BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

The use of independent information brokers for document delivery service in hospital libraries

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Hospital libraries have many alternatives to services traditionally supplied by library networks or academic health center libraries. As hospital librarians try to balance increased patron expectations with shrinking resources, their selection of vendors and information agencies becomes increasingly important. Messerle points out that one alternative for hospitals is contracting for library services rather than underwriting a full library operation [1]. Information brokers represent a rapidly expanding component of the information services spectrum. There are more than 800 such fee-based enterprises in North America [2].

There has been little research specifically about hospital libraries to determine what motivates the change to alternative sources or the extent to which independent broker services are used. However, studies of the impact of information brokers on document delivery service in academic and corporate libraries have shown that patrons placed a high value on fast delivery of requested documents and that libraries that used commercial services were willing to pay more to obtain materials rapidly. Most studies indicate that delivery time for commercial services compares favorably with that for traditional interlibrary loan (ILL) networks [3-5]. In a 1988 study, however, Miller and Tegler found that commercial services did not supply documents any faster than did normal library ILL procedures. They also found that higher charges did not result in faster delivery times and that local operations were no faster in providing documents than distant sources [6].

METHOD

A survey (Appendix A) was designed to produce an overview of independent information brokers’ role in providing documents to hospital libraries. A secondary objective was to examine other services that information brokers provide to hospital libraries. For this survey, independent information brokers were defined as individuals or small businesses unaffiliated with larger corporate enterprises, such as BRS Information Technologies or the Institute for Scientific Information, which provide fee-based information services. The scope was limited to independent information brokers to obtain a picture of the small entrepreneur’s impact upon the health sciences library profession.

The hospital libraries surveyed were in four southeastern states (Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and South Carolina) and two midwestern states (Michigan and Ohio). Surveys were sent to all hospital libraries in these states that were institutional members of the Medical Library Association (MLA), members of regional or state health sciences library associations, or listed in the Medical and Health Information Directory [7].

SURVEY FINDINGS

A total of 307 surveys were mailed during the autumn of 1989, and 223 completed surveys were mailed back, resulting in a usable return rate of 72.6%. Thirty-one libraries (13.9%) used independent information brokers for document delivery. They filled, on the average, 10% of their total document delivery requests; the range was 1% to 45%. Twenty-two librarians (70.9%) did business with one independent information broker. Seven used two brokers, and two used three or more.

The perceived importance of various service issues associated with document delivery by independent information brokers was investigated. Respondents were asked to rank replies on a scale of one to five (1 = unimportant; 5 = very important). Low price was considered the most important economic influence, followed in descending order by inclusion of copyright compliance fees, low referral price, and low volume discount price. The most important aspect was quick fulfillment of routine requests. The ability to place telephone requests was also considered im-
portant. Rush telefacsimile service was considered more important than rush courier service. On issues affecting comprehensive service, the total fill rate and the fill rate for difficult requests were the top-ranked concerns. The acceptance of incomplete citations and high-quality photocopying were also ranked high. Quick or flexible billing was of moderate importance; compiling bibliographies and conducting computer searches were marginally important services.

The general level of satisfaction with broker service was relatively high. Nineteen respondents (61%) were very satisfied, nine librarians (29%) were somewhat satisfied, and two librarians (7%) were unsatisfied. Difficulty in obtaining rush requests for patient care was mentioned as a weakness by one respondent who expected rush material in two hours or less.

Among types of materials requested, the most common was photocopies of journal articles, an item identified by thirty librarians (96.8%). Fourteen librarians requested photocopies of book chapters. Hard copies of entire books were cited seven times. Other requests included audiovisual materials, patent information, dissertations, proceedings papers, brochures, and government documents.

Broker services, other than document delivery, include online searches (19%), searches of nonmedical databases, the use of consultants for special projects (16%), and substitute staffing. Twelve librarians (39%) occasionally referred patrons directly to independent information brokers for time-consuming projects or subjects of peripheral medical content. Nineteen of the thirty-one librarians replied that no additional services were needed.

Future use of independent information brokers was uncertain. None of the respondents intended to discontinue service; six intended to use services more frequently; twenty expected to continue using brokers at the current level; and two intended to use the brokers less often.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that, although independent information brokers have carved out a niche in document delivery service to hospital libraries, there has been no large-scale change to independent information brokers. Only thirty-one libraries, 13.9% of the sample, currently use independent information brokers. However, twenty-eight (90%) of the thirty-one libraries are either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the services offered by their independent information brokers. This general satisfaction is also expressed by the finding that twenty (65%) of the users planned to maintain broker usage at current levels, while an additional six libraries (19%) intended to use the brokers more frequently.

The librarians doing business with brokers were most concerned with fast or comprehensive service. Rapid delivery of materials and high fill rates were considered of paramount importance. The emphasis on service over costs may be explained by the fact that information brokers accounted for a relatively small share (10%) of total requests. Most routine requests were sent to traditional agencies. Some librarians used information brokers mainly to verify and fill incomplete citations or to obtain rare materials. The implication seemed to be that librarians were willing to pay for the specialized service.

Document delivery was the most popular broker service. The majority of the users (61%) expressed no interest in adding to their broker services. Online searching, substitute staffing service, and consultant services all had limited support. Subject expertise was mentioned as an important factor in selecting brokers to perform additional functions. Substantial financial and technological resources, including a proliferation of full-text databases, may enable large, commercial database vendors to offer rapid service at a price that would be hard for small independent brokers to match.

The twelve hospital libraries that referred patrons directly to independent information brokers could be symptomatic of economic changes within the entire health care system. Changing reimbursement procedures and increased competition have meant tightened hospital budgets, resulting in reduced library staffing and services.

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

Independent information broker survey results

1. Does your library currently utilize independent information brokers for document delivery purposes?
   
   Yes 31  No 192

If your library does use independent information brokers, please answer questions 2-11.

2. What is the approximate percentage of total document delivery/interlibrary loan requests provided to your library by independent information brokers?
   
   10% (mean score)

3. How many independent information broker services does your library utilize?
   
   One 22  Two 7  More than three 1

For questions four through six, please use the accompanying scale to rate which of the following criteria are important influences for your library when selecting private information brokers to fulfill interlibrary loan/document delivery requests.

Circle only one answer per statement. 1 = unimportant; 5 = very important

4. Economics

   NA 1 2 3 4 5  Mean score
   A. Low basic price 0 1 2 5 7 16 4.13
   B. Low volume discount price 9 6 4 3 0 9 3.09
   C. Low referral price 7 6 2 5 3 8 3.21
   D. Includes copyright compliance fees 4 3 2 7 4 11 3.67

5. Faster delivery service

   NA 1 2 3 4 5  Mean score
   A. Quick delivery on routine request 1 1 1 1 8 19 4.43
   B. Rush fax service 3 3 2 4 2 17 4.00
   C. Rush courier service 6 7 3 4 3 8 3.08
   D. Accepts telephone requests 0 3 0 3 2 23 4.35

6. Comprehensive service

   NA 1 2 3 4 5  Mean score
   A. High total fill rate 1 1 1 2 5 21 4.47
   B. Accepts incomplete citations 2 1 1 5 17 4.24
   C. High fill rate on difficult citations 2 2 0 2 5 20 4.41
   D. High quality photocopying 2 1 1 5 5 1 4.24
   E. Quick or flexible billing 2 2 4 11 3 9 3.45
   F. Compiles bibliographies 10 10 5 2 1 3 2.14
   G. Conducts computer searches 9 11 5 1 2 3 2.14

7. What is your level of satisfaction regarding the total service offered to your library by independent information broker services?
   
   19 Very satisfied 1 Ambivalent 9 Somewhat satisfied
   2 Unsatisfied

8. For what types of materials do you utilize information brokers for document delivery purposes? (Check as many as apply.)

   30 Journal article photocopies 14 Book chapter photocopies
   3 Bound or unbound journals 7 Books
   3 Audiovisual materials 6 Other (one mention per subject): patent information, dissertations, proceedings papers, brochures, government documents, “anything difficult to obtain”

9. What additional information broker services, besides document delivery, does your library utilize or anticipate utilizing in the future? (Check as many as apply.)

   19 None 19 6 Online searching
   5 Consultant for special projects (includes automation/software) 3 Substitute librarian service
   3 Other (one mention per subject): print audiovisual catalog, medical graphics, out-of-print book assistance

10. Does your library ever refer patrons directly to independent information brokers for time-consuming projects, subjects of peripheral medical content, or any other reasons?

    Yes 12  No 19

11. To what extent do you expect to utilize independent information brokers in the future?

    6 More often 20 Continue at current level 2 Less often
    0 Discontinue 3 Uncertain