

## **In My Opinion, I.L.L. – A Different Option: Buy vs. Borrow**

*By Bill DeJohn*

Recently, I have indicated that the concept and processes of resource sharing need to undergo basic changes and ongoing rethinking because resource sharing is a staple in all of our service programs. Years ago, eligibility for interlibrary loan was often regarded as a perk – not a basic service. In many academic libraries, undergraduates were discouraged or not allowed to use interlibrary loan. In our region, however, access to information and resources has been encouraged since the earliest days of MINITEX and remains a key criterion for participation in the MINITEX Library Information Network.

Recent enhancements to integrated library systems and automated interlibrary loan systems mean that end users have an easier time requesting materials they want to read, listen to, and/or view. Libraries where staff have cataloged materials of all formats and price ranges for their local users are linked with other library systems, and potential users have access to all kinds of resources in all formats.

### *Resource Sharing and the MnLINK Gateway*

Many of us foresaw what has happened through the MnLINK Gateway program -- a huge increase in demand for materials in all formats. In terms of Gateway traffic, comparing FY2004, when unmediated, patron initiated requests began, with the FY07 fiscal year just completed, there has been a 345% increase in borrowing requests among Gateway server sites.

Considering the impact of this huge increase on local staff and workloads, we need to work “smarter” and try to make the software systems we use and our internal policies and practices be more intuitive for both the end user and for library staff.

I see two definite trends developing on the MnLINK Gateway:

1) More requests are being transmitted between and among Gateway server sites. This affects many local libraries. There was an increase of 34%, comparing the first quarter of FY07 with the first quarter of FY08; and,

2) Fewer requests are being routed to the MINITEX Office via the Gateway. There was an increase of only 1%, comparing the first quarter of FY08 to the same period in FY07 – previous quarters have shown much greater increases. Most of this reduction resulted from software upgrades in Spring 2007 that provided enhanced AV searching and rota building so the MINITEX Office is designated as the first potential lender for AV materials less often. By comparison, the number of lending requests sent among public library Gateway Server sites increased 46% in July-September 2007 as compared with same period in 2006.

These trends are also reflected in the volume of materials handled by the MINITEX Delivery System and by regional and local courier delivery systems, and this impacts local library staff who must retrieve materials and send them up the lending chain. The item has to be delivered – and, then, returned -- that ‘last mile,’ so lots of people are involved in fulfillment of loans in all formats.

Comparing the first quarter of FY08 with the first quarter of FY07, we see there has been a 47% increase in total items traveling [in the MINITEX Delivery Systems](#) through the MINITEX Office. In terms of the total Gateway traffic between libraries, there was a 53% increase for the same period.

Presentations by consultants say that many items will be digitized in the future, and there won’t be as much need for interlibrary loan. They note that millions of books are being digitized by mass digitization

projects and argue that DVDs will be replaced by downloads. Well, this may all be true, but, in the here-and-now and the near-term future, we need to deal with the 500,000 plus loan requests made by today's users (as reflected by the total number of requests initiated on the MnLINK Gateway in FY07). And, as I look at the materials moving through our backroom, I don't get the impression that a lot of them will be digitized any time soon.

*Consider: Buy-vs.-Borrow*

One possible approach to this problem is to rethink how interlibrary loan offices handle their requests to see if it is possible for libraries to purchase requested materials rather than borrow them. This is not a new concept. Many libraries use interlibrary loan requests as potential acquisition targets. I remember that, way back when I worked in a local library, it was common practice to give copies of interlibrary loan borrowing slips to the Acquisition librarian who would decide, using appropriate criteria, if an item should be added to the collection.

The buy-vs.-borrow concept will involve important changes in processes as staff ponder whether they want to add such materials to their collections (which are usually based on 'just-in-case' rather than 'just-in-time' concepts). In our region, interlibrary loan requests are filled very rapidly -- by overnight couriers within 1-3 days. I would estimate that over 70% are filled within a week, and only 30% take longer depending upon the material's format. Media requests appear to take longer to fill because the material is very popular in local libraries and is not always available for loan.

What I am suggesting is a method to satisfy the end-user's information needs while adding titles to local library collections that, probably, will circulate several times among local users. And, at the same time, this process should reduce some of the titles that flow through the interlibrary loan process.

I would like to recommend that MnLINK Gateway Server sites and other libraries in the MINTEX three-state region consider creating a program to purchase appropriate titles rather than borrow them via interlibrary loan. Several libraries around the country have established such programs, as well as a few in our region. What I am suggesting is a rapid response through which the desired title is purchased in the quickest way so it arrives in a day or two, and, then, for example, is property stamped by the ILL staff and given to the end user for the appropriate check-out period.

In the MINTEX region, the libraries that I know about are:

- University of Minnesota Twin Cities
- Gustavus Adolphus College
- College of St. Scholastica (planning to start)

If your library has also begun a program of this type, send me an email ([w-dejo@umn.edu](mailto:w-dejo@umn.edu)) so I can add your library to the list.

It appears that more academic than public libraries are joining this trend, and, probably, there are good reasons for this since they have a defined clientele and a more defined collection. However, it should be considered as an option as staff members of all types of libraries weigh the ways they can become more 'user-centric' rather than 'library-centric.'

Results cited by those who have reported on the topic seem to bear out that the practice is worth serious consideration in terms of improving user services and decreasing some interlibrary loan activity and costs. I gleaned the following information from two presentations -- from 2004 and 2006:

From Amy Fry, 5th Annual MOBIUS Users Conf. 2004

(Fry is a staff member at Gustavus Adolphus College)

- Books purchased through buy-vs.-borrow programs subsequently circulate more than normally purchased, approval-plan books
- More than a few patrons are served through the program
  - A Purdue library averaged 2.23 titles for each of 652 patrons (mostly grad students)
- Price is not much higher than cost of an ILL
- It's a good way to fill gaps in collection areas
- Patrons who normally have little say in the collection development process can provide input.  
<http://homepages.gac.edu/~afry/ILL&CDPresentation.ppt>

From Presentation at MINITEX ILL Conference. May 1, 2006

Denton Public Library shifted its focus to “give them what they want” rather than “give them what they need.”

- Started looking to the customer for selection input -- and who better than your hardcore library customer: the ILL User.
- Purchased 135 items since Oct. 2005 (as of April 2006)
- Average circulation: 2.4
- Average renewal: 1.75
- ILL Borrowing reduced by 40% over the same period during the previous year.
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<http://www.minitex.umn.edu/events/highlights/2006/illConference/wardHill.pdf>

It may be difficult to put such a program into effect with patron-initiated, unmediated requests that bypass the Interlibrary Loan Offices as is the case in the MnLINK Gateway software process. However, there will be Gateway software enhancements early next year that will provide an option to allow local ILL staff to review user-initiated borrowing requests based on publication date and price (through an automated check against Amazon). This means that staff could either pull the request and/or let it go on into the normal interlibrary loan process. It is at this point that a purchase-rather-than-borrow decision can be made if procedures have been set up in advance. Also, this can be done with requests that end users leave to be processed by the library staff.

Recently, I did a quick scan of 13 paperback titles in the MINITEX Delivery area waiting to go to a library or to be returned. Checking the titles against Amazon, I found a price range from \$ .01-\$11.77; this indicates that there may be many titles requested by users that could fall into this category if a Gateway server site decides to use the enhancement. If you choose to use the enhancement, you will need to provide a policy for your interlibrary loan staff to follow since this will result in more ‘mediated’ requests. As many of you who use Amazon know, you can pay \$79 to subscribe to an annual service, Amazon Prime membership, which provides no cost shipping and two-day delivery for purchased items. It's possible that, if a library staff orders titles on Monday, they could be received on Wednesday or Thursday.

The decision to move in this direction requires careful thought and decision-making. It could require changes in internal policies and practices. Your library may have policies that would have to be reexamined about who has the authority to expend library funds.

The MINITEX/MnLINK Interlibrary Loan Committee has issued a draft statement on this subject. Since the upcoming enhancement addresses the cost of publication and date of publication, the Committee:

*“... suggests a date of publication within the past 12 months and a purchase price of \$10.00 (or less) as a starting point for a discussion of the review criteria. The committee recognizes that varying local collection development policies and staffing issues may result in different server*

*sites using different criteria. The Committee further suggests that staff review of requests meeting the criteria focus on improved collection development and the development of purchase-on-demand mechanisms to improve customer service and control interlibrary loan request volume.*

*The Committee has identified several potential consequences of implementing staff review of requests meeting the review criteria:*

- *the need to devote additional staff time to reviewing requests*
- *the need to develop effective and efficient mechanisms for reviewing requests, coordinating collection development and interlibrary loan activities, and expediting final disposition of the requests*
- *the need to develop more effective and efficient methods of notifying a patron of the status of his or her request.*

I'm not suggesting taking these steps without regard to the impact on local staff and processes. I suggest that you do your own workflow analysis of borrowing processes compared with a rapid process to purchase a title via Amazon or other vendor that can deliver the titles in a couple days.

I would hope possible issues to be addressed won't deter libraries from creating a few trial projects to determine what can be done in this area. If possible, a small fund might be redirected from the acquisitions budget since the material, presumably, will end up in the collection. If the results show increases in local circulation of a purchased item between 3-5 times, that should count in terms of user-centric library policies.

I firmly believe we are at point in our resource sharing system where there may be better ways to serve user desires to read, listen to, and/or view something rather than generating an interlibrary loan -- and this is one way.