Book Vendors for Public Libraries: A Comparison

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I have chosen to look at five library book jobbers who seem to have sufficient size and features to be the primary supplier for a public library. Those vendors are Baker & Taylor, Follett Library Services, Book Wholesalers, Inc. (BWI), Ingram, and Brodart. I have evaluated each vendor on how well they meet Evans and Saponaro’s (2005) criteria for selecting a vendor, namely services offered and service quality, speed of order fulfillment, discounts and pricing, stability of the company, and vendor’s flexibility in dealing with a library’s technical and financial constraints. Where possible, I have spoken to librarians who have used these services to get their impressions about the vendor.

Baker & Taylor (B&T) is, of course, a major library book vendor and it is the one I have the most familiarity with as B&T is used by the Durham Public Library where I work. Because I have responsibility for ordering children’s books, I have used B&T’s web-based ordering system and have found it to be easy to use overall, but perhaps a little clunky. B&T claims to be the world’s largest distributor of books and digital resources, with 385,000 titles in stock and another 1.5 million that can be ordered. They have extensive services for public libraries, including standing order programs (Automatically Yours), book leasing, core collection lists in numerous subject areas and numerous subscription notification programs for upcoming and hot titles, broken out by subject areas (so that I, for example, can receive notifications of upcoming children’s releases, but not any adult items). They also have cataloging and “shelf ready” services, and an “Opening Day Collection” service that can be tailored to the needs of your individual library.

Order fulfillment is very fast for in-stock books; I have received items as quickly as the next day on some orders. Shipping and returns are free. The return process is also simple and they have never quibbled over any returns in my experience, though I imagine there are limits.
Items that are back ordered or not yet published are clearly marked in the order interface, as are the original and discounted price. The order form does not specify the discount percentage for each book, but it would be possible to calculate yourself from the information provided.

Verdirame (2009), compared prices on 49 elementary school library books from three vendors (Baker & Taylor, Follett, and Mackin). She found that the average discount from B&T was just over 28% and that the total cost of the 49 titles from B&T was about 6% lower than Follett and 8% lower than Mackin. I did a quick check of the average discount on an order of mostly children’s books that I received yesterday, and found B&T’s discount was generally either 25% or 46.6% per book, for an average of 38.8%.

I also have had a small amount of experience with Book Wholesalers, Inc. (BWI). The Durham Public Library has a small standing order program with them for the acquisition of a few children’s series (Junie B. Jones, Magic Tree House, among others). My customer service experience with them has been mixed – a recent phone call for customer service was never returned (I had, in fact, called the main office number rather than the customer service number, but I felt that they should have returned my call and pointed me in the right direction.) However, once I did reach the correct person, I found them to be quite helpful in setting up my online account access.

BWI began as a vendor of children’s materials and has since expanded to a full-service vendor. They concentrate on the public library market. Like B&T, they offer standing order programs and core collection lists. They also have “New & Recent Releases” lists each month that can be browsed or subscribed to as email alerts. BWI also links to full text reviews from the order page, rather than just a list of where reviews appeared, as with B&T. I found this quite helpful. Also, BWI breaks out the email subscriptions into smaller market segments than B&T
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does. B&T, for example, has two email subscriptions for children’s and YA titles, one for upcoming releases and one for current bestsellers (http://www.btol.com/email_subscribe.cfm). BWI, on the other hand, allows one to subscribe to a list of just board books, for example, or just picture books (http://www.bwibooks.com/start.php?target=/bwilist.php). On the adult side, one can get a list of new romance, or new home and garden titles. This would be particularly useful in a library where different staff members are responsible for different parts of the collection.

BWI does not have an opening day collection service, though they do have core bibliographies in each Dewey area and fiction genre, which could be strung together to form a core collection.

Ingram Book Company calls itself “the largest book wholesale distributor in the world, offering immediate access to more than two million titles” (http://www.ingrambook.com/about/default.aspx). It is not entirely clear, but I suspect that doesn’t mean two million in stock, but rather two million that are either in stock or available for order, which is comparable to B&T. Ingram’s services are similar to B&T: they offer cataloging and shelf-ready services, opening day collection services, and specialized collection development services for public libraries, including tools for adult, young adult, and children’s collections.

Extensive standing order programs and an iSelect program, which allows libraries to be notified of upcoming titles that meet their selection criteria are useful tools. The iSelect program can also be structured as an automatic ordering system.

I was unable to try out Ingram’s ordering system but I did speak to a librarian at another public library that uses Ingram. She said that they had switched to Ingram from B&T about five years ago because the Ingram ordering site had more information and was easier to use. However, the accounts payable staff at the library found B&T easier to deal with. The librarian I spoke with is responsible for ordering a portion of the library’s adult fiction, and she said that she
found Ingram, “easy to use, responsive and wouldn’t hesitate to recommend it,” (M. Michaud, personal communication, June 3, 2012).

Follett Library Services serves the K-12 school library market almost exclusively and would not be a good choice as a primary vendor for a public library. They do, however, have extensive resources for children’s and YA materials and might work as a secondary vendor. They have a number of useful services for new libraries through their “New School” opening day program. They will work with the school to deliver an entire shelf ready collection and MARC records to facilitate opening a new library. If you follow their “New School” ordering procedures, they guarantee that 95% of your order will be delivered on time or the order will be free (http://www.titlewave.com/intro/newschools.html). Follett offers cataloging and processing services and emphasizes personalized service – each library has a local account representative. I was not able to examine the TitleWave online ordering system, as that required login access.

The last book vendor I looked at was Brodart Books and Automation. Unlike B&T and Ingram, Brodart only serves libraries; they do not work with bookstores. They claim to have “more than 4 million titles available to search and order,” (http://www.books.brodart.com/Content3.aspx?P=16). It is not clear how many items they have in stock. It is difficult to make a comparison between companies as to how many titles they actually keep in stock and ready to ship based on the information provided on the company web sites. Brodart has all of the standard vendor services, cataloging, shelf-ready materials, standing order programs, TIPS notification programs, opening day collection services, and book leasing services. As with B&T and Ingram, they have an online ordering system that is available 24/7. Without an account I was unable to actually use the online ordering system, but the screen shots
that they provide on their web site look quite similar to the B&T ordering interface that I am familiar with.

My final decision came down to B&T, Ingram, and Brodart. All three offer comprehensive vendor services designed for public libraries. BWI and Follett, I thought, were too small and too focused on children’s materials to be an appropriate choice for a public library. It is difficult to make a final decision among the three remaining choices. On their web sites, B&T, Ingram, and Brodart sound very similar. They have similar services, similar online order interfaces, and similar discount structures. If I were actually choosing a vendor for a library, I would investigate in much greater detail. I would meet with representatives of all three companies. I would interview users of all three companies at libraries similar to mine. I would use each ordering system to check for ease of use, book availability, and discounts.

In the end, I decided to go with Ingram. Ingram has all of the features needed from a full-service library vendor. They have a large number of books in stock for fast order fulfillment. They have an opening day collection service, cataloging and shelf-ready services, and specialized collection development programs and notification services for public libraries. I put a lot of weight on the recommendation of the librarian I spoke with who had switched from B&T to Ingram – that was the only direct user comparison that I had available to me. I feel confident that Ingram is a reliable vendor who would be able to meet the library’s needs.
References


