Criteria for Purchasing E-book Platforms

Abstract

Chapter 2 of Library Technology Reports *(vol. 49, no. 3) "E-book Platforms for Libraries" covers the criteria librarians usually consider when deciding which platforms to choose as delivery vehicles for their e-book collections. These criteria are divided into four distinct groups: content, technical specifications, functionality, and business model. While the needs of institutions vary greatly even within similar library markets, some key factors have been established within the library community as a way to guide librarians in deciding which platforms best suit their needs. This chapter examines those needs by explaining the importance of the scope of the content (e.g., number of titles included, number of publishers represented, etc.), the product's unique features (e.g., ADA compliance), and the intricate details regarding access to the content and ways in which libraries can purchase it.*

There is no one-size-fits-all model when deciding which platforms to choose for delivery of e-books. Every library's needs are different, and no two products provide the same features and functionalities—even when catering to the same type of library audience. Librarians usually start to get acquainted with a platform (or vendor) by asking questions about the content available and compatibility to make sure that they have the equipment in place to support the product. Then they move on to questions about the terms of the licensing agreement and a host of other topics that usually have to do with one of the following areas: content, technical specifications, functionality, and business model.

Content

Questions pertaining to content can usually be answered by simply browsing each product's website. Publishers and vendors tend to be forthright about the scope of their platforms. It is important to get a good sense of how big these platforms are to understand the logic behind their complex pricing structures. And these platforms run the gamut: from those hosting hundreds of thousands of e-books to those hosting a few hundred titles by one or two publishers. A rule of thumb applies: the greater the scope, the greater the value; the greater the value, the higher the price.

The following content-specific questions usually arise in discussions with library vendors: How many books are included overall? Do I need to purchase all of them? What library markets is the platform built for? Who is the primary audience? What types of e-books are available on the platform (e.g., reference books, trade titles from major houses, monographs)? In the case of subject-specific or publisher-specific e-book platforms, what are the key subjects covered? And how often are new titles added to the platform?

When examining aggregator and distributor platforms, librarians want to know about the overall number of publishers represented to determine how many of those publishers' titles they can expect to circulate in the library. Keeping up with titles and publishers is no small task, since most e-book platforms are updated on a monthly, and some on a weekly, basis. Major aggregators are constantly signing new deals and announcing new partnerships with publishers to boost their offerings.

For research and learning purposes, librarians will want to know about the inclusion of multimedia in the package. Are there videos, images, and other tools that help enhance the reading experience? What about integration of other types of content? What else is included in the package other than e-books? Journals? Databases? Lastly, is there a sister product associated with the platform that librarians should be aware of?

Here is an outline of the various content factors to consider when choosing e-book platforms:

- type of e-book platform (e.g., by publisher, aggregator, wholesaler, university press, e-book lending service)
- primary library market (e.g., public, K–12, academic, corporate, government)
- number of titles
- number of publishers and/or imprints
- types of e-books on the platform (e.g., trade books, reference books, monographs, K–12 nonfiction)
- expected growth/frequency of updates (how often new titles are added)
- subjects covered (e.g., fiction, general nonfiction, arts and humanities, science and technology)
- inclusion of multimedia (e.g., images, videos, interactive maps)
- integration of content other than e-books (e.g., journals)
- inclusion of book reviews
- inclusion of author biographies and other works by the same author
- distributor partner (e.g., Yankee Book Peddler)
- offspring (related products)

Technical Specifications

Technical specs involve discussions about the equipment needed for the library or user to access e-books, browsers supported, software or plugins needed, file formats of e-books, and compatible e-readers. Most e-book platforms support all browsers, including Internet Explorer, Safari, and Firefox, but some are still not compatible with Google Chrome, for example. Librarians need to keep in mind that not all patrons own portable reading devices and may still be reading e-books on their home computers. Knowing in advance which browsers the platform supports and whether any additional software installations are needed (e.g., Adobe Digital Editions) will determine if the e-book platform reflects the needs of their community.

E-books are generally sold to libraries in PDF and ePub file formats. These two formats are supported by the majority of reading devices, including Nook, iPad, Sony eReader, and Kobo. Kindle uses its own proprietary format known as AZW. ePub is considered to be the industry standard preferred by librarians.

Most vendors whose platforms support only PDF are working toward making their e-books available in ePub. Librarians usually recommend buying e-books in ePub, XHTML, or other XML-based formats because the files are reflowable and can better adapt their presentation to the output device. PDF files generally do not adapt as well to mobile devices and are difficult to view on small screens. If PDF is the only file format offered by the vendor, text-based Adobe PDF formats are a good alternative as they support highlighting, keyword searching, and disability access.

Clearly, not all e-books may be read on all devices. This is one of the most challenging aspects of how e-books have evolved in recent years. While the number of dedicated e-readers continues to grow, so does the frustration surrounding the limitations imposed on users who own only one reading device or a library able to afford only one type of e-book platform. The most prevalent portable e-readers include Barnes & Noble's Nook, Apple's iPad, Sony's eReader, Kobo, and Amazon's Kindle. The Kindle is widely considered to be the most user-friendly e-book reading device since it uses the patron's Amazon account as the delivery source for content.

Here is an outline of the technical factors to consider when choosing e-book platforms:

- browsers supported (e.g., Internet Explorer, Safari, Firefox, Google Chrome)
- software requirements (e.g., Adobe Digital Editions)
- plugin requirements
- file formats (e.g., ePub, PDF, HTML)
- availability of an app
- hand-held e-readers supported (e.g., Nook, iPad, Kindle, Kobo, Sony eReader)
- availability of a proprietary reader by the vendor
- compatibility with ILS (integrated library system)
- integration with the library's OPAC

Functionality

Functionality is all about the bells and whistles associated with each platform. Librarians need to be aware of the different features available and how valuable they may be both to the library (e.g., COUNTER reports) and to the patrons (e.g., ability to print). Academic librarians will be most interested in the embedded tools that support research, including full-text searching at book and chapter level, annotation and citation tools, persistent URLs, generous copy/paste and printing options, and content availability for offline reading.

The availability of usage data (e.g., COUNTER), ADA-compliant features, and MARC records are of interest to all libraries. E-book catalogs can range from

having MARC records available for every e-book title offered by the library to not having any. The majority of vendors, especially those with a large number of reference books, provide MARC records.

Here is an outline of the various functionality factors to consider when choosing e-book platforms:

- full-text searching
- keyword searching
- copy/paste options
- printing options
- downloading options
- searching at article, book, and collection level
- advanced search capabilities (truncation, Boolean)
- bookmarking within e-books
- citation tools
- annotation tools
- offline reading
- availability of usage reports
- persistent URLs (book, chapter, collection level)
- print-on-demand copy service
- ADA compliance
- personalization features
- availability of MARC records

Business Models

Dealing with business models and understanding the multitude of pricing options available is the most complicated—and controversial—part of e-book acquisition. It requires constantly keeping up with various policies and business practices, which change continually owing to the mergers that occur within the industry and to the technological advances that make it possible for companies to upgrade purchasing plans more frequently. Many questions need to be answered before a library can sign a contract with a vendor and commit to an e-book platform. Since pricing options are usually not explained at length on vendor sites, librarians need to take a proactive approach and explore all viable alternatives.

Here is a sampling of typical business model questions a vendor sales representative may encounter: Is this a subscription platform or purchase-to-own business model? If I choose to purchase e-books to own, are there annual access fees associated with using the platform? Can they be waived if a certain number of e-books are purchased in advance? If I opt for a subscription package, what happens to the content after my contract expires? How frequently will my library be invoiced? Can I view the product before purchasing (and without needing to sign up for an institutional trial)? What DRM policies should I be aware of? And what about embargoes? How long will my library need to wait before it can offer best-selling titles? Although publishers don't wait as long as they used to to release

e-versions of print titles, some still impose an embargo period before e-book versions are available for library lending.

Since many e-book vendors charge the cost of a print title plus a certain percentage for their e-books, librarians want to know what the cost of each title is in relation to its print counterpart. They also want to know about single versus multiple versus unlimited use of each e-book. Some platforms allow for an unlimited use of their e-books (by any number of readers at any time), while others adhere to a one title/one user model. Some offer unlimited access for older titles but impose a one title/one user model for new releases. Access policies vary widely among vendors, and they are not always set in stone. If a vendor has only one business model in place at launch, it is not unusual for the vendor to revise its policy in six months to offer more options.

Patron-driven acquisition (PDA) is one of the most talked-about models for acquiring e-books in academic libraries. Offered by both publishers and aggregators, the PDA model is fairly straightforward: e-book purchases are triggered based on traffic and patron interest in particular titles. In other words, patrons' use of a book triggers purchase. (Various trigger and price points are offered.) This business model guarantees that only the content that gets used gets purchased. Although it is not as common in public libraries, some vendors, including 3M, have started experimenting with a PDA option for their public library customers.

Short-term loans (STL) may be a good solution for librarians looking to obtain access to content they wouldn't be able to afford buying. STLs are similar to the PDA model in that patron demand ultimately drives what the library budget is spent on. The key difference is that STLs are about renting e-books instead of buying them. Patrons borrow titles directly from the aggregator's catalog (not owned by the library) and get access to a title for a set period of time (usually one, two, three, seven, fourteen, or thirty days) and the library is charged for the rental. This costs the library anywhere from 5 to 30 percent of the title price. (Loan prices escalate according to the number of days required for the loan.)

One popular way to save money when purchasing e-books is via library consortia. Many vendors have arrangements with consortia that provide e-books to libraries at discounted rates. As is the case with other alternatives, librarians will encounter both benefits and drawbacks when choosing the consortial route. Benefits include more e-books for less money and equality of content across libraries; minimal energy spent on licensing agreements; and e-book lending across a wide variety of libraries. There are also challenges to note. Since publishers don't benefit as much when libraries share access, they often put pressure on aggregators to limit the size of consortia. In addition,

certain member libraries may have unique needs that are not in line with those of other members, or they may not want to spend money on titles that others want to buy. On the public library side, larger consortia mean longer queues of popular trade titles.

Here is an outline of the business model factors to consider when choosing e-book platforms:

- one user/one book model
- purchase-to-own option
- subscription option
- short-term loans
- patron-driven acquisition (PDA)
- free viewing period (for PDA)
- perpetual archive fee

- title cost relative to print cost
- minimum commitment
- interlibrary loan (ILL)
- invoicing intervals (monthly, quarterly, yearly)
- DRM policies
- use of content via classroom projection devices (e.g., interactive whiteboards)
- annual maintenance fee
- free trials (length)
- pay-per-view option
- availability of prebuilt subject collections
- consortial purchasing
- approval plans
- embargo period