

Zines and Acquisitions

Adventure and Conundrum

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INTRODUCTION

Zines fall outside of traditional acquisitions workflows. A vital aspect of zine acquisition is the formation of one-on-one transactions between libraries and the people who are creating and selling zines. These vendors are usually individuals who often don't accept traditional forms of payment or who cannot be set up as standard library vendors. Moreover, these vendors are often found in unusual places, such as zine fairs, art markets, and independent websites. Libraries cannot depend on traditional vendor relationships or established acquisitions workflows to acquire and purchase these unique pieces of ephemera. Because of this, zines take on a special aspect of library acquisitions within larger collection development policies. How can libraries standardize zine-acquisition workflows and purchases? The simple answer is that they can't. Zine acquisitions happen most successfully when librarians make personal connections with the creators themselves and nurture those relationships over the long term on an individual level.

Part of the problem stems from restrictions imposed by libraries' purchasing policies and guidelines, as well as the need to use nontraditional platforms for ordering. One-on-one interactions with the authors of the zines themselves are regularly necessary, and the authors themselves present some unique issues in the buying process. These one-on-one transactions between libraries and the people who are creating and selling zines have to be taken into consideration. As a young and possibly naive acquisitions manager, I was

unaware of the issues that would need to be dealt with in order to maintain a regular acquisitions workflow for these unique pieces of the collection.

Subject specialists and collection managers are often heavily invested in their zine collections, and the usual acquisitions policies get thrown out the door when they begin to delve into true zine collecting. Acquisitions librarians are having to find new and creative ways to manage the acquisitions of zines, as well as come up with different ways to explain to the financial offices of their institutions why these are necessary purchases. They must also come up with creative work-arounds in order to handle financial policies that were set in place to limit and restrict unique one-time purchases. While much has been written about how important zines are for library collections, very little has been written about the actual practice of purchasing zines within the acquisitions context. This is often a difficult matter that is subject to an individual institution's policies and financial management.

When looking at acquiring zines for any library, librarians often have to work directly with the creators themselves, buying directly from the artists and writers of these materials. Moreover, library policy must often become more flexible in order to handle the process of acquiring and purchasing zines. The ethics of acquiring these materials and then properly identifying and cataloging the items needs to be examined. In general, acquisitions librarians need to understand that they are working with a very different type of creator than they are used to with more traditional library materials. Each zinester will be different in terms of how they handle sales and how they communicate. These are not regular vendors who are commercially minded in the same way as bigger, more mainstream vendors.

Zines are not usually found in traditional library marketplaces. As Holly Callaghan points out in her article on British and Irish zine librarians' activities: "Zines are DIY documents rooted in histories of radical self-publishing, and as such they are naturally found in radical and DIY spaces" (Callaghan 2018). To truly embrace zine acquisitions, one has to continually search "radical" places in order to both find and buy zines. Callaghan points out that this is a vital aspect of establishing best practices when it comes to building zine collections. Many zines are found at zine fairs and through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. There is a great deal of outreach that goes into buying a zine, and collectors have to search in many different locations in order to find the zines they want for their zine collection. Zines also often

happen on a more local level, and by this I mean that zines are often purchased more on the micro level than on the macro one. Librarians have to go out into their communities to make these sorts of contacts, and they have to acknowledge that to build a truly successful zine collection, the usual places for buying books won't be where zines are found.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ZINES

Zine artists and writers often use social media to publicize and talk about their work. Many of the subject specialists I've worked with have found the zines they wished to purchase through places like Twitter and Facebook. Many zine artisans don't have public-facing phone numbers or even e-mail addresses. The simple act of communicating orders can become very difficult when social media are the only way to ask about purchasing. While there are zine distributors around, for the most part, zines are sold by the people who create and produce them. Kickstarter and Indiegogo crowdsourcing campaigns are also a major place of purchase for zines.

One librarian I worked with on acquiring zines had communicated solely with the author through Facebook. When it came time to pass the purchase request on to Acquisitions, she had to send me screenshots of her conversation with the seller, and I had to go through Facebook myself in order to communicate order information to the author. My institution does not allow us to send our credit card information over e-mail or general messaging, and I was uncomfortable with sending possibly sensitive financial information related to my workplace over my personal Facebook account. While this particular vendor was able to generate an invoice for me to pay through PayPal, the entire transaction made me uncomfortable because of all the workplace taboos we were breaking. Even just having my Facebook account up on my work computer was problematic for me in some ways. I worried a great deal about how this particular purchase might be perceived as a personal purchase instead of an institutional one. I documented everything and kept the screenshots in case of a later audit.

While social media sites are often regularly used by subject librarians, the rules for social media use in the technical services department I worked in were very different. After that particular purchase, my department at that time drafted new policies to cover social media use with regard to

purchasing, and separate library accounts were created specifically for the whole purchasing process in these unique cases. Both the subject selector and my department had access to these accounts, and this at least enabled us to follow the conversation and continue it when it was passed from one hand to another. It also made the accounts more official, and my staff were also more comfortable logging into an institutional account versus their own personal accounts. When we pinpointed these issues with these particular workflows, having a conversation with our department's director was an important part of the process. She was able to help us make policies official, and she communicated the issues and the solutions we had identified to library administration.

After placing an order with two Spanish zine creators that the subject librarian had found on Twitter, I had the authors themselves show up at our library when they were on vacation and ask for me because I was their main point of contact. They wanted to see their zine in the collection, which was totally understandable, but I had to explain to them that these items had ended up in Special Collections and couldn't just be seen on the shelves in the main collection. On one hand, it was great to meet the creators and be able to show them around the library, but it was one more illustration of how zine sellers often don't understand how their items fit within the libraries themselves. I was able to get the subject selector who had originally talked to them through Twitter to come down and meet them as well. He was able to talk with them about the actual collection and what he was doing for the campus with their zine.

Crowdsourcing sites are also often problematic. Current policy does not allow me to use auction sites or bid on any items on behalf of the library. Crowdsourcing sites like Kickstarter and Indiegogo fall under this heading in our policies. I have found that the best course of action in these cases is to contact the creator or producer directly and explain the situation to them. I was able to contact a Kickstarter campaign and tell them that we really wanted the item that they were funding for our collections, and promise them that we would pay at a certain level if they would hold onto a copy specifically for my library. They were happy to help me, and when the campaign was over, they sent me an invoice that I could pay by credit card. But they also had the capability outside of Kickstarter to do that. Many individual authors, especially first-time authors, can't do that. While services such as PayPal, Square, and Venmo

are helpful, you often have to be able to walk an individual vendor through the process of accepting a credit card purchase. I have some basic templates written up for both myself and my staff to use in these scenarios to send to vendors who need this sort of help, that walk them through the process in a way that meets all of the guidelines and policies that I need to meet in order to make my accounting department happy. While this particular scenario had a happy outcome, I have run into creators who were unwilling to set an item aside or who couldn't follow through with an individual payment later. The burden also falls on me to follow up on these purchases, which can create its own headache in the midst of everything else.

While I personally enjoy buying items from Etsy and Storenvy in my personal life, these two sites are very specifically blocked by my institution as places from which we cannot buy items for the collection. And I'm not the only one who deals with institutional rules surrounding these websites. Just like with Kickstarter and Indiegogo, often, sellers on these platforms will be willing to work with you one on one, but sometimes they won't. I included Etsy and Storenvy in my documentation about zine purchasing because they have caused so many issues. My selectors know that if they have to buy through these sites, they will have to do it themselves and submit the purchases for reimbursement. I wanted to bring up these two sites because so many zine creators use them as platforms to sell their material. These two websites are illustrative of the continued issues with zine acquisitions because they are so far outside of regular library buying and because the institutions that libraries report to don't have a better understanding of the buying we do in general. We aren't buying office supplies; we are building collections.

ETHICS OF ZINE ACQUISITIONS

Ethics is a big part of the entire zine-acquisitions process within libraries. While my colleagues will talk about the ethics of cataloging zines and presenting authors the way they wish to be presented, I think we also can't ignore the ethics of acquiring these zines either. Many zine creators don't want to have to sell their creations at the institutional level or get involved with a lot of traditional means of capitalistic purchasing. Often, the person who initiates the conversation will have to keep the possible ethics of the creators in mind

with regard to their selling their creations. I have seen and experienced issues with vendors raising issues about where the zine is going and how it will be used after the item is purchased. They will also occasionally challenge the traditional means of acquisition. Why should they have to accept credit card payments or meet the institutional requirements for being set up as a vendor?

Don't be surprised if these sellers raise issues during the purchasing process or refuse to handle credit cards. I am unable to present cash for payment, so at that point the selector will have to decide if they want the item, and, if so, they will have to complete the purchase and then be reimbursed by the institution, if possible. Sometimes creators will ask that you make sure they are represented a certain way in the cataloging record or in how the item is presented at the collection level. These are all things that need to be kept in mind. One way to do this is to create a statement that you can send to zine artists giving them information about the collection, collection development policies, what you're using their materials for, and who is likely to be using the materials.

In traditional publishing models, books have many standardized protections and identifying features that zines do not. As librarians acquiring zines, I think it's even more important that we talk to these sellers in order to help them understand how the zines will be used, displayed, and presented through the catalog and the library. When I worked for a library in New Orleans, I bought zines from creators who were transient. Few of them had a way to communicate beyond the transaction that happened in person because they were selling their zines as art on the streets. When they left the city, they would not be able to send me a zine from wherever they ended up and I would lose contact with them. These zines carried amazing commentary on our community and the things that were happening in it. But to responsibly buy these materials, I always had a conversation with the individuals who created and sold the work to make sure they understood who these materials would be available to and how they might be used, and to make sure that the creators were represented in the cataloging record the way they wished to be represented. By represented, I mean how they are named, how they wanted to be identified, dates assigned, and any other identifying information that would be relevant.

THE ACQUISITIONS PROCESS

Let's take a quick look at a standard acquisitions workflow before we continue the discussion on why zine acquisitions is so different.

1. A request for an order is sent to acquisitions staff to begin the order process.
 - » The information that will be included is the title, an ISBN, or edition requirement (or other identifying information for the item in question), a recommended vendor from the list of established library vendors, a fund code that should be used for payment, and a location for where the item will be housed.
2. Acquisitions staff check for duplication of the item within the collection.
3. Acquisitions staff download a record from a service such as OCLC, or create an original record within their ILS cataloging system using local standards, policies, and requirements, often using a template for a provisional record that will be completed later by cataloging staff.
4. Using the record downloaded or created, a purchase order (PO) number is created in whatever acquisitions module is used.
 - » Sometimes this PO can be sent directly to a vendor via the ILS if the vendor is an established library vendor.
 - » Sometimes the acquisitions staff member has to communicate with a vendor to place the order.
5. When the item is received, the PO is received within the ILS, the item is routed appropriately to whatever cataloging department handles the item, and the invoice is paid by attaching the PO to the invoice within the ILS. That invoice is then passed on to an accounting department that works with the larger institution in order to send payment via check or wire payment.
 - » Sometimes the order is paid by credit card when ordered through a website or other communication with a vendor. That credit card payment is done while adhering to whatever standards the institution has in place.

6. When the material has been received, paid for, and sent on to the cataloging department, the order is considered to be complete.

Most items ordered for the library, whether print or electronic, go through this process. When looking at acquiring zines, however, established methods of buying through library vendors are rarely available, and this model of ordering and payment has to be set aside because standard policies and procedures are not available.

Zine authors, as artists, often don't understand the library acquisitions process at all. Let's face it, many standard companies don't either. At my current institution, getting any vendor set up as a university vendor is a process of often herculean proportions. Most zine creators aren't set up in any way to handle traditional continuation orders the way a standard bookseller might, and it's usually easier to pay them by cash or credit card. Many of the collection development librarians I've assisted in this process go directly to zine fairs, book fairs, and other in-person spaces to purchase these items on their own. In that case, having a policy for personal reimbursement often comes in handy. When subject specialists come to me with questions about this process, I point them to these policies on our wiki and remind them that they need to be able to produce receipts that match our institution's requirements if they want to be reimbursed.

Subject specialists have to be reminded regularly that zine purchasing is not like any other library purchase, but they still need to try to fulfill as many of their institution's policies as possible. One subject librarian was building a collection of international zines and we found that in placing these purchases, the average cost of the individual items was only \$1. Unfortunately, the shipping costs, which were coming from a different general fund, were averaging between \$20 and \$40. We calculated the entirety of the costs for each individual item (which included library processing after the items were acquired), and found that for an item that ostensible cost \$1, we were actually paying around \$125 total. While every item acquired by the library has unseen costs, it was decided that this method of purchasing was unsustainable for our particular budget. The librarian decided to make a majority of these purchases on his own and then get reimbursed for "collections" of zines, instead of putting the acquisitions department through these very small, individual purchases, which took a great deal of our time and cost us a lot of money. When we were

presented with the problems associated with these purchases, this particular selector worked with us to find a more sustainable model of buying.

Regarding library vendors, our collection policies state: “The Libraries are committed to ensuring access to all users regardless of ability and to holding vendors accountable for maintaining sustainable acquisitions models.” Right away, zine sellers become problematic. They are rarely sustainable, let alone responsible for maintaining any sort of traditional buying model. Once a commitment has been made to purchase a collection of zines, having a conversation with the various people involved to discuss policy is helpful. It can clarify the issues that might come up with regard to current policy, and ensures that those in charge of financial issues and collection development are aware of some of the possible pitfalls and differences in purchasing zines. Making sure everyone is on the same page with regard to these purchases clears the road in the future when other issues arise.

Once payment can be agreed upon and arranged with the vendor, I have generally found that most of the standard workflows fall back into place. Some zines have excellent records available in OCLC, while others have nothing. When we realized that zines were going to be a fairly regular purchase, our head of cataloging created a provisional template for staff to use for zines to make sure we could cover as much information as possible during the purchase. Most of these items would need individual cataloging after receipt, but with that template, the basics could often be covered. It was also a good conversation to have within technical services, so that everyone involved in these workflows was familiar with what zines were, how they differed from more traditional comics and graphics, and how we thought they should be handled in the processing workflow.

When a cataloging record is created, a purchase order is generated as usual and the item is received as most other items we acquire are. With regard to the items that subject specialists are buying outside of the library and getting reimbursed for, I created a document for selectors to use as a guideline for what needed to happen next when they were bringing these items to be processed through technical services. This document didn't just lay out the guidelines for reimbursement, it also explained who to bring these items to and what information the acquisitions department needed to complete acceptance of these materials into the library. I tried to stress to selectors the importance of letting me know ahead of time, as much as possible, when they knew they were going

to make these purchases. I requested lists with title, author, and price information when zines were brought down to me. The selectors also had to submit an official order request with fund and location information clearly stated, so that there was no confusion as to where these items were going and from where the money needed to be deducted. The selectors already had an order request template to use in place, and I added fields for zine-specific purchases.

It really comes down to the fact that these purchases inevitably need to be handled individually. I've made sure to train my staff on what zines are and how to recognize a purchase request for a zine. While my staff are extremely competent people, they are often more comfortable handing these purchases off to me to handle, just in case any policy questions arise from the larger institution or if there is an audit. Some of my staff are very comfortable talking with the zinesters themselves and others are not. For those who are not, I've made sure that they know it's all right to ask me to do it instead.

CONCLUSION

Buying zines is a lot of fun, even when it brings up a lot of questions and issues. Purchasing zines over the years has kept me on my toes, and has kept me mindful of our actual practices in acquisitions, and the responsibilities that we carry in making purchases. Buying from zinesters will never be like buying from the larger library vendors, and at the end of the day, I think that's a really great thing. Talking to creators and vendors is always a highlight of my job as an acquisitions librarian because zines create conversations and build connections in new ways that I think we should embrace as much as possible. Talking to zinesters is a reminder of the community we are truly a part of, and while zine acquisitions is often a lot of work, it is also extremely satisfying. I am supporting my library, my patrons, my community, and individual local artists. Purchasing these materials and then presenting them as part of our collections is one of the joys of what I do, and working with subject specialists to track, buy, and receive zines is a practice that I hope to see more of, especially in academic libraries. While zine acquisitions creates many conundrums, it is also a great adventure with a wonderful treasure at the end. Embrace the fact that these things are going to be a little bit wild, and then enjoy the ride!

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