A REVEALING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: In Spring of 1996 the Lamar University library began offering a table of contents service, UnCover Reveal, to its faulty. Having heard "war stories" from others of the trials and tribulations when they began this service, we approached the project with some caution and decided to monitor its impacts closely. This paper gives our "war stores" of implementation and suggestions for what we would have done differently.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the invention of the printing press, the rate of information has been doubling at ever increasing rates. The time is past where one can know all of the worldwide research related to one's discipline.

Ever since the beginning of libraries, the librarian has played a key role in informing the user of what is available. This started with the librarian literally being the gatekeeper of the library. Before organized classification schemes, it was the librarian who knew everything that was in the library. After the advent of the printing press and the subsequent publishing of scholarly journals the information explosion was on its way. In order to help the researcher keep up with the ever increasing flood of information, the role of the librarian was expanded to include compiling bibliographies of important literature on a topic. These bibliographies were in a sense evaluative for they were not complete surveys of the field. Rather, the compilers selected items for inclusion. We still compile these bibliographies. With the wide use of computers for storing information and building databases, the librarian saw the value of SDI for researchers. Thus, the computer was a tool used to search the literature on a regular basis for narrowly focused information for the researcher. These "bibliographies" were perceived as even more valuable to the researcher since they could exactly target a subject. However, they did not evaluate the content and gave only the "hits" on specific subjects. For some reason, cost probably being a major one, this did not catch on in settings outside of high pressure research settings. However, the number of new journals continued to grow. How was the researcher to find out about them? -- Publishers' ads, conferences, word of mouth. Yet with the large number and worldwide distribution this is difficult. In 1986 information was doubling at the rate of every six years. At a recent meeting an estimate that it is doubling every 16 months was given. How was a researcher to keep up? Enter the librarian.

Libraries were having their own problems keeping up with the expanding amount of information available. As the amount of information was increasing so was the cost of producing and
obtaining it (Ketcham & Born 1996). At the same time library funding was being reduced, if only because of the impact of inflation on steady state budgets. Librarians looked for faster ways to give access to journals than the traditional ILL. Librarians had long known that most of the articles published in a particular title were not actually used. So it seemed an ideal way to give access was to make the tables of contents (TOCs) of journals available, without owning the journal (Goodyear & Dodd 1994). Many services have been developed along this concept -- Reveal, Research Alert, Article First, Faxon Finder. In addition, these services usually offer document delivery that is faster than traditional interlibrary loan. The TOCs can be sent directly to the researcher, thus saving the researchers time. Once this is set up, the librarian rarely has to intervene, thus the librarian’s time is saved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS SERVICES

In the past one of the authors has been involved in a table of contents project (Fuseler 1994). In this project the tables of contents were displayed in lieu of the journal itself and the article supplied on demand. Since that project the table of contents services have expanded to allow electronic delivery of table of contents directly to the researcher. As a part of a project to enhance library collections and services, we decided to make this service available to our faculty. If it were successful, we planned to expand it to graduate students and for senior research projects.

Because of funding problems, the Gray Library was involved in a cancellation project almost every year in the period from 1984 to 1994. From 1990 to 1994, we canceled 586 titles, bringing our title count down from a high of 3,200 in 1973 to 1,800 in 1995. Our emphasis in canceling journals during these five years was on “saving” the high-use, curriculum specific titles and canceling the low-use, expensive titles, which generally turned out to be faculty research titles. This tactic, needless to say, was looked on with disfavor by many of the faculty, especially in the science and engineering departments. Although we now have more funds, thanks to the institution of a student library use fee which was approved at the request of the students, we have been very hesitant to add back any of the canceled titles or enter very many subscriptions to new titles because we do not want to find ourselves in the same position as before, hacking away at the book budget in order to fund journal price increases. We hoped that the provision of the REVEAL TOC service would prove to be an easy, painless way for faculty to be aware of the contents of titles the library had canceled as well as titles not owned by the library, and provide them with access to the contents of journals to which the library does subscribe without their ever having to set foot in the library, something that many faculty seem to find highly desirable. We also hoped that this would serve to assuage some of the unhappiness created by the heavy cancellation of research titles.

We saw as an additional advantage the subject search portion by which the person could get not only the TOCs of journals known to be of interest, but also could develop a subject search that was automatically run against 17,000+ TOCs of the journals in the complete database. This would help to make researchers aware of journals that they might not know of, but which would show up repeatedly in their subject searches.

INTRODUCTION OF TOC AT LAMAR

Since we were already providing access to UnCover and our faculty was familiar with that service, we decided to offer TOC through UnCover’s Reveal service. This service has been
publicized in the literature. However, in discussing this with other librarians, we learned that many people had trouble with signing onto the service and setting up their profiles. The profile
determines which TOCs are sent to them. In April each member of the faculty was sent a letter,
tailored to his department, explaining the service and its value. The normal distribution for these
letters is for a stack to be sent to the department chair who then has someone distribute them to the
mail boxes. Since we anticipated the difficulty in setting up a profile to be a negative in using
this service, rather than sending the rather detailed (five pages of small print) directions we
received from UnCover, we asked the faculty members to call their subject librarians to set up
profiles. There were very few responses.

In June several VIPs including the President, all vice Presidents, and key people, such as the
head of the computer center and the registrar were sent letters explaining the service. To each of
these letters were attached examples of a TOC and a subject search geared to their subject field.

In July we talked to the Council of Deans, which includes the Academic Vice President, about the
service. They were all enthusiastic and couldn't understand why we had a poor response. They all
agreed to talk to their Department Chairs about this wonderful service.

In early August we sent follow-up letters to deans. These letters included the instructions for
subscribing. The deans assured us they would copy and distribute these to their department
chairs.

Another avenue of publicity was the subject librarians talking to our users on a one-on-one basis
about this service. In August the Library Director and the Science Librarian talked to faculty in the
Chemistry department about canceling Chemical Abstracts. The use of Reveal was offered as one of the options for keeping up with the literature. One new faculty member raved about the
service, which he had been introduced to during his orientation by the Science Librarian. The
others all were sure it was something they wanted to do, and vaguely remembered, but just hadn't
had the time . . .

A call to UnCover in early September revealed that only 37 users from Lamar were subscribed.
This included eight library faculty members. It was obvious that the service was being under
utilized, if used at all by anyone but the librarians. We decided to try to find out why. This would
help us determine how to publicize and make this available to faculty and graduate students in
the fall semester.

SURVEY RESULTS

We surveyed forty faculty in 27 departments. Of the forty surveyed, sixteen said they were not
familiar with Reveal, fourteen were "vaguely" aware, and ten admitted to knowing about the
service, with only three of that ten having signed up for the service. Of the three who have signed
up,

1) one has never chosen any journals for which to receive contents or set up a specific
subject search;

2) one, a chemist, was enthusiastic about the service but hadn't actually received
anything yet and knows he'll download it rather than read it when he does;
3) and the other, a librarian, is using the service primarily as a current awareness service for journals to which the library subscribes. She stated that she had no problems signing up and that she views this service as a way to "browse" journals without having to look at each issue to see if there is an article of interest to her in that issue. Her only negative comment was that the process of signing up could be a little more streamlined.

Eight of the twenty contacted were department chairs, who were sent letters addressed specifically to them that described the service. Of that eight, six remembered "hearing about" or were "marginally familiar" with Reveal. Two of the eight stated that they had never heard of this services. One of the department chairs who was "marginally" familiar with the service enthusiastically offered to copy any information we sent to him to share with his faculty. One of the library liaisons that we had talked to about the service a few months before remembered he'd heard about it "maybe at a meeting" and would like to know more. Why didn't we "send him a memo about it?"

Of the forty faculty contacted, only six are not actively involved in conducting research at this time. The 37 faculty who are not using this service reacted positively when the service was described and asked that information on how to sign up be provided to them. One faculty member who vaguely remembered having heard about the service asked that he be sent the information but stated that since he objected to the fact that Lamar does not offer graphical capabilities with its computer accounts, he refuses, on principle, to apply for an account that would allow him to access Reveal even though he thought it would be very useful to him.

What We Would Do Differently

In retrospect, we probably would have had a much more positive reaction if we had offered this at a different time of the year (by the middle of April, most faculty have so many different stacks of "things to do" on their desks that our letter probably disappeared into one of those stacks, never to be seen again).

It would also have been much more effective if we had gone to the different departmental meetings and given our little talk, with examples of tables of contents specific to that department to pass around. The spoken word attached to the familiar face generally is much more powerful than the written word in what looked like (and basically was) a form letter.

Another thing that might have served us better was to have introduced the service to graduate students first since our anecdotal evidence has shown that our faculty are frequently clued in on new methods by their graduate students, who usually have more time to spend exploring the electronic avenues of research than do faculty who are teaching 12-15 hours a semester, serving on committees, and conducting research. In addition, many of our graduate students are more used to using computers and E-mail.

Things that we may do this fall include have an article in the campus research newsletter, inviting groups in for demonstration and sending out rewritten short instructions. Perhaps we should have taken a clue from the politics of this year and done more with sound bites and less with substance.
We are also hoping that our informal survey and the information we send out to the faculty surveyed will help to spread the word about this service.

We still think that this service has much to offer our faculty, researchers and students and perhaps next year we will have a success story for you.

REFERENCES

