

E-City in action

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share with you of how we at Wellington City Libraries (WCL) developed our electronic collections and our experiences in making them available to our library customers.

This paper is in two parts. The first part outlines the beginnings of E-City, database selection for E-City and the issues that have confronted WCL since E-City began.

These issues include:

- Relationships with vendors
- Copyright protection
- Licensing agreements
- Shifting content in databases
- Costs

The second part of the paper covers the technical implications of implementing these databases and the staff training issues that arose.

What is E-City?

E-City (www.e-city.co.nz) is the stand-alone web site, a “one-stop electronic shop” where customers of Wellington City Libraries (WCL) can access the Libraries’ on-line catalogue and full-text databases. E-City can also be accessed through Wellington City Libraries web site (www.wcl.govt.nz).

E-City was developed at the time when the technology environment, particularly the web-enabled technologies, was rapidly expanding. Wellington City is, on the whole, a highly educated and technology-savvy community. Computer ownership levels are high. In our 2001 survey of WCL library customers conducted earlier this year, 62 percent of respondents reported that they had access to the Internet at home.

WCL was keen to capitalise on these developments and expand our services through this new medium. Internationally, public libraries were looking at expanding electronic holdings as part of their collections, and we felt this was where we should also be heading.

The genesis of E-City and WCL's electronic collections was the decision in August 1998 of the newly formed Collection Development Team to purchase EBSCO MasterFILE Premier, the first online database for Wellington City Libraries. The primary reasons for purchasing the database were:

- to meet the needs of library customers who prefer online delivery of information
- to have a resource which provided extremely current information
- to have a readily available information resource which gave equity of access to all Wellington City Libraries customers simultaneously across the twelve branch libraries
- to provide a wider range of information resources to specialist customer groups, e.g. business-oriented customers

MasterFILE Premier was selected for the versatile content that most closely matched our customers' needs. The publications on the database were a mix of high quality journals (e.g. Harvard Business Review), popular journals (e.g. Time) and journals which give a wealth of information on topics such as religious studies, which, while very useful, were less essential.

MasterFILE Premier was initially only networked throughout the branch libraries. The potential for remote access to the database was an important reason for the decision to purchase it however, and in February 1999, without any promotion whatsoever, MasterFILE Premier was installed on the Wellington City Libraries web site for a six-week trial. Those library customers who chanced upon it were enthralled with it.

In the meantime, work was begun on developing a stand-alone site where online databases could be directly accessed. This was to become E-City. Once the site was ready and authentication issues over customer access to the databases had been worked through, MasterFILE Premier was installed on E-City, along with Electric Library Australasia (ELA) and Gale's Biography Resource Centre. E-City was formally launched in December 1999.

Database selection for E-City

At the time of the purchase of MasterFILE Premier there was no specific coverage of electronic tools in WCL's Collection Development Policy. The criterion for selecting these tools was the same as that applied to other formats. Since then, however, the Collection Development Team has formed policies around the selection of online databases.

The basic criteria for selecting databases has not changed since that which was applied to the selection and purchase of MasterFILE Premier. Electronic databases must significantly add to the value of the information that can not be as well provided for in the traditional print and other formats. The Collection Development Team identifies areas where databases could significantly enhance specific areas of the Collection.

The policies already in place have been further developed within the last three months. The selector in whose subject area a gap has been identified will seek out potentially suitable databases, vendors will be contacted and the database tested. Depending upon the subject area, there may only be one suitable product in the market. If there are several products, the databases will be tested simultaneously. Two separate groups will test the database(s) – a customer group and a group of WCL staff – using agreed criterion.

Databases are selected for their ease of use and coverage of subjects to appropriate levels. These levels can vary from subject to subject, depending upon on the profile of the target customer group.

WCL's policy is to commit us to a database product for two to three years initially. Significant investment goes into the purchase, instalment and promotion of each database. Furthermore, we will build greater customer loyalty to E-City if we offer a selection of products that remain predictable and stable.

The Collection Development Team's policy is not to purchase an electronic database to cover every subject area or to automatically replace material in print and CD-ROM formats with online versions. The perception that an online version of a work is the infinitely superior product is not necessarily correct. Printed formats of some works are still the better option for us. Online products are invariably more expensive than the printed version. Furthermore WCL is not able to invest in large numbers of public PCs. Printed versions, particularly of reference-only material, will be more easily accessible by customers than on-line versions on the few heavily used multipurpose PCs.

The databases purchased so far include:

- EBSCO MasterFILE Premier - selected for its versatility, and its particular strengths in business, health, science and current affairs
- EBSCO World Magazine Bank – a very useful all-round database which came with MasterFILE Premier
- EBSCO Business Source Elite – selected for its business coverage to support Wellington City Council's strategy to actively support the Wellington City business community.
- Electric Library Australasia – selected for its INL newspapers content
- Gale Biography Resource Centre – selected for its wide coverage of biographical material, particularly for students
- Grove Art – selected for its excellent coverage of the arts and particularly useful to college and tertiary students, artists and crafts people

Other databases are being considered for purchase in this financial year.

A vitally important but often overlooked requirement when setting up a site like E-City is that it must be continually and heavily promoted to library customers. The promotion strategy leads to be multi-layered to target different segments of the community. These include school students, tertiary students, hobbyists and business people, among others. WCL has run some low-level campaigns but we have become increasingly aware that many of our customers who are potential users of E-City don't yet know about it. A major promotion campaign for E-City to Wellington City residents is planned for this financial year.

Issues

At a time when WCL was becoming seriously committed to online information resources – 1999 – issues were beginning to arise in the field of online aggregate databases. WCL was an early leader among public libraries in Australasia in putting commercial online databases on their web site, and was one of the very first public libraries in New Zealand to offer remote access for all library customers to an aggregate online database. While our initial purchases of databases were relatively straightforward, issues soon arose between our vendors and us. These issues were, we think, the result of international database vendors operating in new markets in New Zealand which are very different from the academic markets, which they have experience in, and the public library environment.

WCL's relationship with vendors

At the time of the purchase of MasterFILE Premier the relationship between WCL and EBSCO was more of a traditional vendor-customer relationship. As time has gone on, however, WCL has introduced the concept of partnership with its main vendors. Our policy now is to develop partnership relationships with all our major vendors and contractors.

Partnering in this context is a commitment between WCL and another organisation for the purpose of achieving specific business objectives by maximising the effectiveness of co-operation. This agreement, whether written or not, complements the formal contract. It covers communication styles, behaviours that govern the partnership, and conflict resolution. Partners, however, despite amicable agreements and excellent intentions, have their own interests to protect and advance, and those interests can be in conflict with the other partner's interests. Partnerships with database vendors in the present uncertain climate can be a challenge to manage effectively.

An example of where the partnership approach has benefited both WCL and one of our vendors was an issue between us over WCL's "out-of-town" memberships. The vendor had given approval for us to offer access, for a small administrative fee, for our out-of-town" members. Eighteen months later, after the launch of a promotional campaign, our membership policy was deemed to be unacceptable. Other issues have been the shifting content on databases, and the question of the location of PCs that access the E-City Databases. These issues will all be discussed more fully later.

In the meantime, we hold to the principles of partnership with regard to our database vendors. These principles have helped us particularly in the negotiation phases, and when addressing issues that could become major conflicts. We will in future be encouraging our vendors to enter into formal partnership agreements with WCL.

Copyright protection

WCL recognised from the first that it is of paramount importance that our library customers are aware of their responsibility to abide by copyright law when using our online databases. When promoting the databases to groups WCL carefully outlines the copyright provisions which govern the use of commercial databases. All customers must agree, by clicking a on the login button, to a statement outlining copyright provisions before being allowed access to any of the databases on E-City.

Difficulties arose between WCL and one of our vendors when a local college withdrew their commitment to subscribe to a database because “we can get it free now from Wellington Public”. The vendor, while accepting that WCL was not at fault, (and had indeed already contacted the school concerned), requested that we revise the access statement so that the database could be accessed only through library, home or privately owned machines. It was important to us that customers legally able to access our databases can do so from any machine, whether it be located at home, at school or at work. No other library that we could find which offered this same product to their customers by remote access had had to accede to this condition.

Both parties discussed the matter at some length and as a result there was agreement that the statement did not need to be changed. This incident highlighted for WCL how sensitive the copyright issue is for aggregate database vendors and publishers, and that we must continue to promote correct usage of the E-City databases.

Other database vendors who have been keen to sell their online databases to WCL have also expressed this view. WCL continues to regard all our customers as legitimate members of Wellington City Libraries and therefore entitled to use the databases on E-City from any PC they have access to.

Licensing agreements

Licensing agreements are a particularly difficult area for the purchasers of online databases. There is no industry standard; database vendors have their own licensing agreements. There seems to be little opportunity for libraries to alter or amend the provisions of a licence. Generally speaking, what you are presented with is what you are expected to sign up to.

A problem with license agreements is that the wording in them can be interpreted differently by the each of the parties to the agreement. All licenses refer to the purchasing library's members as "patrons". But what is a patron? WCL understands "patron" as being any person who is a current, signed-up member of Wellington City Libraries irrespective whether or not they live within the City boundaries. We have different categories of memberships for our patrons who live outside the City boundaries (called "out-of-towners"). These "out-of-town" members are required to pay for their library membership. WCL has *always* had an extensive out-of-town membership; most, though not all, of these members work in Wellington City but live in outlying local authorities. Their membership payment is *not* a revenue-generating service; it covers administrative costs only.

One of our database vendors became extremely concerned that, by giving the paying "out-of-town" members access to all the E-City databases, WCL was effectively "on selling" their databases. This was a serious issue for all of us, with the potential of serious conflict between library and vendor. WCL's position is that our memberships are an historic service which we wish to continue with, that the numbers involved is very small, and that our intention is not to "on sell" databases. Through careful discussion, and invoking our partnership approach, that vendor has agreed to accept WCL's position on membership privileges, as others have since. It is the practice of other major public libraries in the United States to offer "out-of-town" memberships in the same way that we do.

Shifting content of databases

This issue has arisen as a major concern, particularly over the last eighteen months, for all libraries that are subscribers to commercial online databases. There have been numerous articles in professional journals, conference papers and discussions on the list serves about this issue. We in Wellington City Libraries have been confronted with two instances of major shifts in database content.

The first instance occurred about September 2000 when one of our reference librarians discovered, with a customer across the desk, that the full-text version of Harvard Business Review was no longer on MasterFILE Premier. Later, other high-class business journals, e.g. Sloan Management Review, were also found to have disappeared from the database. This was a severe blow to WCL's strategy of providing our business-oriented customers – a very important segment of our market here in Wellington – with online access to specialist business journals. We approached EBSCO, and entered into a dialogue with EBSCO's senior management. We explained that our decision to purchase MasterFILE Premier, which had cost us a substantial amount of money, was partly to gain online access to the sorts of journals that were now disappearing off it. It was freely acknowledged by EBSCO that this was part of a business strategy to move high-class journals, particularly those that can be described as "academic", from the general databases on to highly priced specialist databases.

Where did this leave WCL? There were two main issues for us. Firstly, there was the simple communication issue that we, as a major New Zealand client of EBSCO, and a client, moreover who had raised that company's profile in this country as a database supplier, had not been informed these developments. Secondly, there was the issue of

our right as consumers to a product we had purchased in good faith as having specified content. After two years of investment in MasterFILE Premier – installing it on E-City, promoting its contents (particularly the high-class business journals), building up a customer following, we were faced with having a devalued database and a customer base disenchanted with it, and by extension, with us.

There seems little, on the face of it, that customers like Wellington City Libraries can do to seek redress in these situations. But talking to EBSCO, outlining our concerns, and making it clear that we expected some recompense for this changed situation, all while using the partnership model, has benefited WCL. We have since added EBSCO Business Source Elite, which includes the business journals shifted from MasterFILE Premier as well as many others, to E-City. It has been a very popular acquisition: in the first three weeks of it being installed on E-City, with no promotion at all, there were two thirds the number of hits on that database as there were on MasterFILE Premier for the same period.

Electric Library Australasia (ELA) is another database where content, or more accurately the nature of that content, has significantly changed – to our dismay.

In order to keep faith with our E-City customers we have added to each of the E-City database login pages a statement that explains that we have no control over the content of the databases, and that there may be changes from time to time.

Costs

Of this there is no doubt: commercial online databases are very expensive. Most are so expensive that, in general, they are presently unaffordable for any but the biggest public libraries in New Zealand. Even for the large libraries such as WCL, every purchasing decision, even for the modestly priced databases, is a major one.

We at WCL have found a huge diversity in costs between one product and another, and between one vendor and another. By the time we had purchased our first three database subscriptions, we could reasonably benchmark the prices of other databases (and the value of their content) against them. We have vigorously negotiated with potential vendors when we have felt the price has been too high. More than once we have negotiated to purchase a database for a substantially lower price than we were originally quoted. In one instance, the price was dropped to a third of the original price offer. We purchase each database on its own merits. We do not accept “package deals”, i.e. “you can have this for the really good price of \$X, if you also take that at the price of \$X”. They may be great prices, but unless we really want both the products they are not bargains for us.

Another difficulty for WCL has been the widely differing price structures in relation to the structure of the licenses. Here are some of the variations we have encountered:

- One price for all users, irrespective of the number of branch libraries or the number of simultaneous users
- One price for the Central Library and another for the branches whether accessed through the library network, or by remote users
- One price for a set number of simultaneous users, whether those users access the database through the library network, or whether they are remote users
- One price for the number of simultaneous users who access the database through the library network, plus another price for remote users
- One price based on the total population of the City

While these variations can confuse the purchaser we have found that by having clear criteria and using a similar database as a benchmark it is easier to negotiate an acceptable price with a vendor.

Having been purchasing and installing online databases for three years now, our view at WCL is that vendors have not researched their markets in New Zealand well enough, and have not put in place pricing structures for their products that most libraries can afford to purchase. New Zealand is not a wealthy economy. Public libraries here, unlike those in the United States and Australia, don't receive any form of state funding. Their local authority funders, for the most part, support their public libraries as much as they are able, but even their purses are stretched by the competing demands from the other services they must fund.

These issues suggest to us that vendors are still becoming familiar with the New Zealand library environment, just as we at WCL are still learning about the online industry. Public libraries who are purchasing database subscriptions are committing large amounts of their collection budgets to their purchase. Their level of use by library customers must justify their cost; they must "earn their stripes". Vendors concerned about wide and easy access to their products by public library users could consider developing products targeted at specific markets, e.g. one for public libraries, another for schools, at prices that those customers can afford. Only large academic and public libraries, along with a very few corporate libraries, can realistically afford to purchase most of the online products presently being offered by database vendors.

The first part of this paper has covered the process of the development of our electronic collections and the issues we have encountered as we have progressed. The second part of the paper will discuss some of the technical and competency issues that arose.