CASE STUDY

University of Plymouth

The University of Plymouth Maximizes Its bX Trial

The spirit of creativity and innovation of the dynamic, ambitious University of Plymouth marks it *the* enterprise university. Located in the southwestern United Kingdom, the university's student population is around 32,000. Programs cover disciplines in the arts, the sciences, technology, education, marine biology, and business.

The University of Plymouth recently subscribed to the Ex Libris bX recommender service, following a successful 30-day trial, and has made it available to all the library's users.

The library at the University of Plymouth provides access to more than 500,000 books and multimedia resources; 22,000 journals; and numerous other university-based, national, and international resources. The library currently manages its print and electronic resources using a suite of Ex Libris® products, including the Voyager® integrated library system, the SFX® OpenURL link resolver, the MetaLib® gateway and metasearch solution, and the Verde® e-resource management system.

The bX scholarly recommender service from Ex Libris is the first service to provide recommendations that point to specific scholarly articles and that are based on actual usage data. Following a successful 30-day trial of bX, the University of Plymouth subscribed to the service in mid-July 2009. The intuitive nature of the bX service coupled with the familiar SFX user interface allowed researchers at the university to begin benefiting from the service right away, with no need for training. As an on-demand service, bX did not require the library to install or maintain any software on the network. Its researchers now tap into the power of the networked scholarly community and receive article recommendations directly in their familiar scholarly search environment.

A Trial with No Errors

Before registering for a bX trial, the university library staff discussed which outcomes would help them decide whether to move forward with a full subscription at the end of the 30 days. Subject librarians worked as a team to perform a well-organized internal

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assessment that included subject-specific inspections of recommendations received and an informal load test.

An important part of the internal review of bX—the first step, in fact—was a staff demonstration of the service for other staff members. The attendees commented that the bX service became much more understandable to them and was no longer an abstract notion. It was the first time anyone had seen a library recommender service for articles.

During the trial itself, subject librarians were encouraged to conduct searches in their "home" subjects in the library's databases, click on SFX buttons, and check the resulting bX recommendations. Many librarians looked specifically at the journal titles included in the recommendations, and for the most part found them to be well-regarded in their fields.

Librarians also experimented with following the recommendations—that is, they clicked the SFX buttons for the recommended articles and checked the recommendations that appeared. All the subject librarians pride themselves on their high standards for quality, and all understood their important role in the assessment—helping identify any issues that would require communication to Ex Libris support and product management or that the library's own publicity and instruction programs would have to address.

Getting the best results with bX

In addition to checking the quality of bX recommendations, library staff also tested performance on at least one occasion. As many librarians as possible were asked to click SFX buttons simultaneously and check whether SFX and bX returned information quickly. Much to the library's satisfaction, both products passed with flying colors in these tests of response time.

Librarians commented on the unobtrusiveness of bX and the helpfulness of its functioning in the familiar user interface of ever-popular SFX; they were also enthusiastic about the service's insertion of suggestions at the user's point of need— along with the display of the search results. One librarian commented that SFX is so

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familiar and trustworthy that there is no need for an additional brand for bX—good SFX services can stand on their own. The library is planning to add additional customizations to the SFX menu to highlight bX. "Once people see bX, they like it," commented Fiona Grieg, content and development manager. In multidisciplinary areas particularly, no one database covers all material, so supplementary tools such as bX are especially valuable.

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As the trial drew to a close, the last week of work was spent reviewing results and comments and coming to agreement about moving to purchase. Most of the subject librarians felt that although the library is experiencing some cuts in the materials budget, the service would be a good addition to help maximize the available resources and put them in front of the user, at the "point of need"—it was clear to the librarians that they should move forward with a subscription.

"Once people see bX, they like it,"

On July 15, 2009, the day bX was made publicly available, library staff at the University of Plymouth gave a demonstration of bX to the university deputy vice-chancellor in charge of library services. The demonstration included citations for articles that she had authored and showed articles that were related to those. Similarly, and very effectively, citations in which the deputy vice-chancellor's articles were recommended were also presented. Plymouth library staff noted that following recommendations for UK research was a good way to verify the presence in the bX database of regional scholarly articles. Library staff members have agreed to contribute their site's SFX usage data to help in this regard.

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Back to School—a New Start with bX

Some programs at the University of Plymouth run over the summer, so a number of students enjoyed the bX service right from the beginning of Plymouth's subscription in July, and their reaction was very positive. However, the university's library staff was looking forward to seeing more end users accessing bX as the fall term began in September. The subject librarians at Plymouth planned the autumn roll-out activities for new and returning students to fully include bX. In addition, the librarians visited faculty members and explained the new bX service to them.

With the 2009-10 academic year underway, University of Plymouth library staff and faculty eagerly await the results of the bX recommendation service in the research of their end users.

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