

The Disposal of Duplicates

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IN ANY LARGE LIBRARY the problem of the disposal of duplicates can easily attain major proportions if the proper steps are not taken to keep the situation in hand.

The first step in the establishment of a system of duplicate disposal is the adoption of a definite policy as to just how commercial an attitude the library shall take. The goodwill of other institutions is of no small moment and undoubtedly a policy of liberal donations brings concrete returns over a period of time. Yet the librarian must balance future benefits against present needs and decide whether or not the library shall consider "a bird in the hand" as "worth two in the bush."

If it is decided that liberal donations shall be made regardless of commercial considerations, the problem is much simplified since there is no doubt that giving books away is far easier than selling them. With this policy, the problem is reduced to a question of the best mechanical methods of handling and shipping the books, with a general care toward impartiality in giving.

If, however, the librarian decides for "the bird in the hand," as probably most librarians would have to decide, then care must be taken to see that the material is handled on a businesslike basis.

Two important sources of cost in the disposal of duplicates are time and space

charges. Work done on the books must be paid for and a proportionate part of the total cost charged against each item handled. Also, each foot of shelf space used for the disposal of the material has a definite cost per year and likewise adds to the cost of the handling of the units occupying it.

In general, there are three lines of conduct available for the disposal of duplicate material. Each of these lines has its advantages and disadvantages, and it is in the balancing of these, one against the other, that the librarian must show the greatest judgment.

Sale in Lots

The first method is the sale of material in lots; the second is the sale of material by listing; and the third method is the sale of material by varying combinations of the parts of the first two methods.

The sale of material en bloc has the great advantage of reducing considerably both the time cost and the space cost. There is no necessity for sorting the books, they merely have to be placed in a position easily accessible for examination by the potential purchaser. Then, too, there is no necessity for keeping them on hand during any great length of time since any differences of opinion as to price can be ironed out at once, the prospective purchaser can make his decision immediately, and oftentimes will carry the material away himself.

In this way, the handling and storing charge against each unit can be lowered, a consideration which is the chief benefit of this method.

There are, however, two unfavorable aspects to this situation which must be noted. First of all, wholesale selling always means that the price received per unit is much lower than it would otherwise be. Secondly, the librarian is limited to customers who are able to come to the library and examine the material, since few purchasers are willing to buy material without seeing it.

Listing of Material

These two objections are not to be met with in the system whereby all material is listed. In that case, a higher price per unit may be obtained since the purchaser has the privilege of selection and rejection. Also, the number of potential purchasers is limited only by the number of copies of the list sent out.

Theoretically, under this system a much higher price can be obtained for all items and especially so in the case of the better material. Actually, however, this does not always prove to be true.

Assuming that an item finds a purchaser, its inclusion in a list means that a higher price can be obtained for it than if it were part of a lot. Against this increase in net profit, however, must be placed the increase in the cost of listing, sorting, and handling the item. If this increase in cost balances the increase in income the system is unprofitable as listing obviously entails more administrative action than lot sales.

In practice this method has another drawback which tends to cancel most of its advantages, and that is its all-inclusiveness. Good titles are listed with poor ones and while in theory the better items

support the poorer, in practice this does not always work out.

In any miscellaneous lot of duplicates the less valuable type of material will ordinarily be far greater in quantity than the better type. This poorer material is usually very common and naturally more likely to be found in many libraries. As a consequence, when a list goes out it often happens that the libraries which want most of the material are not in a position to buy it, while the libraries that can afford it already have much of it. With the latter libraries the list runs the risk of not being considered at all, or if it is, very few items are felt to be worth searching for.

As a result of the above condition there is a great deal of material which can be sold only with difficulty if it can be disposed of at all. If this residue is not kept within reasonable bounds the list loses all value.

It would be difficult to furnish figures to support the above conclusions but there can be no doubt that the obstacles mentioned can and do exist at times. When one is dealing with miscellaneous second-hand books there is not very much margin of profit, and this factor assumes greater importance when one considers that, in general, it costs just as much to list a one-dollar book as it does one worth ten dollars.

Combination of Methods

The third method is not a distinct method at all, since it combines the first two methods described, in an attempt to avoid the obstacles and weakness with which they are afflicted. It is much more flexible and variable than the other two methods and for that reason, it can follow more closely the variations in the value of the material to be sold.

At present, this third method is the point at which the Harvard College Library has arrived in its search for the most profitable method for the disposal of duplicates. Since the library does not feel that it has by any means attained its goal, the following description is offered only as a possible assistance to those interested in the duplicate problem, and not as a final solution.

The space allotted for handling material rejected by the library consists of about one hundred feet of shelving in one room and some seventy-five additional feet in another room. The first section is used for working space and temporary storage, and the additional seventy-five feet are employed for displaying material for sale.

Books and pamphlets are received from one part of the catalog department and serials and documents from another. These groupings are retained throughout the process of disposal.

The books and pamphlets are examined as they are received and certain types of material are withdrawn. All Harvard material is sent to the archives to see if it is wanted there. Special items of a type in which dealers or individuals are known to be interested are taken out and held in the extra shelving available in the working section.

All books bearing dates before 1550, English books before 1660, and American books before 1820 are sent to the treasure room for further consideration. If that department does not want them they are returned for sale.

The exchange assistant is free at any time to extract material for exchange purposes and, in fact, often takes advantage of this privilege. The library receives many books with the stipulation that they are not to be sold if they prove to be du-

plicates. These volumes are disposed of by gift or exchange, since the donors usually have no objection to their being placed in other libraries.

The serials and documents are examined to discover whether or not they are saleable. This is one part of the process which requires some special knowledge. However, the assistant always includes anything which might find a purchaser in the saleable group.

All of the above process is preliminary in nature, preparatory to the sale of the material, which sale also follows a definite routine.

The special material of all types segregated in the storage section is offered to the parties interested in it. These parties often come to the library to look at the material but whenever this is not possible, it is listed. In this case, there is no question as to the value of listing since there is a known demand for the type of material included.

Books Displayed

The books and pamphlets are placed in the display section as they come along. They are inspected by faculty members, students, staff members, and any other persons who know they are for sale. Quite a few sales are made this way. Many more could probably be made if the existence of the collection were advertised, but this is not done, since the library feels that it should not be in active competition with neighboring book dealers.

No prices are marked in the books, the assistant setting them as the occasion arises. The reason for this action is that the major portion of the books are sold to dealers after they have been thoroughly inspected by the individuals mentioned above. Obviously, retail prices, even when low, are

of no help in setting lot prices, and putting them in the books would not pay.

The lot sales are usually made after a personal examination by the dealer. This particular part of the process also requires some specialized knowledge on the part of the assistant who must arrive at a fair price with the dealer.

In the case of one dealer, the assistant selects books and ships them without any record or pricing whatsoever. This dealer has had cordial relations with the library for years and the setting of prices on the material is left to him. The account is run on a priced exchange basis, a type of sale which is common and quite successful, due to the fact that the dealers feel that they can give higher prices for material when no cash outlay is involved.

Oftentimes, large groups of books on the same or similar subjects are rejected en masse. Many of these groups are sold after personal examination by the dealers, but in this instance also, listing can be extremely profitable. This is so because the homogeneity of subject increases the value of each unit, even those having no great value as separate items.

Serials and Documents

The saleable serials and documents are sold in a manner quite similar to that used in disposing of the books and pamphlets. Much of the material is sold in lots, a respectable portion is taken for exchange purposes, and any sizeable runs or unusual items are listed and offered to dealers and other institutions.

However, a very large portion of this material consists of single, scattered numbers and short, broken runs. This material is not sorted or listed but is packed in cartons and shipped to a dealer who specializes in periodicals. He oversees the

sorting of the material and sends a check for its value.

Any material in any one of the four groups for which there is no market is held aside. A great deal of it is sent out in the form of gifts to other institutions or, if unusable, is sold as waste paper.

That the above method has flaws and weaknesses there is no doubt. To defend particular parts of it would be extremely difficult, due to the lack of any definite figures, yet, as a whole and over a lengthy period, it has proved workable and more profitable than any other system heretofore followed.

It has one advantage which is of value in an administrative sense rather than in a commercial way, and that is, that at no time does it allow the collection to get out of hand. The librarian does not have to worry about sudden expansion in the space necessary to care for the material, as the system is devised to eliminate material in a steady flow just as it is rejected.

Whatever may be the systems adopted by different libraries there is one fact which is apparent. There is much room, to say nothing of necessity, for research in the matter of duplicate disposal. There are many other factors of importance besides the ones covered above, but they were completely and deliberately avoided either because any statements about them would lack solid support or because their ramifications were too detailed for so brief a survey.

To settle these points, in fact, to make any valid research whatsoever, possible, there must be first of all the full realization that the problem of the disposal of duplicates offers to the librarian fully as much difficulty as other branches of library activity, but a difficulty just as amenable to systematic study and correction.