Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Obtaining Journal Titles via Big Deals Most Cost Effective Compared to Individual Subscriptions, Pay-Per-View, and Interlibrary Loan

A Review of:
Lemley, T., & Li, J. (2015). "Big deal" journal subscription packages: Are they worth the cost? *Journal of Electronic Resources in Medical Libraries*, *12*(1), 1-10. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15424065.2015.1001959

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Abstract

Objective – To determine if "Big Deal" journal subscription packages are a cost-effective way to provide electronic journal access to academic library users versus individual subscriptions, pay-per-view, and interlibrary loans (ILL).

Design – Cost-per-article-use analysis.

Setting – Public research university in the United States of America.

Subjects – Cost-per-use data from 1) journals in seven Big Deal packages, 2) individually subscribed journals, 3) pay-per-view from publishers' websites, and 4) interlibrary loans.

Methods – The authors determined cost-per-use for Big Deal titles by utilizing COUNTER JR1 metric Successful Full-Text Article Request (SFTAR) reports. Individual journal subscription cost-per-use data were obtained from individual publishers or platforms. Pay-per-view cost was determined by recording the price listed on publishers' websites. ILL cost-per-use was established by reviewing cost-per-article obtained from libraries outside of reciprocal borrowing agreement networks. With the exception of pay-per-view numbers, title cost-per-use was averaged over a three-year period from 2010 through 2012.

Main Results – Cost-per-article use for journals from Big Deals varied from $2.11 to $9.42. For individually subscribed journals, the average cost-per-article ranged from $0.25 to

$84.00. Pay-per-view charges ranged from $15.00 to $80.00, with an average cost of $37.72.

Conclusion – The authors conclude that Big Deals are cost effective, but that they consume such a large amount of funds that they limit the purchase of other resources. The authors go on to outline the options for libraries thinking about Big Deal packages. First, libraries should keep Big Deal packages in place if the average cost-per-article is less than individual subscriptions. Second, libraries could subscribe only to the most-used journals in Big Deals, cancel the packages, and rely on ILL and pay-per-view access. Third, consortia could be joined to favourably negotiate Big Deal package prices. Fourth, Big Deals could be dropped completely. Fifth, individual libraries armed with JR1 reports can negotiate with publishers for better deals.

Commentary

As a general climate of budget pressures and vendor price increases continues, librarians require tools for evaluating the "Big Deal," "an online aggregation of journals that publishers offer as a one-price, one size fits all package" (Frazier, 2001). While this article reminds librarians to consider multiple ways of obtaining articles and the associated costs, it has significant flaws and is of limited value.

The article could be strengthened by comparing the value of the same set of journals using various purchasing methods or by shying away from an analysis of all Big Deals in favour of identifying individual Big Deals that are comparable with bundles of individual journal titles. One way to compare apples to apples is by analyzing journals by discipline as this factor significantly influences price. The authors did not analyze their data in this fashion; they compared cost-per-use of articles between a biomedical library and a general campus library, which gives a skewed picture of the cost of resources.

The details in this article are very general. For example, the cost-per-article of one-off subscriptions identified by the authors from $0.25 to $84.00 per title. This range is far too varied to help librarians make subscription decisions.

Throughout the article critical details are missing. The cost-per-use of ILL is never stated, the authors do not specify if they are using COUNTER reports, and the authors mention that they exclude data from articles obtained "for free" via reciprocal borrowing agreements. While there may be no fee for articles obtained via reciprocal agreements, there is a cost associated with staff processing time. If a library chooses to cut titles based on the assumption that ILL is cheaper, it should factor in how much the increased staff time will cost.

The authors could improve this paper by going beyond a simple cost-per-use analysis to answer the question of whether or not Big Deals are worth it. While they do mention in the very last paragraph that "a key issue in discussing any Big Deal journal package must include library user satisfaction," (p. 9) this point comes far too late and is not unpacked. The authors are silent on other factors librarians must consider when reviewing Big Deals, such as curriculum requirements and usability.

While the paper does have a good summary of the pros and cons of Big Deals, overall it is of limited value. Librarians may want to consult this article for ideas but compare groups of similar resources for a more accurate analysis.

Reference

Frazier, K. (2001). The librarians' dilemma: Contemplating the costs of the "big deal." D-Lib Magazine, 7(3). Retrieved from http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march01/frazier/03frazier.html