◆ *Putting Your Vintage Issues Online*

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As many of us consider placing back issues online, it is essential to know what questions to ask vendors and what questions to ask ourselves. First, decide whether your highest priority is competence, speed, service, or price. Then, address the type of final content you seek and what formats that includes or excludes. Finally, establish the scope and timing of the conversion, and determine a budget for the project.

Electronic Format

Because data conversion involves altering data syntax, you must decide what attributes you want most in the final version. PDF with OCR is fast, inexpensive, and generally preferred over HTML for printing. SGML and XML far outweigh the other data technologies in functionality because of their tagging capabilities, but you pay for this benefit in dollars and time. According to David Skurnik, director of sales and marketing at Data Conversion Laboratories, the difference between XML and SGML is more marketing-related than technical, but XML is rapidly becoming the Internet standard and costs slightly less. Skurnik recommends that for XML or SGML conversions you should convert and tag automatically because manual tagging introduces inconsistency.

Consider how quickly you must change and what type of flexibility you need. It is always wise to research your competitors and note which aspects seem to be working and not working for their journals. You should also ask to review a sample of converted files before committing to the full run.

Scope Considerations

It might not be necessary to go back to volume 1, issue 1. To help determine the extent of your conversion, calculate the half-life of your journal and note whether a distinct dropoff occurs in citations. Check what content is available and whether the print archives have any gaps. Sometimes journals select a few seminal papers in the literature for the sake of preserving "the classics", without converting outdated information from the same period. Bill Witscher of HighWire Press has found that most journals maintain a 10% activity level for all their past issues, but that conversions on average have gone back about 10 years, essentially including all issues from the 1990s.

Vendor Selection

You should query several companies for bids and compare the costs and services of the submitted proposals. Be sure to provide the same information and samples to each vendor. You will have to prepare a portfolio, including a brief history of the publication, the number of subscribers, the estimated number of pages per issue, a description of the subject matter, and a realistic timeline. If you make any alterations, communicate them to all vendors. Remember to thank the companies for their time and energy, especially those who did not win the bid.

Budget

Bids will probably vary widely; in fact, one comparison found a 34-fold difference in price ($35,000-1,200,000) based on the same information. You should look closely at what the vendors are offering for the different costs; some of the lower bids might not include all the incidental costs, which you will nevertheless pay. Estimated costs should include preliminary work, the actual conversion (per-page or per-article price), quality control, and postconversion work. Typically journals require extensive searching capabilities, so be sure this feature is included in the bid. Other expenses, such as storage costs or graphics fees, can also be relevant. Relative costs for the various formats can range from $0.25 to $3 per page for TIFF or PDF, from $2 to $5 per page for HTML, and from $2 to $8 per page for XML or SGML.

Tradeoffs exist, but you can select the appropriate vendor and format with confidence if you understand the needs of your journal's readers.