Industry Standards in ARL Libraries: Electronic and On-Demand

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Abstract

Purpose—Little is known about the current state of industry standards subscriptions in U.S. libraries. In this age of electronic access and tightening budgets, many libraries are re-examining whether or not to alter paper subscriptions of standards to electronic versions and/or switch to on-demand delivery.

Design/Methodology—Two surveys were conducted in an attempt to gauge the extent to which other libraries are currently collecting standards in electronic format, or providing on-demand purchasing for industry standards.

Findings—The number of libraries purchasing electronic standards or providing on-demand purchasing in 2003 appears to be incongruous with comments from both surveys. In the 2001 survey, librarians could not find ways to fund on-demand purchasing and in the 2003 survey, a number of libraries were purchasing some sets on an irregular basis to save money. A little over half (51%) of the responding libraries provide electronic versions of standards and sixty percent indicated they provide on-demand purchasing of individual standards.

Originality/Value—Survey responses resulted in several local changes to improve patron success rates at acquiring industry standards including: created a publicly-searchable database of locally-available standards, initiated a purchase on-demand process, worked with Interlibrary Loan (ILL) staff to determine which standards would be better to purchase versus request on ILL, and became more adept at reference interviews involving requests for standards.

Keywords

Disciplines
Library and Information Science

Comments
This is a post-print of an article published in Collection Building, 24, no. 1 (2005): 20–28, by Emerald.

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Industry Standards in ARL Libraries: Electronic and On-Demand

Lorraine J. Pellack

SUMMARY

Little is known about the current state of industry standards subscriptions in U.S. libraries. In this age of electronic access and tightening budgets, many libraries are re-examining whether or not to alter paper subscriptions of standards to electronic versions and/or switch to on-demand delivery. Two surveys were conducted in an attempt to gauge the extent to which other libraries are currently collecting standards in electronic format, or providing on-demand purchasing for industry standards. The number of libraries purchasing electronic standards or providing on-demand purchasing in 2003 appears to be incongruous with comments from both surveys. In the 2001 survey, librarians could not find ways to fund on-demand purchasing and in the 2003 survey, a number of libraries were purchasing some sets on an irregular basis to save money. A little over half (51%) of the responding libraries provide electronic versions of standards and sixty percent indicated they provide on-demand purchasing of individual standards. Survey responses resulted in several local changes to improve patron success rates at acquiring industry standard including: created a publicly-searchable database of locally-available standards, initiated a purchase on-demand process, worked with Interlibrary Loan (ILL) staff to determine which standards would be better to purchase versus request on ILL, and became more adept at reference interviews involving requests for standards.

KEYWORDS


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Introduction

Many published articles have discussed the role of industry standards in academic libraries and provided guidelines for developing these collections (Musser, 1990; Ricci, 1990; Schlembach, 2001; and Taylor, 1999). “Although in many respects standards are no different than any other collection of material on a specific subject, they do present a challenge because of the diversity of organizations which publish them, the variety of formats in which they are published and a frequent lack of adequate description of the needed standard” (Ricci, 1990).

For a wide variety of information resources, databases that can be accessed via the Web are allowing entire campuses of users to conduct preliminary literature searches and access full-text articles without ever setting foot in the library. Industry standards are the next logical extension of that concept for scientific libraries. As more vendors make their products available in a web-accessible format and with IP access (or proxy authentication to verify that users are part of a library’s constituency), it seems reasonable to provide full-text industry standards to remote users.

Iowa State University has an excellent "historical" collection of industry standards (in paper format) from various organizations such as the American Society for Testing & Materials (ASTM) and American National Standards Institute (ANSI). In this age of electronic access and tightening budgets, local library staff have been re-examining whether or not to alter the paper standards subscriptions to electronic versions and/or switch to on-demand delivery of various standards. Lawyers and engineers, from the nearby state capitol, regularly need to consult "historical" standards, which many libraries discard as soon as they are updated, and there were concerns about diminishing this collection by switching to electronic access. There were also concerns that the amount of time it takes to print an electronic version is significantly longer than that required to photocopy pages from a paper version and
perusing lengthy standards online might be uncomfortable for patrons. In addition, the subscription cost for many electronic standards was significantly more expensive than the price of the print standards. On the positive side, electronic formats would allow broader access to standards beyond traditional library hours, since they could be provided over the Internet to members of the ISU community.

Methodology

In February of 2001, the author sent out a message to ELDNET-L and STS-L, listservs aimed at engineering and science librarians, asking participants on these lists:

- How are you dealing with the electronic versus paper versions of standards?
- Do any of you provide on-demand purchasing of standards? If so, how easy is it for patrons, how often is it done, and are the standards added to the library collection when the patron is finished with them?
- How do you alert patrons to your historical standards? Are they included in the library catalog?

Only a handful of responses were received, but they represented a wide variety of institutions in size and specialty. Consequently, a choice was made to broaden the results set by personally contacting science librarians from Carnegie I land grant schools (peer institutions, whose situations would more closely parallel local collections) and ask them the same questions posed to the listservs. While this increased the result set to 15 libraries, the number was still neither satisfying nor statistically significant. Nevertheless, initial findings helped pave the way for a more structured and revealing subsequent survey. Among these 15 libraries, very few in the group were actually subscribing to many electronic standards in 2001 (see Appendix A). Notable exceptions included North Carolina State, Purdue, Texas A & M, and Virginia Tech. Most libraries in the group consistently owned IEEE Electronic Library, but a surprising number of large libraries had not ventured into electronic standards at all. According to the librarians who responded, the overriding factor in most cases was budget limitations.
2003 Survey

In June of 2003, a more detailed questionnaire was sent to librarians at each academic ARL library in the U.S. with an engineering collection. Librarians were chosen based on information provided on their library web pages. Wherever possible, the survey was sent to the person who appeared to handle standards at each library, or the library’s head of Reference if a relevant librarian could not be identified. Reminders were sent in July to those who had not yet responded. A total of 35 responses were received – a response rate of 39% (see Appendix B).

Approximately half of those responding indicated they maintained an “historic” collection of older industry standards and sixty percent (21 libraries) indicated they provide on-demand purchasing of individual standards. Of those twenty-one libraries: 20 libraries provide librarian-mediated purchasing, 1 offers direct patron purchasing charged to the library, and 2 offer direct patron purchasing charged to the patron (typically as part of an Interlibrary Loan transaction).

Fourteen of the twenty-one libraries purchase 1-10 individual standards per year, five libraries purchase 11-50 individual standards per year, and two libraries purchase an astonishing 51-100 individual standards per year. This was an interesting comparison and, throughout the survey answers and comments, a single theme continued to surface: non-owned standards are not being requested very often by patrons. Several possible explanations come to mind – including that patrons may not know to ask if they don’t find records in the library catalog, or that librarians have refined their standards collection subscriptions so well that their patrons rarely need one that isn’t already in the local collection. Several librarians also commented that they provide links to standards vendors, and encourage their patrons to purchase their own copies directly from vendors.

Amounts being spent for on-demand purchasing were quite interesting. Costs ranged widely, with one library reportedly spending $10,000-20,000 per year, but clearly most of the responding libraries estimated spending between $101 and $1000 per year for on-demand purchases.
The only survey question with a 100% unanimous response dealt with patron complaints about printing or downloading of the electronic or CD-ROM versions of standards. *None* of the responding librarians indicated *any* patron complaints or problems in this area. This response was both surprising and reassuring, given local librarian concerns about the lengthy extent of some standards and the amount of time it takes to print large PDF files.

The Interlibrary Loan (ILL) section of the survey seemed to be the most problematic for librarians to complete. Standards are often located in branch libraries, while ILL requests are frequently processed in a centralized operation within the library system. This was anticipated in the creation of the survey, but the question was also intended to alert librarians to a somewhat invisible problem related to industry standards. ILL staff often have difficulty acquiring standards through traditional Interlibrary Loan. Reasons include: the difficulty of locating holdings at other libraries since many standards are not cataloged by the owning library and not in OCLC; standards are often housed in non-circulating Reference collections, and thus are not loanable; and copying entire standards usually exceeds copyright restrictions, so most ILL offices are unable to provide a complete photocopy. Not a single respondent mentioned the *Union List of Technical Reports, Standards and Patents in Engineering Libraries* (Schlembach, 1999) as an alternative to locating holdings on OCLC. Interestingly, these comments are directly contradicted by the responses to question #7 “Do you allow your standards to be loaned through Interlibrary Loan?” Eleven of the responding libraries said YES. Two of the respondents qualified their answers by indicating they would not loan current standards, but would loan older ones.

Sixty-three percent of those responding indicated they request fewer than ten standards per year on ILL. On average, it takes from three days to four weeks to receive standards via traditional ILL, although five of the responding librarians were unsure how long the process usually takes in their institutions. Only three libraries indicated that they did not notice some standards were more problematic than others to obtain via ILL – although an additional person marked “unsure.” Those standards most frequently identified as “problematic” were ISO standards.
A few comments resurfaced continually throughout the ILL section of the survey: 1) librarians prefer to have patrons purchase their own standards instead of going through ILL, and 2) the majority of requests for standards come from outside customers, not affiliated with the academic institution – and these individuals frequently do not have ILL privileges.

One new finding, which had not surfaced in the 2001 survey, was the fact that many libraries are now choosing to purchase sets of standards on an irregular basis to save money. They may, for example, buy the Annual Book of ASTM Standards or the ACI Manual of Concrete Practice once every two or three years instead of annually. Electronic formats are almost always more expensive than their paper counterparts, yet a little over half (51%) of the responding libraries provide electronic versions of standards. This figure was in sharp contrast to the figure revealed two years earlier, when only two of the libraries surveyed informally were providing standards in electronic format. (The latter figure, however, does not include the libraries with IEEE Electronic Library which contains IEEE standards.) As libraries face more budget cuts, lower use materials such as standards from smaller societies seem to be at risk for further cuts. The number of libraries purchasing electronic standards in 2003 appears to be incongruous with comments from both surveys. In the 2001 survey, librarians could not find ways to fund on-demand purchasing and in the 2003 survey, a number of libraries were purchasing some sets on an irregular basis to save money. Are we so eager to embrace new technologies and provide remote access to our resources that the cost is no longer a concern? Or, is it just easier for staff to purchase electronic subscriptions than to provide on-demand purchasing? Either is possible and likely depends on local variables.

**Availability of Electronic Standards**

Two main vendors were investigated as part of this process – ILI (a British company) and Information Handling Service (IHS). Both vendors offer a search engine that includes historical standards. ILI offers Standards Infobase and the IHS version is TDX Index. A detailed comparison of vendor search services was recently published (Schlembach, 2001); however, other services vary and are almost impossible to compare. ILI allows libraries to mediate purchases by patrons. IHS does not have
this option. IHS offers subscriptions for full-text publications from a lot of different standards organizations but a separate subscription is required to access full-text of standards for each issuing agency. There are many pricing options, but the cost of “internet access for a networked user” for the full-text ANSI standards collection is roughly identical to the cost of our current paper standing order to this collection (our standing order covers a large portion of the ANSI standards, but is not the complete collection). The non-networked user is about $5,000 cheaper and a CD-ROM stand-alone is roughly $4,000 cheaper than the non-networked user. ASTM and ANSI also offer subscriptions to full-text of their publications directly, with prices similar to IHS. The drawback to purchasing electronic standards via subscription is the cost for networked access and multiple users. Another concern is that non-affiliated researchers might not be able to access the full-text collections if the license requires limiting use to affiliated researchers. The advantage is access to the full text of various standards for ISU-affiliated researchers. Some libraries may be able to afford a couple of core collections electronically and possibly some additional collections on a stand-alone CD-ROM; however, few libraries will be able to afford extensive electronic subscriptions. Ongoing subscriptions such as these are constantly under scrutiny for possible cancellation due to lower usage rates than other library collections.

**On-Demand Purchasing**

In this age of flat budgets, most libraries are unable to provide a wide selection of standards due to ever increasing subscription costs. It seemed strange that, in 2001, few libraries had begun providing on-demand purchasing as an alternative to ongoing subscriptions. At that time, seven of the fifteen responding libraries did indicate they provided some sort of on-demand purchasing, mostly for their faculty or graduate students. Many others commented that they would like to provide on-demand purchasing, but had not yet managed to fit it into their budgets.

This seems to parallel librarians’ early reactions to commercial document delivery services, and their anxieties regarding the library’s ability to broker or subsidize such services for their users. Many librarians were intrigued by document delivery, but worried they would not be able to keep up with the
demand once they started down that path. These worries were allayed by published reports of trial projects, with data clearly showing that subsidized document delivery was not as expensive as libraries had anticipated. It is hoped that this article will inspire similar open-mindedness with regard to on-demand purchasing of standards.

A secondary reason that many have not ventured down this road is the need to establish deposit accounts with a vendor. Acquisitions staff in many libraries may be hesitant to work with deposit accounts, since they typically require procedures outside of normal workflows. At our institution, this involves: special handling for ordering, tracking, claiming and receiving the individual standards; the creation of a deposit account(s); and additional recordkeeping to track expenditures against deposit account balance, keep sufficient funds in account, and provide an adequate trail for audit purposes.

Creating an on-demand purchasing process definitely requires a concentrated and collaborative effort on the part of library staff, across numerous departments – Acquisitions, Accounting, Reference and Interlibrary Loan. It requires agreement on: when a standard should be purchased versus requested on ILL, which vendor to use, how to list the ordered standards in the acquisitions system, whether or not a patron should be allowed to use the standard before it is cataloged (if it is cataloged), whether or not there should be a limit on how many standards one patron can request, etc. With shrinking budgets, more work on individuals' plates, and the endemic shortage of time, librarians often choose to avoid special opportunities to acquire materials. On the plus side, deposit accounts can be a successful approach to acquiring some library materials like industry standards.

What has been done locally

As a result of these surveys, library staff at Iowa State University have taken the following steps to deal with industry standards:

1. Inventoried the existing ANSI standards collection in the library and made it available as a searchable database for librarians/patrons, to be used in determining whether or not a particular
standard is available locally. This was based in part on a project initiated at the University of Washington Engineering Library. Abstracts are available, and searchable, for those that were available from the publisher. The ISU ANSI database is available at:

http://db.lib.iastate.edu/elib_pac/ansi_search.jsp

2. Become more knowledgeable about the local ANSI standing order and the ANSI standards in the local collection. Standing orders from IHS are tailored to fit the needs of each subscribing institution. IHS will vary which ANSI standards they send to each institution based on how much that institution is willing to spend annually on ANSI standards and which standards organizations the institution wishes to receive. The content is negotiated with the sales representative, but has historically not been well documented within the library. As staffing turnovers occur, information has been lost.

3. Established a deposit account with a major standards vendor to purchase standards on-demand. The account was seeded with an initial $3,000 in gift monies and will be monitored to see how much appears to be needed each year to continue on-demand purchasing in the future.

4. Worked with local acquisitions & accounting staff to establish a process for placing on-demand orders. Initially, a decision was made to purchase only paper versions, though this decision may be revisited and a switch made to electronic formats in the near future. Turnaround time from patron request to receipt of standard currently averages approximately 1-2 weeks, but we are still working on ways to substantially shorten this time.

5. Worked with local ILL staff to establish procedures for which standards to process through ILL, and determine when to shunt a request off to a bibliographer for possible on-demand purchase (see Appendix C).

7. Become more adept at reference interviews involving requests for standards. Local students are often required to locate a standard on a given topic for a research project. Unfortunately, they often locate a reference to a standard, and then expect the library to acquire that particular standard when any similar standard might work as well.

8. Begun updating a local, user-oriented guide and making standards information more readily available on library web pages:  [http://www.lib.iastate.edu/services1/ref/standards.html](http://www.lib.iastate.edu/services1/ref/standards.html)

9. Become much more comfortable with the concept of purchasing electronic versions of standards, particularly since there do not appear to be patron complaints with printing/downloading these versions at other libraries.

Based on results from the surveys, a decision was made to set up a local on-demand purchasing process with no dollar limit per purchase, but purchases were limited to ISU faculty, staff and students. From April 15, 2003 to February 15, 2004, ten individual standards were purchased on-demand for a total cost of $1042.01. A few purchase requests were turned down, due to exorbitant costs, but these were either filled via Interlibrary Loan, or suitable alternative standards were located for the patron. Local library staff continue to provide non-affiliated researchers with information on how to purchase standards, as in the past.
One of the best outcomes of the project has been a much-improved relationship between the Interlibrary Loan, Reference, and Acquisitions staff involved in establishing the decision-making workflow and purchasing process. Putting together a standards workflow (see Appendix C) enabled these departments to work together much more closely than in the past.

Conclusions

Clearly some education needs to take place with regard to industry standards, for both patrons and librarians. The ability to locate paper versions of standards in local collections can be challenging, as is the processing of Interlibrary Loan requests for these items. If trained librarians have difficulty locating this information, then how can we possibly expect our patrons to do so? Effective finding aids for both librarians and patrons are essential – as is their ready accessibility on library web pages. Using tools such as the Union List and the Information on Standards would help identify libraries with particular standards, beyond what OCLC holdings may show, and would increase success rates for these types of Interlibrary Loans.

Locally, the combination of speedy on-demand purchasing, options for Interlibrary Loan, and staff education seems to have alleviated the pressure to purchase full-text electronic standards. While purchase of one or two large sets of electronic standards (such as ANSI or ASTM) would clearly be a nifty acquisition, they are already available in paper format, and patrons seem content to come to the library to access them. Switching these subscriptions to electronic access would save shelving the paper standards but we would have difficulty finding ways to justify and fund the increased costs. The standards being requested by patrons, beyond ANSI or ASTM, are from a myriad of publishers. Consequently, there is no affordable way to maintain subscriptions from all of these organizations – even in paper format, let alone in an electronic format that is typically more expensive to purchase. Electronic standards would be helpful for remote users, and during times the library is closed, but they would not help fill or alleviate the requests for non-owned standards. By putting dollars toward on-demand
purchasing instead of electronic subscriptions, patrons are more successful in locating previously unavailable standards.

References


APPENDICES

Appendix A – Summary results table from 2001 survey

Appendix B – Summary results from 2003 survey

Appendix C – Standards workflow process