

OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

Sounding the collection depths: Usage-based funding models

Public Libraries are increasingly focussing on the purchase of content that will give them improved circulation figures and improved stock turnover usage. Essentially in the usage-based model, fewer titles and more copies is the focus, a purchasing approach moving more to the bookshop model and relying on encouraging library users and non-users to increase their patronage, with the purpose being to increase customer satisfaction. James Bennett's Nada Stanojlovic says balance is the key.

Libraries, like businesses, are looking for the best bang for their buck, the highest usage and turnover for their dollar. This may naturally lead the industry of content provision to follow the same methodology – invest in the

blockbuster – the money maker, the one that users will come to the library for – but what of the breadth and depth of publishing and therefore depth of our library collections we all speak about? By following usage-based funding models, we are more likely to see a decline in actual publishing numbers and this could

sell more than the minimum. We are all into success and efficiency, which can breed complacency if performance indicators and relevancy are not considered.

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Maintaining depth of collections (and not just purchasing titles that will potentially be content movers and shakers or are planned blockbusters) requires an adaptive and clever collection development policy which incorporates user needs. Breadth can best be achieved by covering a broader range of resources, including user requests reviewed against collection development policies, and balancing internal acquisitions processes with external input.

The availability of range of content when libraries and general readers are buying blockbusters (and non-fiction is being referenced on the internet) is reducing, as publishers naturally reduce in areas no longer being purchased. If publishers and distributors cannot sell a minimum quantity of titles, they will opt to support the titles that can

the investment will lead to a minimal number of loans or a minimal turnover rate. This is especially relevant for libraries with smaller budgets as they are under more pressure to buy what is suitable for the majority rather than the minority, which leads to a lack of depth. For larger libraries the opposite could be true. They may be able to buy all requests and really cater for individual needs, however the usage-based funding model tempers this and, depending on a library's collection development policy, could lead to collections which are limited.

Usage-based funding models and library collection analysis tools advise you on how stock performs, but how do libraries know what they are missing? The importance of a balanced collection with depth includes surveys, requests and obtaining opinions on collection development – in fact our role in the industry is all about user engagement, customer feedback and understanding patron needs.

Indeed, you may have a need, but cannot obtain the content. Libraries are only a very small part of sales for the publishing community and therefore have limited clout to rely on, and research for alternative titles is important. This gets down to library professionals doing what library professionals do best,



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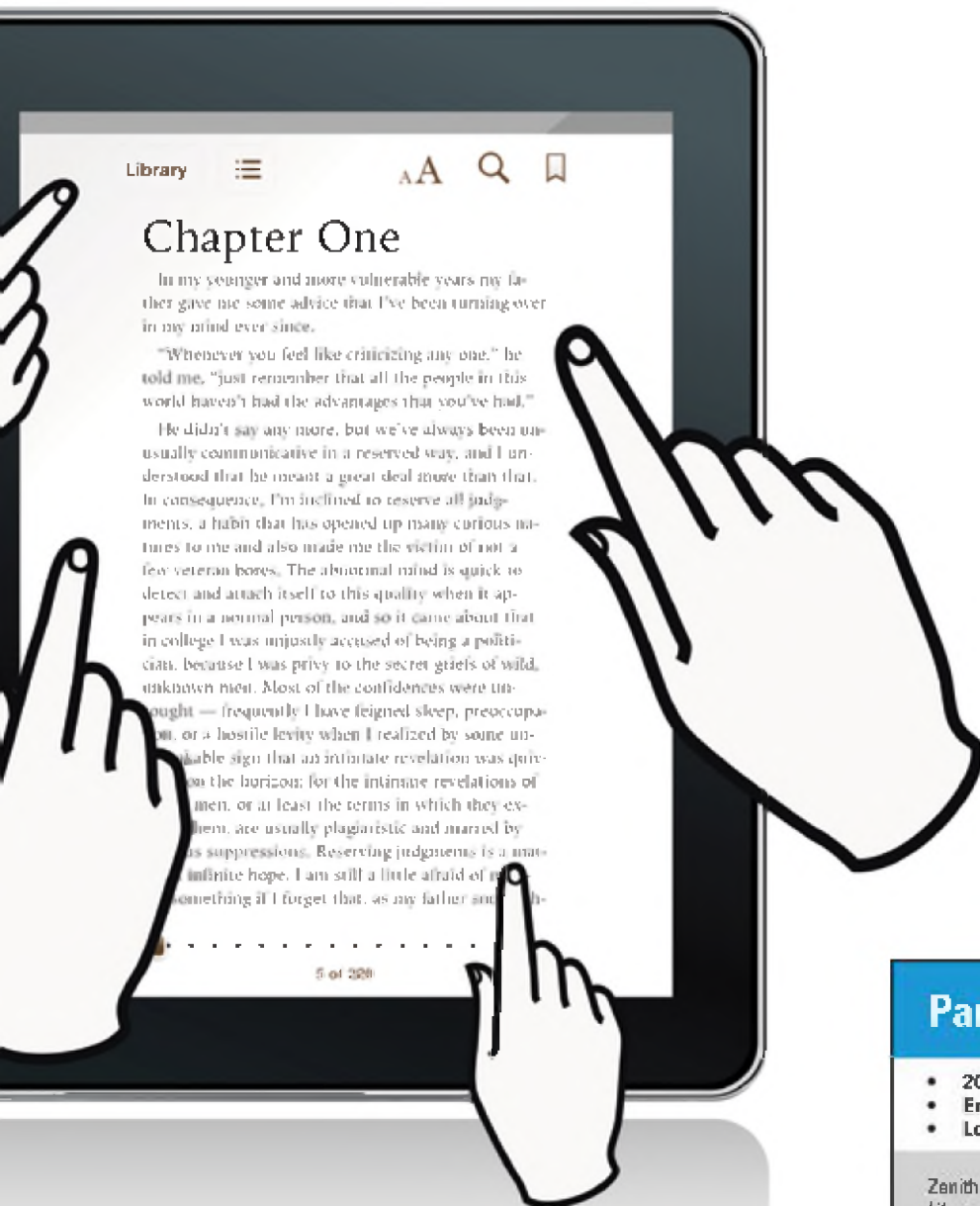
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and that should be user engagement and research. Capturing needs which are not met by published content, and providing this in a useful way back to publishers to drive content for the future seems to be a valid course of action for the industry.

Customer interaction has also been outsourced by self-check methodologies, reducing reference enquiries and perhaps lessening engagement with users. Getting back to basics in libraries is key, as is the creation of a balanced collection including online resources and ebooks. The audience for these resources includes users who may become members of the library only temporarily, so we also have to ask ourselves how a suggested purchase assists the depth of our collection and our library's ongoing, regular users.

Specialisations were considered important in previous public library funding models, and allowed libraries within geographic groups to invest and be the specialists in subject areas pertinent to their user demographics, for example in community languages, specific art title collections and English as a Second Language resources. Today, the user-based funding model relies on larger core collections, and will challenge the depth of such collections for the future, unless we can

demonstrate their usage and show how meeting these needs will better meet collection development policy and patron needs.

Balanced purchasing can assist to provide better ongoing depth to collections, and this can be reflected appropriately in your collection development policy. Usage-based funding supports the creation of an environment where people are using the library more, and the benefit of maintaining and increasing funding for the library can be demonstrated. By combining these approaches, depth of collection is more of a focus and is therefore more valuable to the community, providing resources to meet changing needs.

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