Faxon Finder/Faxon Xpress: report from a beta test site*

By Mary Linn Borsman, M.L.S.
Assistant Director for Access Services

Treadwell Library
Massachusetts General Hospital
Fruit Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02114

In this environment of expanding information needs, spiraling journal costs, and curtailed financial resources, medical libraries must take advantage of the rapid evolution in document delivery services [1–3]. There are exciting developments in transmission technology, from fax machines to scanners to the Internet [4]. There is also a notable shift away from the traditional reliance on library networks toward use of commercial vendors as document providers. These changes require reevaluation of interlibrary loan (ILL) and document delivery systems on many levels, including pricing structures, workflow, and impact on collection development [5–7]. As commercial vendors develop increasingly effective products, librarians can test, evaluate, and incorporate them into their ILL operations to enhance service to users and relieve the pressure to acquire new resources; in this way, librarians can move from the “just in case” practice of building an on-site collection to the “just in time” model of providing timely delivery of materials to users as needed. This paper describes a beta test of the Faxon Finder/Faxon Xpress table of contents and document delivery services conducted by the Treadwell Library of the Massachusetts General Hospital.

THE ENVIRONMENT

The Massachusetts General Hospital has more than 1,000 beds, 36,000 annual admissions, and a research budget of more than $100 million. The user population consists of researchers; clinicians; fellows; residents; nursing staff; and medical, nursing, and allied health students. More than 47% of library use is for research purposes. Treadwell Library has nine professional librarians and a support staff of twelve. The library subscribes to 940 journal titles and houses 38,000 journal volumes and 15,000 books.

In 1992, the ILL unit processed 8,500 borrowing requests, more than 700 per month. The number of requests increased by 22% in 1993. One full-time support person has primary responsibility for ILL operations, including verifying citations, determining locations, and transmitting requests. Co-workers handle billing and mail processing, and a reference librarian assists with problematic citations.

Approximately 95% of the items requested are available on DOCLINE®. QuickDOC software is used to transmit the requests and track them on DOCLINE. Locations for non-DOCLINE items are determined by searching local consortium holdings, OCLC, and other library catalogs via the Internet. Requests typically are sent within twenty-four hours of receipt, with an average turnaround time of eight days for journal articles.

ILL is a fee-based service; users pay $20.00 for rush service and $6.00 for all other ILLs. Rush service offers forty-eight-hour turnaround Monday through Friday. The ILL staff person telephones or faxes other libraries to expedite these requests. Although some effort is made to find an inexpensive source, speed is the main objective; any rush and fax fees charged by the lending library are considered a cost of providing the service. A primary current goal is to reduce turnaround time significantly. The library keeps abreast of developing technologies, incorporating into the ILL operation whatever is feasible and improves service.

BETA TEST

In the fall of 1992, Treadwell Library agreed to be a beta test site for Faxon Finder and Faxon Xpress. Faxon Finder is a database of the tables of contents of more than 10,000 journal titles, with full retrospective coverage back to 1990. Titles are chosen based on Faxon’s client subscription volume. More than 60% are in the biomedical and science and technology area, 29% in the social sciences, and approximately 10% in the arts and humanities. All *Index Medicus* titles are included. All data from the table of contents, including any notes or descriptive material, is double-keyed and compared for discrepancies as it is entered so that errors are detected immediately. This helps ensure a clean database.

Faxon Xpress is the delivery end, supplying documents via fax within twenty-four hours of a customer’s order. Once a document is identified in Finder, it is ordered while the user is still online.

Finder software allows keyword searching; the use of Boolean operators; wild-card replacements for multiple characters, single letters, and words; searching by ISSN; and proximity commands, to bring keywords within a meaningful range. Searches can be refined by date range, volume and issue number, article type, and language.

Faxon Finder/Faxon Xpress could be either used for end-user access to journal literature or applied to specific library staff tasks. Treadwell Library designed the beta test to use Finder/Xpress as an ILL tool. The test ran from December 1992 through May 1993.

Each day, the ILL staff person separated the incoming requests into two groups by date: citations prior to 1990 and citations dating from 1990 on. All requests in the latter group were searched in Finder to determine which ones were available in the database. All these requests were logged, with availability and price information noted.

Faxon allowed five requests per day to be ordered for delivery at no cost beyond the copyright charges. These five requests were monitored for turnaround time and clarity of the fax transmission.

RESULTS

Of the total sample of ILL requests for each month (sample sizes ranging from 163 to 993 per month), the number of requests dated from 1990 on remained fairly constant at approximately 50%. The number of citations dated 1990 to 1993 available in Finder increased over the course of the test, from 12% in December to 44% in May. This increase reflects the growth of the Finder database as Faxon completed retrospective coverage of titles and added new titles.

Because approximately half of Treadwell’s ILL requests still fall outside the scope of Finder’s database (that is, the requested materials were published before 1990), the number of citations available in Finder as a percentage of the total ILL requests is also of interest. This percentage increased from 5% in December to 23% in May.

The fax documents received via Faxon Xpress were clear and legible. Twenty-four-hour turnaround time remained the standard performance of Xpress for the duration of the beta test.

DISCUSSION

Within the scope of the beta test, Finder/Xpress performed well. A comparison of staff time spent verifying and ordering on MEDLINE and DOCLINE versus Finder/Xpress would be an interesting research topic. Applications in reference services and in direct access by end users could be explored as well.

This beta test did not include a detailed cost analysis. Such an analysis, currently underway at Treadwell, would include DOCLINE libraries and a selection of commercial vendors. Although this data remains incomplete at this writing and is beyond the scope of this article, Treadwell has found that using a commercial vendor can greatly reduce the labor involved in filling a rush request and that the average cost of obtaining a document from a commercial vendor can be competitive with lending libraries' charges for rush service.

As long as a substantial number of ILL requests predate most vendors' databases, DOCLINE remains an essential tool. However, bearing in mind the goal of reduced turnaround time, Treadwell will continue to use commercial document delivery suppliers as an integral part of ILL operations. As vendors move to rapid delivery at relatively reasonable rates, the library is better able to meet users' need for quick access to information, acting as an efficient partner in the research process, rather than a frustrating barrier.

Treadwell’s considerations in selecting such a service would be reliability and responsiveness of the vendor; quality of the database (in both range and depth of the contents and in the sophistication of the software); and, last, but certainly not least, cost. Even with a fee-based service that allows some recovery of costs, the library must control ILL expenses in these tight fiscal times.

CONCLUSION

The biomedical market for document delivery is driven by the mutual needs of libraries and end users for access to a range of literature beyond the scope of any one library collection and for rapid delivery of documents. As commercial vendors compete, their products will evolve to meet these needs more effectively. Finder/Xpress offers a sophisticated table of

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contents database and rapid, reliable document delivery and therefore is a strong contender in this market. Faxon also continues to develop its service with new releases and enhancements that are responsive to user needs. Libraries can use commercial products such as Finder/Xpress to improve ILL services and successfully meet the challenge of providing users with what they need when they need it.

REFERENCES


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