Beyond the 'Tragedy of the Commons'

How to cope with ever increasing journal prices and user expectations

Dr. Oliver Obst, Head Medical Branch Library, University and Regional Library, Westfalik Wilhelm University Münster, Germany

INTRODUCTION

Münster is located in the north-western part of Germany and has ¾ Mio. citizens.

Our medical library serves 1,500 clinicians and scientists and 3,500 medical students. My first official duty was the cancellation of 300 journals, worth £ 80,000. This was the hard way of becoming familiar with the journal price crisis. Today we pay twice as much for each title than five years ago, because the price increase of scientific journals, especially in the field of medicine, exceeded the consumer price index by an order of magnitude, leading to a severe loss in buying power.

JOURNAL EVALUATION

In order to cancel the right journals, the library had to evaluate the journals in detail. We considered several evaluation parameters including journal prices, journal use, faculty ranking, impact factors and indexing in abstract databases, but we decided for reasons of clarity to reduce the formula to the two most important parameters: journal price and journal usage. Their ratio equals 'Tragedy of the Commons'.

COLLECTION OPTIMIZING

As a solution to the ever increasing gap between journal prices and budget, the advisory library panel worked out a fairly revolutionary journal concept. The goal was to optimize the journal collection and balanced it out. No department should feel underprivileged. Journal orders and cancels should reflect the needs of the faculty members more closely. The scientific users should get more influence as well as responsibility, which journal the library subscribe to and which not. Therefore the departments were assigned a Virtual Journal Budget. This Virtual Budget was distributed to the departments according to a certain key. With this 'play money' they could freely purchase current as well as new journals. To support a more objective decision, they were provided with the following informations to each title: annual subscription rate, amount of usage, price/usage ratio, faculty ranking.

RESULTS

Overall, 1,284 journals were desired. Because of the limited 'budgets' and the strong information campaign, the institutes and clinics choosed 'good value' journals more often than expensive and/or less used titles. This could be seen by the fairly modest price/usage ratio for the desired current titles ($10.50). The core journals were even less priced with about $4.80 per use. In contrary, the titles, which were not named, costed almost $45.80 per use.

CONCLUSION

Obviously the presented method of journal allocation to departments had led to a selection process towards valuable, heavy used, and reasonably priced journals. The presented concept allows a quick and flexible reaction to changes in departmental research and publication orientation. As we know from regularly inquiries, the scientist and clinicians of the medical faculty enjoy electronic journals very much, quickly lose their inhibitions of and use at least some of them heavily. The library forces the development of delivering content directly to the customers' desks, so that they could get in touch with the dissemination of the latest scientific information. In the age of exponentially rising numbers of journals, rising prices, and flat budgets on the other hand, periodical management is a big challenge. In order to meet this challenge and overcome the tragedy of the commons, new ideas have been tested by the Medical Library of Münster.

It is to be concluded that libraries function more and more as gatekeepers to published material rather than as owners.

LITERATURE


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