹, is as follows.

Step 1: Planning and Direction.

What do you need to know? This could be viewed as the first step and the recurring last step as your plans and directions will probably change the more you know about what you're investigating. What do you need to know or understand is often stated as a question to help facilitate the process.

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Step 2: Collection

Gathering information. As practicing information professionals you shouldn't be surprised that just about everything needed is already available someplace. Personal observation is also a valid resource and shouldn't be forgotten when gathering information for use in the analysis phase.

Step 3: Analysis

Utilizing the information gathered in the previous phase of the process, begin the process of weighting the information for importance and credibility, timeliness, etc. Determining patterns or establishing a chain of events would be useful, as that can be used when developing various scenarios that may prove possible. Developing realistic future scenarios and how your institution may be able to prepare or respond is part of this phase of the process.

Step 4: Dissemination

At this point, the various scenarios and possible responses have been "documented" and are ready to be set to the person or persons that make policy or determine the general direction of the organization. As with any information, the best format is the one most suited to the intended audience.

Competitive Intelligence in the Library Setting

The CI process within a library setting isn't concentrated so much on the "what are competitors doing" as "what events involving us are taking place" and how do we want to address them. While institutions may compete for students, and libraries are certainly part of that recruitment effort, libraries themselves hardly actively compete with each other with any destructive intent.

While it's likely that someone or a group people in the library attempt to keep up with the latest and greatest that vendors have to offer or with larger political and policy issues, it's important to make everyone at least aware of what to expect. Additionally, whenever there are a number of choices or when possible trends start to emerge that are all plausible, it's time to start outlining some responses.

Taking two issues that my own institution should be addressing within the next year or two, I will attempt to utilize the CI process in part to formulate a response to a possible or probable scenario. What follows in the

next section are some thoughts on what effects the library's "brand" presence could have among library users based on the two examples.

Integrated Access to "Not Indexed" Periodical Collections

Seamless electronic passage between 3rd party indexing and the article or document itself may represent if not the last technical hurdle, at least a large step, to easing the connection between accessing the literature and the relatively mechanical step of obtaining the literature itself. The following is an example of using the CI process in a library setting regarding the "integration" of periodical indexing and periodical literature driven by vendor products and/or technology.

Step 1: What's the question(s)?

Anybody could pose the question(s); what's more difficult is getting someone, or a group of someones, to finish the process.

How, when or should the library pursue integrating electronic collections of periodicals into indexing resources? At what cost and from what points will the articles actually be available to users?

Step 2: Information collection.

As part of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, Millersville University is part of a consortium that purchases about two dozen databases from SilverPlatter, of which Millersville subscribes to eighteen. Given that Millersville subscribes to eighteen databases (mostly indexing) and generally is able to add about one new title every year, there is certainly already "critical mass" on the indexing side to make integrating full text from strictly full text aggregators via "SilverLinker" feasible.

Without getting into reams of data, list comparisons, etc., we'll make the assumption that there is a sufficiently high match between the periodicals indexed in various databases to which Millersville subscribes, and full text in other products to which Millersville subscribes. Additionally, we'll consider the cost of the adding on the SilverPlatter product SilverLinker to be within the grasp of the Library Department.

Step 3: Analysis

As stated above, analysis is the most difficult part of the process as building scenarios can get complicated

quickly, and it is often necessary to make some educated “guesses.” For this issue, I’ll try to keep the scenarios simple and sufficient to illustrate the idea of analysis.

Scenario #1. Linking will function seamlessly within a specified IP range, but not from off campus, even though a user will have access to the indexing portion of the product off campus via validation services. This is caused by lack of off campus access to electronic periodical collections.

Scenario #2. Linking will function for any validated (enter of barcode) user, regardless of physical location on or off campus. (For Millersville this scenario would require that additional issues be addressed as the library presently deploys IP passthrough whenever possible to aid ease of access and on campus library instruction).

Scenario #3. Linking will function on campus via IP passthrough, and off campus via existing validation for indexing, but additional validation will be required prior to gaining access to the actual article. Passwords for validation would have to be issued for each periodical database that a user might encounter.

None of the above scenarios is intended to be the definitive word on how the technology may or may not work, but they are intended as some possible examples of scenarios.

Step 4: Dissemination

At Millersville, whoever has assembled the report would pass this along to the Collection Development and Management committee for review. Should that committee find it useful and something to pursue, it would be forwarded to the entire Library Department for discussion.

One could make an argument for the process to end with a decidedly neutral recommendation, or it could favor some method of deployment. The Library Department at Millersville traditionally likes to have some sort of “recommendation” for or against after something has come from committee, so the dissemination and discussion process will have to take into consideration how your organization reaches decisions (or doesn’t) on issues.

Delivery of Physical Materials

Despite the talk surrounding grand schemes of the paperless office and the promise of electronic publication, it is very likely that one has to look no further

than one’s own office to find that this is not true. Information stored on some sort of physical medium (usually known as paper) continues to clutter our offices and arrive in the mail at what seems an ever-increasing rate.

Delivery of physical materials that cannot be accessed electronically, or that a user elects to review in a physical format could represent an area of extension of library services in response to student needs when they are not physically present at the library. These materials could consist of simple articles, various governmental documents, or items from the general collections (we’ll exclude restricted access collections).

In an effort to meet the needs of remote users (primarily those off campus) and provide equitable access to information resources, libraries will eventually have to develop a mechanism and surrounding policy about how to deliver these materials to students. Millersville is developing distance education courses and programs, and yet the library has no means of delivering physical information to prospective students. Millersville is not alone. To truly support a distance education program, there is little doubt that some delivery mechanism accommodation has to be made, but remote library users may find delivery services just as convenient and useful.

Step 1: What’s the Question(s)?

Should the library consider sending physical items to remote library users? For what cost? For everyone who is registered and wants to pay, or just people not on campus?

Step 2: Information Collection

If this phase were being performed right now, there would be considerable secondary resources to consult, and various institutions doing something similar to this already. The phone and e-mail would likely be very useful resources for this phase as talking about various success and/or failures at institutions that have a service similar to this could yield very useful results.

Step 3: Analysis

Analysis of this question would likely yield several existing models with varying degrees of service and cost associated with each. Scenarios for this would probably concentrate on who qualifies for the service, where something would be delivered, speed of delivery, the

costs associated with speed of delivery, and return mechanisms for items that are to be returned. It would be appropriate in this phase to explore some financial “break-even” points as well.

Step 4: Dissemination

Dissemination and discussion of any report for this type of service (unknown, usage based, and having monetary transactions) will likely go to library faculty, staff, and administration as this involves multiple areas and some sort of billing/funds collection operation.

The Library and Extension of Services

Simple observation reveals that most incoming students are largely unprepared to effectively utilize the increasingly technologically oriented tools of an academic library or library system². However, with some instruction (one tries for systematic instruction) and experience, many students obtain sufficient skills to understand the general concepts of the library catalog, periodical index and, it has increasingly been my experience, where students can get access.

If convenience of use for the average remote library user is at the top or near the top of desired attributes from a library³, what does that do for any particular academic library trying to meet the needs of its users? It’s paradoxical that the easier a library is to use, resources are to access, services are delivered, the easier it becomes to forget about it as a specific entity and think of it in a more generic sense.

Using myself as an example, I’m not overly concerned about my bank, I’m concerned about where and when I can do my banking. Making arrangements to get to Detroit, I wasn’t concerned about any particular airline, but rather point of departure and departure/arrival times. Notwithstanding that I work at a library, my second trip through graduate school didn’t see me using too much of the physical library since I could do most of my research from the comfort of my office, 50 miles away. I don’t consider myself lazy; I just prefer to take full advantage of options that save me time and movement, even if there is a direct cost. What I consistently see in daily library thinking and discussion among my colleagues is a failure to understand that there is a cost associated with place. If a library enhances the ability to deliver services, what happens in the long run as users no longer think of the library as an entity because it’s been “replaced” with resources purchased by the library, but delivered to the end user by vendors?

I hold office hours in computing labs on the Millersville campus specifically for business and economics students. I also provide increasing numbers of “library instruction” sessions for business students, often outside the library, but still making full use of the resources they will need for their assignments. What I see happening I think is very interesting. Students are acting and talking of information needs and specific products, not of the library. Hence, I have adopted a few strategies that help students understand that there is a “library” that supports all of these technologically accessible products and services that are available.

What follows are some of the activities that I am undertaking to keep library services (but not necessarily the library) in the forefront of student and faculty research activities.

Getting “Out There” with the Students

Similar to many other academic libraries, Millersville has a liaison program. I am the liaison librarian to the Business, Economics, and Computer Science departments at Millersville. If the information is “out there” and services are “out there” I should be out there as well. Beginning in the spring of 1998, I started holding office hours in general purpose computing labs and had what I thought was modest impact. I’d average about one student every office session. I was unable to hold office hours in computing labs in the fall 1999 semester, but have reinstated the service after numerous requests from other faculty to help students with their research projects. In interactions with students, they aren’t inundated with “this is a library resource” so much as a tangential comment that the library purchases the product for use with this and other assignments as part of the learning process.

Network with New Faculty

New faculty orientation at Millersville is a great opportunity to meet with new faculty in my areas and talk about what resources and services are available and how I can be of assistance in the learning process. While this takes time to develop since I’m casting a fairly small net, in only three or four years it has become a major tool for getting “library instruction” inserted into the curriculum at the most appropriate time for all parties concerned. You can often learn a lot more about the intent of various assignments, and what’s happening in departments by asking your fellow faculty at any meeting involving food. Never underestimate the “schmooze factor.”

Just a Little Advertising

Walk into many libraries and you'll likely see a list of workshops, who to contact, where to sign up, etc. Using a simply one page flyer sent directly to faculty in my areas, I have several hundred flyers distributed directly to students in their classes addressing essentially the same concept. If students have a research question in one of my subject areas, they are encouraged to attend either my office hours, or make an appointment with me for private consultation. To my surprise, I've even seen some of these informational flyers posted on faculty office doors and in areas where students congregate to use computers or work on group research projects they have been assigned.

Associate with Products & Resources

Increasingly I attach my name and e-mail address to resources being made available via the library in my subject areas. Starting with web enabled bibliographies for classes that list me as the person to contact with any questions, to simply being listed as the "expert" for a particular resource, there is a *name* and a *means of contact* for students when they have questions.

Managing Expectations

Despite every intention of meeting user needs, there will be instances when either myself or services provided by the library will not be able to fulfill a need, in either the immediate or distant future. Managing expectations about what can realistically be expected is another way I attempt to continue fostering interaction. Users will view services as being adequate more often (and consequently view myself and library services with less dissatisfaction) with a better understanding of what is available⁴.

Conclusion

While I expect to continue seeing, and actively encouraging, the deployment of new technologies to enhance access to scholarly information, I am also drawing the conclusion that the library as an institution will be the conduit for information. No longer will the library be the sole aggregator, repository, and only legitimate information purveyor in the academic setting. I tend to agree with Andrew Odlyzko's comments that publishers (or their vendors) could be assuming more of the aggregation and storage functions in the digital arena very similar to what the library has historically performed in the print arena⁵.

While it is unlikely that academic libraries will be relegated to strictly wholesale storage locations of information anytime soon, we need to recognize that publishers of information now have the means to bypass the library and its functions should they elect to do so.

Notes

1. Larry Kahaner, *Competitive Intelligence: How to Gather, Analyze, and Use Information to Move Your Business to the Top* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 43–47.
2. Cheryl A. McCarthy, "Expectations and Effectiveness Using CD-ROMs: What Do Patrons Want and How Satisfied Are They?" *College and Research Libraries* 58 (March 1997): 128–42.
3. Rosemarie Cooper, et al., "Remote Library Users—Needs and Expectations," *Library Trends* 47 (summer 1998): 42–64.
4. Christopher Millson-Martula, "Customer Expectations: Concepts and Reality for Academic Library Services," *College and Research Libraries* 56 (January 1995): 33–47.
5. Andrew Odlyzko, "Competition and Cooperation: Libraries and publishers in the transition to electronic scholarly journals," January 19, 1999, white paper, <http://www.research.att.com/~amo/doc/eworld.html>