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| Public-Access Provocations: An Informal Column
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"Just Point Me in the Right Direction"

By Walt Crawford

Suppose, for the moment, that your online catalog includes
sophisticated transaction logging and analysis capabilities. Suppose
that you can determine, for each search, how many call numbers the
patron examined before leaving the terminal.

Now, suppose that you define a universe of transactions that
begin with subject or quasi-subject (e.g., title word) searches which
yield two or more results.

By most standards of library research, "successful" transactions
within this universe fall into two categories:

    1.   The patron examines all or most of the results;

    2.   The patron narrows the result in some manner.

I'll wager, however, that an analysis would show that a
substantial percentage of such transactions end after the patron
examines a single call number. And, if asked, most patrons would
consider these transactions to be successful: the catalog gave the
patron what the patron wanted.

What Do They Want?

When a patron gets multiple results and checks one (and only one) call
number, the patron is probably getting a pointer--a place to begin
browsing in the stacks. I do that all the time. So do you, if you
are at all typical of experienced library users.

When you are not looking for one specific title, chances are that
you want one or more books (or whatever) on a particular topic. But
you want something that will meet YOUR OWN needs and preferences. No
matter how much information an online catalog provides, the only way
to be certain that a book will suit you is to look at the book.

In that respect, these transactions could be considered
successes, even though the patron has ignored most of the results.

The patron knows where to look for books on a topic, which is all that was desired from the catalog.

What Do They Need?

There's at least one problem here, of course. Topics don't always fit neatly into Dewey or LC classifications. For example, in a Dewey library, books on desktop publishing will be in two or three different call number areas. Thus, the "point me to the stacks" patron may miss most of the collection unless he or she suspects that the library must own more than is immediately evident.

It gets even worse when an online catalog includes more than one physical location, as is the case in most academic libraries and multi-branch public libraries. The patron may not be browsing in the best stacks for the particular topic. That's annoying if there are NO books in these particular stacks, and the patron simply didn't realize (or see) that the call number referred to some other location. It's worse, however, if this location has one or two books while another location has dozens: the patron goes away satisfied, but unaware of the real resources that are available.

The Dilemma of Browsing-Oriented Patrons

Making call numbers readily available on multiple-result screens encourages patrons to use the catalog as a pointer, quite possibly stopping after a single call number, and almost certainly stopping after the first screen of results. If multiple call numbers appear on the first screen, they may alert the patron to the need to browse in more than one area of the stacks--but there's no reason to believe that the first screen will, in fact, include call numbers from all of the relevant areas or locations.

If call numbers don't appear on initial result screens, browsing patrons need to spend more time to get what they want. If call numbers do appear on initial result screens, these patrons will get what they want and probably love the online catalog--but they may not be aware of the full range of materials available.

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For that matter, patrons looking for stack pointers may not need the catalog at all. A library may serve these patrons (and reduce the load on the online catalog) by preparing compact printed lists of topics, showing call number ranges for each topic. In at least one public library where that was done, it was a great success: patrons used the list heavily and wanted copies of it. A list, however, can't possibly include every specific topic that a patron may desire.

What we have here is a dilemma. Browsing patrons--surely a significant percentage of patrons in any open-stack library--can get what they want rapidly from any well-designed online catalog. But what they get may not be what they really need.

Challenges and Question

1. Are there online catalogs that can generate numbers to show the
     extent of this sort of use? If so, what are the results?

2. How can a patron access system help browsing-oriented patrons gain
     access to more of what they want, without annoying those patrons
     who use the catalog for specific information?

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