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Try To Be Complete on Something: Tips on Building a Highly Specialized Subject Collection

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**“Try To Be Complete on Something”:
Tips on Building a Highly Specialized Subject Collection**

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Every library should be try to be complete on something, if it were only the history of pinheads. I don't mean that I buy all the trashy compilations on my special subjects, but I try to have all the works of any real importance relating to them, old as well as new.

– Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1809-1894)

The Poet at the Breakfast Table (1872)

Wise and careful selection of materials remains, I believe, among the most important and enduring duties of the librarian – and also among the most difficult. Once we move beyond some of the general principles learned in library school, we quickly learn that real collection development is difficult, time-consuming work that cannot be easily reduced to a step-by-step, cookbook approach.

I have found this to be especially true in a specialized subject library, where traditional collection development methods do not always yield good results. I work at an academic branch library focusing on hospitality management – including everything from restaurant and special event management, to travel and tourism research, to lodging and timeshare sales, to theme park and golf club administration. My library is one of the few standalone libraries focusing on these areas, and most of the literature of these fields is not well covered by standard sources or is limited to a very small audience. My university offers what is believed to be the first bachelor's degree program in Event Management, and I expect tracks in Theme Park Management and Golf & Club Management to someday become the nation's first four-year degrees in those areas as well. In such a highly specialized environment – where we aim for a truly one-of-a-kind collection – I quickly learned that building a strong subject collection would require more than merely tweaking an approval plan and circling a few items in publisher catalogs.

While collection development practices must necessarily vary according to subject matter, type of library, budgets, and other factors, I believe that many of the tips below will appeal to a wide variety of librarians seeking to “be complete on something,” to borrow Mr. Holmes' famous sentiment – whether in hospitality management, art, business, humanities, law, medicine, social sciences, or any number of other disciplines.

Make Your Case

One inescapable truth is that good, specialized collections are expensive and time-consuming to build. While modern technologies and vendor agreements do offer some time and cost savings,

the special librarian still needs a healthy budget and a flexible technical services department in order to build truly strong and unique collections.

Highly specialized, limited-quantity materials – often available only through industry associations, research firms, or niche publishers – typically cost more than other library materials. Just as importantly, acquiring such materials may require acquisitions staff to go beyond their usual jobbers and to make personal contact with many small suppliers and associations. And once these materials arrive, many will have to be cataloged from scratch or otherwise receive additional treatment beyond the usual copy cataloging. Such tasks are increasingly difficult for technical services departments that are regularly being trimmed, partially outsourced, or otherwise strained.

Highly specialized collection development, in other words, requires significant buy-in and support from administration and colleagues in other departments. While the fact that highly specialized collection development requires more time and resources may seem obvious to the frontline librarian, I have found that even the best administrators occasionally need to be reminded and convinced of this reality. Therefore, I make my case often. I regularly highlight the state of the collection in annual reports and other documents, and I have surveyed users on the quality of the collection and passed those comments on to decision makers above me. I have compared my holdings to peer institutions or similar collections, and I frequently call attention to significant changes that impact the selection process, such as new degree programs, new areas of research, or new publishing models. And I always highlight new materials and encourage their use whenever possible.

Go “Old School”

In an era in which many libraries are going more “high tech” with their approach to collection development – with finely-tuned approval plans, collection analysis software, and complicated consortial agreements – the subject specialist can often benefit most from a back-to-basics, “old school” approach.

Book approval plans are widely used in today’s academic libraries, as they can save time and money by selecting core materials for libraries according to pre-defined criteria, spending limits, and so on. But I have found that an approval plan can actually be wasteful or detrimental for some areas. For subjects that are relatively new, highly multidisciplinary, or otherwise not easily pigeonholed into a few Library of Congress Classification ranges, an approval plan can be disastrous, simultaneously selecting a lot of materials that are not wanted and failing to select many of the best materials.

After struggling through this process for a few years, my specialized branch library eventually dumped a standard approval plan entirely. We did set up an electronic “slip” profile – whereby the vendor electronically generates information about new titles in specific ranges on a regular basis – but none of these are ordered automatically. Instead, I go through these records regularly and select only those titles that are most relevant for my highly specialized collection, ensuring that my limited budget is spent as carefully and wisely as possible.

I also employ a variety of other time-honored approaches, such as culling titles for possible purchase from publisher catalogs, the library catalogs of other institutions, email lists, professional journals, and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Selecting materials the old-fashioned way can be more time-consuming, but doing so ensures that we receive the best and most unique materials. It also means that I have strong, firsthand knowledge of the shape and scope of my collection, as I have personally selected almost every title. This knowledge also pays off in reference and instruction encounters, in visits with potential donors and other visitors, and in telling our story to administrators and other decision makers.

Get Creative

Building a highly specialized collection means going beyond standard approaches, and modern technologies can variously aid or impede the process.

Early on, I discovered that many important materials in the hospitality field are published only by industry associations, such as the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) or the American Resort Development Association (ARDA). Because these materials are expensive to produce and sell, many such associations are switching to electronic publication, usually in PDF format. Occasionally these materials are made available without charge, which is a boon to the librarian but also imposes other challenges (for example, how to maintain links to and effectively promote discovery of such freebies). More often, however, such documents are expensive and not designed for use by multiple users. This model of publication, therefore, presents a quandary to the librarian, who must pass up the material, test the murky waters of copyright law, or seek permission to bind the material or otherwise make it available to multiple patrons over time. In my experience, librarians should not be shy to take the third option, as many publishers are quite willing to allow the library to share or bind such documents: the publication of the material in PDF format is usually simply a cost-savings measure, rather than an attempt to restrict use of the material.

Librarians seeking to build comprehensive subject collections may occasionally need to improve retrospective holdings, especially if the library is relatively new. My branch library is less than ten years old, and we lacked many core titles from the recent past. We found that out-of-print dealers, such as Alibris (<http://www.alibris.com>), were very willing to assist us in collecting relevant, older materials by sending us lists of materials in particular subjects, extending bulk discounts, and reducing shipping charges.

For some subjects, librarians should not overlook specialized depository programs. Most librarians are familiar with state or federal government depository programs, but a variety of other, lesser-known programs exist. For example, my library is a World Tourism Organization (<http://www.unwto.org/index.php>) depository library, providing us with a wealth of tourism materials for a greatly reduced price, provided that we agree to maintain the materials, provide sufficient access, and meet other basic requirements.

Colleagues at other institutions can also be very helpful to the subject specialist. Specialized email lists and user groups exist for many different types of librarianship. And if one does not yet exist for your subject matter, you might be able to start one. For example, a few years ago I started the Hospitality-Lib email list for librarians and information professionals who work with hospitality management, tourism studies, culinary arts, or related fields of study (<http://library.ucf.edu/rosen/hospitalitylib.asp>). While the membership is small and traffic is low, over the years I have gleaned a great deal of helpful information from the list, as well as made contacts with many likeminded colleagues from around the nation.

Take Up the Challenge

Not every special librarian will have an understanding administration and a generous collection development budget to work with, but many of the above tips can be implemented slowly over time, and often with little or no cost as compared to the status quo.

Ultimately, I believe that building a highly specialized collection is predicated on commitment from the librarian to uncover the best materials, wherever and whatever they may be; to spend funds wisely; to advocate tirelessly for the collection; and to collect and preserve materials for the intellectual communities of today and tomorrow. It may not be possible to be truly “complete” on any subject in today’s complex information landscape, but the trying – the journey of discovery that collection development represents – remains one of librarianship’s most interesting and intellectual pursuits.