

Sharon Holderman

# Formalizing the academic library subscription request process

## An opportunity to cultivate relationships

**L**ibraries want to help connect patrons to the information they need as fast as possible, but budgets do not typically allow unlimited subscription purchases. It is easier to find money for books and other single purchases because they are one-time costs. Subscriptions require an annual commitment of money, and are more difficult to manage, especially considering rising costs and varied prices. Many academic libraries allocate money to departments for library collection purchases.

The Volpe Library at Tennessee Technological University had previously allocated money based on a formula developed more than 40 years ago. We eliminated allocations in 2013 and began approving all one-time purchase requests regardless of the department or college. This has been a great success with the departments and colleges, and it allows for flexibility in spending for new programs, new classes, and new faculty.

Once faculty enjoyed the unlimited request model, some began requesting subscriptions and not just one-time purchases. Without a formalized process for managing requests, we realized we had to develop a method that worked well for requestors as well as those managing the budget.

Unfortunately we could not take our one-time purchase motto of “you want it, we’ll buy it” and apply it to subscription requests due to budget limitations. Subscription requests are more complicated than one-time purchases

for a number of reasons. Costs are always changing, and buying a subscription usually means the library is making a financial commitment to that resource for at least the next few years. Therefore, we cannot use “extra” money at the end of the fiscal year but must find a way to sustain that purchase over time.

Library staff typically know this, but those making subscription requests do not always understand why we can financially support some purchases and not others. Some faculty may also have a narrow view of the library’s purpose and want us to purchase subscriptions for their individual research. Although we want to financially support all research, our budget forces us to concentrate on serving larger populations. These complications mean we must sometimes deny some requests for subscriptions, which can potentially create unhappiness and negative perceptions of the library.

### The new process

We found the best way to manage the complications and the library’s image was to create a subscription request process that keeps requestors informed at multiple points. It begins when the requestor completes an online form<sup>1</sup> to start the approval process. The form

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has evolved over time, but it contains key components to help requestors understand some of the complications. Besides asking for information about the desired subscription and the requestor, the form also asks more thoughtful questions. The requestor must review the library's existing journal and database subscriptions in the same subject area and detail what the requested subscription covers that existing ones do not.

The next question explains that the library may need to cancel existing subscriptions in that subject area to afford the request and then asks if the request is worth cancelling existing subscriptions. If the requestor answers yes, we ask them to suggest which subscriptions to cancel. We also ask them if their department is willing to pay part of the subscription cost every year if the library's budget cannot cover the purchase. Then the requestor lists faculty who would use the new subscription in their classes. Finally, they are to list any additional reasons that support the purchase request. At the end of the form there is a note that says the library may schedule a trial of the subscription to help determine need and usage.

Not only does this form gather the necessary information for the library to explore a subscription purchase, but it also forces the requestor to review existing subscriptions, recognize that the library budget may not cover the purchase, indicate whether their department will contribute money, and understand the focus on student/class usage.

Once the form is submitted, the content is emailed to the coordinator of public services, who coordinates the collection content. She then emails the requestor both to acknowledge the request and to explain the process. Although explaining the process could be part of the online form, the personal email and detailed explanation helps develop a rapport between the coordinator and the requestor. That is also the time to ask any questions about the request for clarification. The electronic resources librarian then provides cost and licensing details. The coordinator emails the requestor at this point to tell him or

her the request is moving to the next step and to share the cost of the resource. This often generates further discussion about money, which helps explain budget details to those outside the library. The request and related details then go for approval to the Library Coordinating Council, which meets twice per month. The council's conversation covers aspects like cost, budget outlook, number of people served by the subscription, whether it is indexed in our discovery tool, existing resources in that subject area, and availability through interlibrary loan (ILL).

If the council has difficulty deciding, the library offers a trial of the resource to obtain usage data and give patrons the opportunity to use it. The trial data can indicate potential need and usage to help the council decide. Lastly, the coordinator informs the requestor of the council's decision via email. If the request is denied, the email includes the reasons and proposes alternative methods of access like ILL and other related resources. If the request is approved, the electronic resources librarian begins the purchasing and licensing processes.

In the approval notification email to the requestor, we explain license negotiations can take a long time, so access to the material may be delayed. However, even more important is informing the requestor that this purchase may not be forever. It is vital to explain that all subscriptions, new and old, are reviewed for usage data every year to justify their cost. The requestor must understand that if the subscription is not used, it is subject to cancellation like all other subscriptions. Although the requestor may still get upset if it gets cancelled in the future, it is important to inform them early that the purchase is not guaranteed forever.

### **The pros and cons**

There are many benefits to this new, formalized process. Each requestor feels their purchase request is heard and equally considered since all requests follow the same steps. Budget limitations are addressed by some questions in the original form, which

suggests at the outset that not everything is approved. Those who are denied understand why, since they are educated and informed throughout the process. The process also sets up a dialogue with the requestor regardless of the verdict so we learn about people's information needs and why they want specific subscriptions. We have discovered valuable information when asking what they would suggest cancelling and have even saved money cancelling a more expensive database and purchasing a cheaper one.

Lastly, we are benefitting from good rapport and positive perceptions of the library. Those we have approved really appreciate us responding to their needs. Those we have denied still make other requests and continue to work with the library in various ways; the denials do not appear to harm our relationships with faculty and patrons. There are only a few drawbacks. We are unable to approve every request, but that is not the fault of the process and has always been a drawback. This process also requires more work by the requestor because the form requires evaluating other resources and gathering information from their departments. Although this is a drawback to the requestor, this is a benefit for the library, since requests are only made by those serious enough to put in the work. There are instances when people inquire about subscription purchases but never actually submit the form to start the process. To date we have not heard any complaints about the subscription request process.

### **Lessons learned**

Since the process was created, we have learned a few key things. Explaining details to the requestor is important, both up front in the form and throughout the process, and requestors have been extremely appreciative of this in their comments and emails. Also explaining that access is not immediate due to the licensing process is valuable since most faculty are unaware that licenses must be negotiated. We have helped those who want faster access for a class by asking for an extended subscription trial with the vendor,

which is easier to obtain once we start the purchase process. When we have to deny requests, we offer alternatives like ILL, Get It Now, or related resources. Even though those alternatives are not their first choice, they do recognize we are trying hard to solve their information need within our means.

Since subscriptions change over time, it is important to document who requested what subscription so if usage declines, we can start a conversation prior to actual cancellation. In order to determine whether something is being used, all online subscription statistics should be reviewed at renewal time. Even though there are some databases we feel we will never cancel, it is still worth reviewing the statistics to notice any usage changes. This will help avoid renewing subscriptions with low usage, help inform subscription request decisions, and help find money for new requests. Sharing these usage and budget statistics with faculty, departments, and colleges keeps them informed and shows them the bigger picture about what the library provides. We began creating college reports<sup>2</sup> in 2014, which detail information about one-time purchases, subscriptions, LibGuides, instruction, ILL, and circulation for each college. Not only do we include the usage and budget data, but we also include percentages of the total to help them see how each college fits into the library's services to the whole university. Although we may not be able to approve every subscription request, we have benefitted from a formalized process that has built relationships with requestors resulting in positive perceptions of the library.

### **Notes**

1. "Subscription Purchase Request Form," Tennessee Technological University Volpe Library, accessed June 1, 2015, <https://www.tntech.edu/library/faculty-resources/subscription-purchase-request-form>.
2. "Stats by College, Library Statistics & Reports," Tennessee Technological University Volpe Library, accessed June 1, 2015, <http://tntech.libguides.com/reports/collegestats>. 