How to Have a Database Cancellation Conversation: Strategies and Tips

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In March, I had to lead a difficult conversation with the Department of Economics (ECON) faculty about canceling a core database. It was not an easy discussion, as two of the faculty members were power users who were vocal about their need for this database in their research. Nevertheless, we managed to cancel the database and replace it with two others. I consider this a success and would like to share my strategies and tips from this process.

The Background

As a Business Librarian, I am also the liaison to ECON at Portland State University (PSU). ECON technically belongs to the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, rather than the School of Business. The database, let's call it Database X, had been part of our collection for over a decade (even before I joined PSU). It provided proprietary reports and data not found elsewhere.

However, Database X was one of the most expensive databases at the Library, costing a bit over $30K in Fiscal Year (FY) 2024. The vendor's offer projected an increase to almost $35K (a 12% increase) in FY 2025 if the renewal was for one year, and almost $40K in Year 3 if we renewed it for three years, a 26% increase over the 2024 price point. Our Collection Development & Management Librarian negotiated the one-year cost down to $33,000, but it still represented a 6% price hike, well over the 2-3% inflation rate budgeted at our Library.

Budgeted Cost	32377 (a standard 4% inflation from the previous year $31132)
Actual Cost	$33,000 (6% increase) AFTER negotiation, 1 year agreement
Originally proposed renewal quotes	1 year: $34868 (12% increase) 2 year: $34245 for 2024 and $37670 for 2025 3 year: $33,623 for 2024, $36313 for 2025, $39,218 (26% hike) for 2026

Figure 1. Cost table. Adapted from the meeting presentation.

I had long questioned the cost-effectiveness of this database despite the unique content. A few years ago, I tried to discuss its cancellation, and was met with strong opposition since there were quite a few vocal power users at ECON. For a few years, the ECON liaison duties shifted to the Government Information Librarian. I hoped he would cancel the database, but he had not before he left for another job, and the liaison duties shifted back to me, at least for now and in the foreseeable future.

The Conversation

When I reviewed the data after receiving the renewal proposal, the numbers reinforced my concerns. Usage had declined precipitously: Cost Per Use (CPU) had risen to $57 in FY 2023 (the latest data available to me at that time), up from a few dollars or even

under a dollar in 2020 through 2022. The heaviest users had likely retired or left the institution. It was time to revisit the issue.

Here are some of my strategies used in the process:

Have the Conversation in Person

I could have simply canceled Database X and informed the ECON faculty afterward, or communicated via email, as I often did. However, I believed the decision required a face-to-face discussion, especially since I did not know who had been using it. After a few tries, I was able to present at their faculty meeting. Presenting at their in-person meeting removed the possibility that some faculty might have missed my emails or quickly forgotten the topic after a brief glance. I also emailed the whole faculty the slide deck in case anyone was not able to attend.

Tell the Story with Data

Because I assumed that economists generally value quantitative evidence, I built my slide deck around a clear problem-solution narrative. I started the presentation with a table listing the usage statistics, prices, CPUs, and year-to-year increase percentages since FY 2020. This demonstrated that continuing the subscription would require cutting other ECON databases. I also compared the CPU of Database X (at $57) with that of ECONLIT, a core economics database, which was $3.48. The contrast was so striking that some faculty members at the meeting even commented, “Just cut it – I don’t use it anyway!”

	FY 20	FY 21	FY 22	FY 23	FY24	FY 25
PRICE				29935	31132	33000
USAGE	27674	7281	31887	520		
COST PER USE	0.97	3.8	0.90	57.57		

Figure 2. Price and usage trends. From the meeting presentation.

Offer Alternatives, But Be Fully Transparent

Although Database X offered unique data and reports not available elsewhere, I found comparable information across other existing databases. I presented screenshots and descriptions of these possible alternatives, but I was honest that they were partial substitutes at best.

Apply “Peer Pressure”

To provide context, I showed that very few institutions in the region (2 out of the 7 I checked) still subscribed to Database X. Using WorldCat (n.d.) and other libraries’ websites, I found that fewer than 50 libraries worldwide maintained access, and some of the fewer than 50 were branch campuses of a large university system. Given our financial constraints, the ECON faculty recognized that continuing this subscription was not sustainable.

Provide Options and Let Them Choose

At the end of my presentation, I proposed two options: cancel another economics database, such as ECONLIT, to fund Database X, or cancel Database X and redirect the funds towards

other sources. Because I valued transparency and faculty input, I wanted the decision to be collaborative. The majority chose the second option.

Work with Power Users

Two faculty members - the “power users” - were understandably disappointed. I offered to meet with them individually to identify alternative sources. Although they preferred to explore independently, I supported them by setting up database trials after consulting the BRASS online discussion notes (American Library Association, n.d.) and peer institutions’ database lists and economics research guides.

I recalled that one of the power users had just requested an expensive dataset from a source we could have subscribed to. Since this professor was likely in need of the same but an updated dataset for his research in the near future, instead of buying the dataset on an annual basis, and there is no guarantee the Library will have the budget every year. It would be easier and more cost-effective to subscribe to the whole database, which provides more datasets than just the one he requested.

I communicated all that via email, and eventually, they agreed that two of the three replacement candidates the Library provided trials for were “good enough” substitutes for Database X. And because I investigated the prices before the trials, I knew the total cost for both databases ($20950 together) was still less than that of Database X ($33000, the lowest offer our collection management librarian was able to obtain after negotiation).

To prevent the wild database price inflation from happening again, I also obtained a direct promise and a tacit agreement in writing (email) from the vendors to keep the annual inflation below 3%.

The Reflection

It is never easy to talk about canceling a database, especially a long-standing and high-cost subscription. However, if we can handle this process with transparency, inclusiveness, data-driven storytelling, and a solution-focused attitude, we can turn what could have been a contentious conversation into a constructive and collaborative decision.

References

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