



ReadersFirst Guide to Library E-Book Vendors

Giving librarians the knowledge to be more effective
e-book providers

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ReadersFirst: Who Are We?

We are 292 library systems (and growing!) representing nearly 200 million readers. We are a movement to improve e-book access and services for public library users. Libraries have a responsibility to fight for the public and ensure that users have the same open, easy, and free access to e-books that they have come to rely on with physical books. Libraries face major challenges in this effort. The most obvious obstacle is that the products currently offered by e-content distributors, the middlemen from whom libraries buy e-books, create a fragmented, disjointed, and cumbersome user experience. ReadersFirst aims to overcome this challenge.

ReadersFirst Guide to Library E-Book Vendors: What You'll Find Here

This guide will be especially useful for libraries that do not yet offer e-books, helping them identify library e-book vendors through an objective rating of how well those vendors' products make the e-book experience seamless for readers, while also being responsive to the needs of libraries through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs—see the **Glossary** for definitions of terminology). The ReadersFirst Guide should also be useful for libraries looking to expand their e-content holdings. How do their current vendors stack up with the competition? Librarians can support the vendors that improve that experience. We also hope that the ReadersFirst Guide will prove useful for e-book vendors, helping them to understand the needs of libraries so they can better partner with their customers. Both librarians and e-book vendors have a stake in making content easily and freely available. The **ReadersFirst Guide to Library E-Book Vendors** can help bring them together to put the READER FIRST.

The ReadersFirst Guide: Our Goal

Our aim is to give librarians the knowledge to be **more effective e-book providers**. We also hope this guide will be an advocacy tool, moving the library e-book experience into alignment with our Four Key Principles. ReadersFirst, in creating this guide and pursuing our other work, strives to give public libraries everywhere a clearer path toward improving the e-book experience.

ReadersFirst: Four Key Principles

ReadersFirst calls upon publishers and e-book vendors to observe **Four Key Principles** to enhance the library e-book reading experience, allowing readers to:

1. Search one comprehensive catalog to access all of a library's offerings
2. Place holds, check out and renew items, view availability, manage fines, and receive communications within the single source the library has determined will serve their users best (website, catalog, or other)
3. Seamlessly enjoy a variety of e-content
4. Download e-books that are compatible with all reading devices

An Explanation of the Scoring System

The Vendor Product Evaluation Form is the basis for our assessment of vendors. The form has 37 categories; although all 37 are important for evaluating compliance with ReadersFirst principles, inevitably some are more important than others. For example, in the first section of the Evaluation Form, the ability to authenticate patrons from the library’s own system without a separate log-in to a vendor site is vital for creating a seamless user experience and, even more importantly, for compliance. For example, not requiring a separate log-in trumps whether requirements exist for the display of item records.

ReadersFirst has thus developed a ranking scale. Our scoring system is on a scale of 0–100, with 100 being the top score.

Because all categories are important, each of them is given a base rating (2.5 points per category) to formulate the final rating. 15 categories are given a slightly higher weight (3 points per category) to reflect their greater impact. It should be noted that scores, when possible and appropriate, reflect what readers can do via an API. Therefore, vendors might not earn scores for services that they currently offer to readers who log in separately through the vendor’s website or another portal. To summarize, a score reflects how compliant vendors are with ReadersFirst principles in seven areas: general terms and conditions, metadata, circulation, patron accounts, patron notifications, formats, and administrative reporting. Whenever possible, scoring is done whether or not an API is in place to streamline transactions.

ADA Concerns

ReadersFirst supports making all library e-book vendor websites and products (and library websites too, for that matter) fully ADA accessible. However, independently assessing compliance with this goal is currently beyond our capacity. In future updates of the ReadersFirst Guide, we hope to add an objective assessment of how well vendors are meeting these needs.

Vendor Matrix

PRODUCT	READERSFIRST COMPLIANCE SCORE	API INTEGRATION	PLANNED API INTEGRATION	ILS/DISCOVERY PRODUCT COMPATIBILITY
Baker & Taylor Axis 360	80	– Search – Availability – Circulation* – Account	*Suspend hold 2014 Q1	Polaris SirsiDynix TLC
EBSCO eBooks	38	None	Availability 2014 Q2; Circulation 2014 Q2	None
Gale Virtual Reference Library	39	None	None	None
Ingram MyiLibrary	49	None	Circulation 2014 Q1; Account 2014 Q1	
OverDrive	85	– Search – Availability – Circulation – Account		Innovative Interfaces Polaris SirsiDynix TLC
ProQuest ebrary	30	None	None	None
3M Cloud Library	84	– Search – Availability – Circulation – Account		BiblioCommons Innovative Interfaces Polaris SirsiDynix

Vendor Assessments

Baker & Taylor Axis 360

Axis 360 is a cloud-based e-content platform for school and public libraries covering a range of e-readers that can download ePub, PDF, or Blio formats. The collection includes primarily popular titles. The discovery and use of e-books and e-audios are through Axis 360, but ILS integration is feasible. Axis 360 has multiple external access methods (APIs, web services), including circulation and holds. Representatives understand the value and purpose of ReadersFirst's requirements and have proven committed to aligning with them.

OVERALL	GENERAL	METADATA	CIRCULATION	PATRON ACCOUNTS	PATRON NOTIFICATIONS	E-CONTENT FORMAT	ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING
80	19.5	21.5	14	9	2.5	6	7.5

EBSCO eBooks

EBSCO eBooks is a web-based proprietary platform for academic, school, and public libraries offering online and downloadable e-books. The collection includes academic content, popular fiction, medical collections, and more. The discovery and use of e-books is achieved through the EBSCOhost interface. EBSCOhost has no external access methods (APIs or web services), but expects to offer these by the end of the second quarter of 2014. Representatives seem to understand the value and purpose of ReadersFirst's requirements and have expressed a commitment to aligning with them.

Discovery methods appear to be limited to the traditional method of loading MARC records into the library catalog. Content is available in open formats, including ePUB, PDF, and HTML.

OVERALL	GENERAL	METADATA	CIRCULATION	PATRON ACCOUNTS	PATRON NOTIFICATIONS	E-CONTENT FORMAT	ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING
38	16.5	13	0	0	5	3	0

Gale Virtual Reference Library

Cengage Learning has a catalog of over 5,000 titles in its Gale Virtual Reference Library product (GVRL). The content is academic in nature and Gale has expressed no future plans to offer popular reading material. The product follows a reference model, not a circulating model, so patrons do not check out or download titles, but rather use the GVRL interface to search through texts in either single volumes or subject categories of titles, or across all titles in an institutional collection. In simpler terms, GVRL acts more like a standard database than a circulating e-book platform. All titles in an institution's GVRL collection are available for unlimited use, so more than one patron can access a particular work at the same time. GVRL's non-circulating setup excluded it from meaningful analysis under the circulating and patron account-related sections of the Vendor Product Evaluation Form. Nevertheless, Cengage Learning's positive responses to the metadata requirements are commendable.

OVERALL	GENERAL	METADATA	CIRCULATION	PATRON ACCOUNTS	PATRON NOTIFICATIONS	E-CONTENT FORMAT	ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING
36	11.5	10.5	3	0	0	3	7.5

Ingram MyiLibrary

MyiLibrary is a cloud-based e-content platform for school, academic, professional, and public libraries. Available in ePub and PDF formats, e-books can be viewed online via the MyiLibrary Online Viewer or downloaded onto non-proprietary e-readers capable of handling these formats. MyiLibrary currently has no external access methods (APIs, web services, etc.), but does have plans to develop integration options for circulation and account services with an expected availability of 2014 Q1. MyiLibrary can provide access using several authentication methods and offers interlibrary “e-loans.” Representatives seem to understand the value and purpose of ReadersFirst’s requirements and have expressed a commitment to aligning with them.

OVERALL	GENERAL	METADATA	CIRCULATION	PATRON ACCOUNTS	PATRON NOTIFICATIONS	E-CONTENT FORMAT	ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING
49	11	19	0	0	2.5	6	10

OverDrive

OverDrive has recently made strides with APIs that work in open-source platforms. APIs are now offered that enable library-authenticated patrons to: search and display catalog information (including copies available and the number of holds); circulate titles; place or cancel holds; view what they have checked out; and return items. APIs do not yet exist to allow patrons to change their library card numbers. However, library staff can move customers in loan queues, remove titles from hold queues, and reactivate missed loans. Furthermore, API pilots are in place with Innovative Interfaces, Inc. (III), The Library Corporation (TLC), SirsiDynix, and, more recently, Polaris. Otherwise, access to content is available solely through OverDrive’s website or its proprietary app. OverDrive is notable for providing titles in Kindle format, although users of this format are directed away from OverDrive’s site (and from any library’s site) to Amazon.

One contact term to note: individual libraries currently have access to titles from Macmillan and Hachette that consortial buyers do not enjoy, but this is a publisher restriction and not an OverDrive issue.

Discussions with OverDrive have been fruitful. Their representatives understand ReadersFirst principles and have committed to improving their RF score. If their API pilots are successful and can be extended to all ILS vendors to permit seamless access directly from libraries, OverDrive will be among the leaders in ReadersFirst compliance.

OVERALL	GENERAL	METADATA	CIRCULATION	PATRON ACCOUNTS	PATRON NOTIFICATIONS	E-CONTENT FORMAT	ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING
85	19.5	21.5	14	6	5	6	12.5

ProQuest ebrary

ProQuest's ebrary is a proprietary web-based service offering content for academic, high school, public, corporate, and government libraries. At the time of writing, over 680,000 titles are offered. Titles are nearly all non-fiction and are better suited to research and study, office use, and career development, as well as for lifelong learning in cookery, health and wellness, parenting, and pet care, rather than as leisure reading. E-books may be accessed via apps for Android or iOS devices with Adobe ID authorization, but ebrary is optimized for use via computer and browser. Accessing a title through a library catalog will open ebrary QuickView, without the need for separate software. QuickView allows the user to highlight, take notes, copy into word processing with automatic citations, print, search other ebrary and online resources, and export citations that can be managed via RefWorks or EndNote. Simultaneous access by customers to many titles (although not all titles—buying models are complex) and the heavy emphasis on research make this product more like a traditional database than a circulating e-book collection.

Two factors—the lack of APIs and the consequent inability of other discovery methods to access content and manage accounts—result in a relatively low score currently, but it should be remembered that ProQuest ebrary's different emphasis precludes it from meaningful analysis in many categories. ProQuest does understand ReadersFirst principles and has committed to aligning with them, first through in-house ProQuest products and eventually through third-party vendors.

OVERALL	GENERAL	METADATA	CIRCULATION	PATRON ACCOUNTS	PATRON NOTIFICATIONS	E-CONTENT FORMAT	ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING
30	6	13	0	0	0	3	7.5

3M Cloud Library

3M Cloud Library is one of the library e-book platforms most compliant with ReadersFirst principles. 3M provides metadata, MARC records, and APIs that allow for integration with ILS systems and discovery services, or with individual library developers. 3M provides APIs which allow for: search; display of metadata and merging of records from multiple content suppliers; item and account status; and circulation functions, including checkout, download, and place/cancel/suspend holds. 3M Cloud Library does not currently offer the ability to change a patron's barcode number, reorder the holds queue, or report the number of searches per title. Digital Rights Management (DRM) is handled using a back-end Adobe scheme so that the only identifying information a patron needs for access is their library card number and (optional) PIN—there is no need for a separate Adobe ID and password. E-books must be accessed via 3M Cloud Library apps for all major platforms (Android, iOS, Kindle Fire, Mac, PC) and can be sideloaded onto dedicated e-readers (except for the Kindle E Ink reader).

While libraries with the resources to create their own interface for discovery and lending of e-books may see a ReadersFirst-compliant experience, libraries that rely on third-party vendors (i.e., ILS systems like Polaris, III, or BiblioCommons) to provide access will see a restriction. 3M's APIs work with these vendors, but libraries using them are contractually obligated to have content opened and consumed in 3M's proprietary Cloud Library application. There is no way for the reader to see content without also seeing 3M branding.

OVERALL	GENERAL	METADATA	CIRCULATION	PATRON ACCOUNTS	PATRON NOTIFICATIONS	E-CONTENT FORMAT	ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING
84	19.5	21.5	16.5	8.5	5	3	10

Vendor Product Evaluation Form

Explanation

The Vendor Product Evaluation Form was sent to the e-content providers in our guide. After they reported back, we followed up with questions for clarification. The form is divided into seven parts: A) General Terms & Conditions; B) Item Metadata; C) Circulation Transactions; D) Patron Account Information; E) Patron Notifications; F) E-Content Format; G) Administrative Reporting & Support. We are seeking a detailed picture of how well the vendor creates a seamless reader experience and how well the vendor responds to library needs. Below is a basic explanation of the form's content and aims.

General Terms & Conditions considers the ease-of-use and openness of a vendor's content delivery system. Can users directly authenticate through their library system without being redirected to another log-in screen on the vendor's website? Can libraries freely use enhancements—such as cover art, series information, and user reviews—in their catalogs? Does the vendor place few and only reasonable limits on user activity (simultaneous users, length of visit)? Can items be displayed without any restrictions? Does the vendor offer technical support directly to users?

The **Item Metadata** section rates how well readers can search for and identify items. Do vendors provide brief records and MARC to libraries? Do they provide enrichments like cover art and user reviews? Do they show item availability? Can a reader see how long the holds queue is? Are the language, format, and audience (adult, teen, child) clear? Is there a time stamp on areas that might change (i.e., number of holds), allowing titles to display instantly and accurately? Are the records described in enough detail to identify and merge different types of records (e-book, e-audiobook, print) from different vendors under one title?

The **Circulation Transactions** portion measures how effectively readers can borrow and return content. They should be able to place a hold, check out and obtain an item, return it before it expires, cancel a hold, suspend a hold until a later time, and get the first available copy of an item in the format of their choice regardless of vendor.

Patron Account Information rates how well readers can get information about their borrowed items. They should be able to see their holds, including title, queue position, and estimated wait time all at once. They should see the number of items they have checked out, with title and expiration date. They should know how many holds and checked-out items they have remaining. They should be able to check and readily change any personal data, like e-mail address and check-out period preferences.

Patron Notifications investigates if libraries can control and change the content and timing of notifications sent to their readers. Vendors should not require that their content, links, or branding appear in the notifications.

E-Content Format discovers if content is available in open formats. It shouldn't be displayed only through a vendor's proprietary format. For example, a vendor might offer titles in .MOBI (Kindle) format, but it should also offer the same content in ONIX, ePub, or PDF.

A vendor's **Administrative Reporting & Support** should allow libraries to support their readers and create informative reports. Can library staff change reader authentication information, such as library barcode, by themselves? Can staff re-order the holds queue? Can the library see the number of items borrowed (including title, subject, language, device, format, and day and time of borrowing)? Are libraries able to see the number of holds, per subject and genre, as well as by day and month? Can we see the number of searches per title? How about the top searches? The number of unique customers and site visits? Can we review the site traffic?

ReadersFirst Vendor Product Evaluation Form

Vendor _____

Date of Evaluation _____
MONTH DATE YEAR

Product _____

Percentage RF Compliance Score _____

A	GENERAL TERMS & CONDITIONS	YES / NO	WEIGHT	SCORE	QUESTIONS / COMMENTS
1	Use and/or sublicense external access methods to third parties under contract to customer		2.5		
2	Store and index metadata related to items owned or licensed by customer		2.5		
3	Accept authenticated patrons from the library's account management system without requiring a separate login by the patron		3		
4	Freedom to choose item enhancement data from a chosen provider, and to use that data in the presentation and display of item records in an external environment (e.g., cover art, series information, reviews, and summaries)		3		
5	Limits on programmatic access methods restricted to those that protect performance, security, and stability of the service (including time of day, frequency, and size limits)		3		
6	No requirements or restrictions on the display of item records		2.5		
7	Direct support for troubleshooting technical issues		3		
B	ITEM METADATA <i>The service must provide methods to allow customers to perform batch exports and real-time querying of metadata for all items licensed or purchased by the customer. Data should include:</i>	YES / NO	WEIGHT	SCORE	QUESTIONS / COMMENTS
8	Standard bibliographic metadata (brief record—and additional MARC, where available)		2.5		
9	Enriched content, where available (e.g., cover art, front matter, table of contents)		2.5		
10	Current item availability-for-checkout or hold-ready status		3		
11	Holds queue length for each title		2.5		
12	Title/copy unique identifier		2.5		
13	Language, format, and intended audience of item		2.5		
14	Timestamp information related to changes of volatile metadata to allow for retrieval of metadata for new or changed items (e.g., item acquisition, item availability, number of copies, number of holds)		3		
15	Provide metadata that allows discovery mechanism to merge records from multiple content suppliers under one title/ISBN for the purpose of discovery		3		
C	CIRCULATION TRANSACTIONS <i>The service must provide methods that allow programmatic access for approved external services to securely perform circulation transactions on behalf of the patron and wholly within the environment of the external service. Circulation transactions include:</i>	YES / NO	WEIGHT	SCORE	QUESTIONS / COMMENTS
16	Place a hold		3		
17	Check out an item		3		
18	Download an item		3		
19	Return an item prior to expiration date		2.5		
20	Cancel a hold/request		2.5		
21	Suspend a hold/request		2.5		
22	Retrieval of the first available copy of a title across multiple content providers		2.5		

D	PATRON ACCOUNT INFORMATION <i>The service must provide methods that allow programmatic access for approved external services to securely query, return, and display information about a patron's account and current borrowing activity, including:</i>	YES / NO	WEIGHT	SCORE	QUESTIONS / COMMENTS
23	Current number of and details about holds/requests, including titles, queue position, and expiration dates		3		
24	Number of holds and checkouts remaining, including maximum and remaining holds and loans (if applicable)		3		
25	Any other patron data stored by the vendor, such as e-mail address and notification preferences		3		
26	Estimated wait time for items on hold		2.5		
E	PATRON NOTIFICATIONS <i>The service must allow customers to select and customize the delivery, content, and timing of notifications to their patrons regarding availability of requested or held items, expiration of borrowed content, and other communications.</i>	YES / NO	WEIGHT	SCORE	QUESTIONS / COMMENTS
27	Libraries can customize message content and timing of notification delivery to patrons.		2.5		
28	There must be no requirements that any vendor-provided content, links, or branding appear in notifications to library patrons.		2.5		
F	E-CONTENT FORMAT	YES / NO	WEIGHT	SCORE	QUESTIONS / COMMENTS
29	E-content available in open formats (ONIX, ePub, PDF, HTML5)		3		
30	Not required to display e-content through proprietary apps		3		
G	ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING & SUPPORT <i>The service must provide robust reporting options as well as tools that allow the library to support the patron.</i>	YES / NO	WEIGHT	SCORE	QUESTIONS / COMMENTS
31	Provide ability for library staff to change/update patron authentication information (e.g., barcode number) as needed		2.5		
32	Provide ability for library staff to re-order the holds queue if required for patron support		2.5		
33	Provide statistics on number of items borrowed (including by title, subject, genre, language; library; day, month; device, application, format; top titles borrowed)		2.5		
34	Provide statistics on holds per item, per subject/genre, by day/month		2.5		
35	Provide statistics on number of searches per title and top searches		2.5		
36	Provide statistics on number of unique customers		2.5		
37	Provide statistics on site traffic		2.5		
	SCORE		100		

Glossary

API (Application program interface)

A set of procedures, rules, and tools for creating a software application—the building blocks that a programmer uses to create software. The more complete the API, the more the programmer can do.

Application

A program or group of programs designed for an end user. Applications software includes database programs, word processors, etc.

Application services

An application interface that allows organizations to share data without having access to each other's IT systems (behind the firewall); also known as web services

Authentication

The process of identifying users, usually through a username/password or a library card number

Cloud-based platform

Software that is made available to users—on demand—through the Internet via a service provider

Digital products/digital goods

A general term that is used to describe any product stored, delivered, and used in its electronic format (e-books, e-audio, e-video, e-music)

DRM (Digital Rights Management)

A system for protecting the copyrights of data circulated via the Internet or other digital media by enabling secure distribution and/or disabling illegal distribution of the data. Usually the data is encrypted and is only accessible to authorized users. The data may be watermarked so that it cannot be readily shared.

Firewall

A system designed to block unwanted access to or from a private network. This can be hardware, software, or a combination of the two.

Metadata

Describes how and when and by whom a set of data was collected and how that data was formatted. Metadata can also help with discovery and identification (title, author, subjects, etc.).

Non-transferrable

The contract holder (licensee) cannot assign or convey the license agreement to another party without the licensor's consent.

Web-based platform

Applications designed to run on the Web that are independent of a user's computer operating system

Web services

An application interface that allows organizations to share data without having access to each other's IT systems (behind the firewall); also known as application services

User Stories

To complement the technical requirements prioritization that ReadersFirst members participated in (February 2013), members were additionally encouraged to contribute user stories as a way of animating the importance of these requirements as related to specific tasks and actions undertaken as a routine part of the e-lending experience in public libraries, whether from the point of view of patrons, library staff members, or vendors. ReadersFirst asked contributors to send user stories around three main themes: discovery, patron accounts, and staff activities. The user story technique is borrowed from agile software development methodology, in which to reach optimal development of functionality in new products and the latest upgrades to established products, software developers are encouraged to engage the potential uses of a system from the end-user perspective. User stories are short and quickly put together, and avoid overly formalized approaches to simple needs. We have included various user stories submitted by RF members below.

WHAT WE'RE HEARING, WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

AS A . . .	I WANT TO . . .	SO I CAN . . .
Library patron	discover e-content in the library's catalog	discover all of the library's offerings (e.g., all content formats)
Library patron	search the entirety of the library's offerings from any search function presented to me, including the one in my e-reader	discover everything the library has to offer and learn about offerings that may appeal to me, even though I did not seek them out
Library patron	find all of my checked-out and on-hold materials (including all print, electronic, audio, etc.) in a single account	easily manage my library lending activities
Library patron	check out e-content using the same login as I use for other library activities and account management	access all of the library's resources without dealing with multiple accounts (e.g., tracking multiple user names and passwords)
Library staff member	merge titles from multiple e-content vendors into a single bibliographic record with a single holds queue	optimize the use of collections through a single record and prevent patron holds from clustering around the most easily found title (i.e., the one that appears first)
Selector/acquisitions staff member	order an additional copy of an existing e-title from any vendor and have it linked to the single existing bib record in the library's ILS	fill additional holds or meet anticipated growth in demand (e.g., an author appearance)
Cataloger	link any additional e-title to the existing bib record that I have already created in my catalog	avoid creating unnecessary duplicate records and manage the bibliographic data for e-titles in a single record, both in my ILS and in OCLC
Collection management librarian	designate specific copies of e-titles into different loan/patron-type parameters (e.g., "of 5 copies of this title: 3 copies regular 3-week loan and 2 copies non-reservable 2-week loan" or "3 copies Young Adult and 2 copies Adult")	maximize promotional opportunities, target specific communities, and maximize available copy usage
Customer service staff member	Bump up a patron in a holds queue when their original position has been compromised	resolve the patron's issue quickly and responsibly

WHAT WE'RE HEARING, WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

AS A . . .	I WANT TO . . .	SO I CAN . . .
Library patron	locate e-content services in the language of my choice where the library provides a bilingual or multilingual interface	access my materials
Library patron	access open formats	access library content on the device of my choice
Library patron	use one e-reading app/software to read all of my library and purchased content, or be able to access my e-content on all of my devices, including tablets, phones, computers, and dedicated e-readers	have a seamless e-reading experience
Library patron	customize the notifications I receive about my library materials, including by the ability to specify the timeframes for receipt of notifications for available e-book holds and expirations	choose to receive the information that is relevant to me and have the option to opt out of marketing
Library patron	see how many more items I am allowed to check out in my account if check-out limits are implemented	efficiently and easily manage my account
Library patron	see due/expiration dates for e-content in my account and have this collated with my other checked-out items	efficiently and easily manage my account
Library patron	check items back in early when I'm done with them	manage my account and maximize my checked-out items
Library patron	be able to pause my requests when I am on vacation so I don't miss out on my materials	manage my account effectively
Library patron	view my position in the holds queue (or estimated time until I'm able to borrow) for requested e-content, along with the status of all other library materials that I have on hold	determine when I will be able to access the requested material
Collection management librarian	view reports (circulation, holds, acquisitions, new titles, weeding, etc.) on e-content in the same environment or format as the reports I receive on the rest of the library's collection	analyze collection performance as a whole and responsibly allocate budget dollars as the focus shifts between formats
Web services librarian	track site traffic for collections (analytics)	improve site design

Background: How the ReadersFirst Guide Was Developed

Some six years ago, a combination of improving technology, greater selection of titles, marketing, and reader acceptance created what had long been forecast without ever arriving—a viable e-book market. Since then, libraries have experienced increasing demand for e-content. Pew Research Institute reported that in late 2012, 33% of Americans 16 years of age or older owned a dedicated e-reader device or tablet. The number of e-book borrowers in libraries increased from 3% to 5% during 2012. Public awareness that libraries offer e-books rose from 24% to 31%. While most libraries' e-book circulation is still small compared to print circulation, annual growth is often two or three times higher each year, while print circulation remains flat or is shrinking. It is clear that the demand for library e-books is only going to grow. E-books will become an integral part of libraries' democratic mission: we must develop strategies to get content to all of our users, making sure access to content is not restricted by a reader's ability to pay.

In spite of the e-book explosion, or perhaps in part because of it, the library e-book experience is not always a pleasant one for readers. At least one irritant is out of the direct control of librarians: a great deal of content, and even some very popular content, is unavailable to libraries electronically. Librarians and the vendors that serve libraries unanimously decry the failure of publishers to provide content (or, when they do provide content, to provide it at reasonable prices). Some progress is being made, but much work remains to be done. Libraries must guarantee that e-book users are provided with free and open access to the same variety of information and content that print users enjoy.

Other problems have impaired the library e-book experience—problems more amenable to our influence. Getting content can be complicated and cumbersome, involving many steps that do not always work. Troubleshooting can be difficult for readers and the librarians supporting them. Vendors have made some efforts to streamline the process, although the need to operate in various formats, often protected by Digital Rights Management technologies, has made progress difficult. The growth of the library e-book market has attracted more and more vendors, all of them eager for a share of the pie and each of them creating their own sites and APIs (application programming interfaces), the protocol for finding, checking out, and obtaining content. (See Glossary for definitions of terminology.)

To get content, library users must navigate away from a library's chosen source for information (catalog or website) to a vendor site. Once there, they have to search for content, perhaps visiting other vendor sites if the desired content isn't available where they started out. If they succeed in finding the content they want, it's possible that it's not available in the format that their device uses. Additionally, there is no single place to track the e-content they have on hold. This is the often complex process of getting titles—a process that can vary from vendor to vendor. For the library user, the experience is fragmented and, for some users, hopelessly complicated and frustrating.

Four Key Principles

To ameliorate these issues, librarians have organized ReadersFirst—292 library systems (and growing!) representing 199 million readers. We call upon publishers and e-book vendors to observe Four Key Principles to enhance the library e-book reading experience, allowing readers to:

1. Search one comprehensive catalog to access all of a library's offerings
2. Place holds, check out and renew items, view availability, manage fines, and receive communications within the single source the library has determined will serve their users best (website, catalog, or other)
3. Seamlessly enjoy a variety of e-content
4. Download e-books that are compatible with all reading devices

Readers should not have to visit multiple sites to view all of a library's holdings. Each library should be in control of the single interface its readers use to discover titles. Users should be able to search, get content, place holds, and track everything they have reserved in one place. And librarians, with the permission of the user, should be able to see all of that information and be able to assist the user with it. Libraries should be able to provide e-book content in any format of their choice and on any platform of their choice. Getting and enjoying content should be easy and seamless for all e-book users, not just for those with expert knowledge. Library e-book users should have access to any title that is available to the public, and at a reasonable cost to the library. We call upon vendors to assist us as we seek to bridge the ever-increasing digital divide—to guarantee the right to read for all library users, providing democratic access to information for all, without regard to economic status.

One of ReadersFirst's initial goals was to produce this Guide to Library E-Book Vendors. Our aim is to give librarians the knowledge they need to be more effective e-book providers. We hope the guide will be especially useful for libraries that do not yet offer e-books. But all readers of the guide will learn about specific library e-book vendors, each of them rated objectively on how well their products make the e-book experience seamless for readers and responsive to library needs through APIs. The guide should also be useful for libraries looking to expand their e-content holdings. How do the vendors they are considering stack up with their current vendors and with the competition? We also hope the guide will be an advocacy tool, moving the library e-book experience into alignment with our Four Key Principles. Libraries will now have a path toward improving the e-book experience. Librarians can support the vendors that improve that experience. Furthermore, we hope that the guide will prove useful for e-book vendors, helping them to better understand the needs of libraries so that they can partner more effectively with their customers. Both librarians and e-book vendors have a stake in making content easily and freely available. The **ReadersFirst Guide to Library E-Book Vendors** can help bring them together to put the READER FIRST.

Part II

Once it was decided to put together the Guide to Library E-Book Vendors, two questions needed to be answered: how to build the guide?; and, what kinds of information should it incorporate? The process needed to be inclusive, with the guide accurately representing the opinions and experiences of the ReadersFirst membership. The guide would not be a widely used tool if it did not reflect the beliefs, visions, and day-to-day experiences (and frustrations) of the many librarians in the field.

In November 2012, the ReadersFirst Working Group distributed the Content Access Requirements, a unified first effort for public libraries to spell out—from their point of view—which technical requisites were essential for an effective e-lending experience. At the following American Library Association Midwinter Meeting in January, ReadersFirst shared this document with vendors and other interested groups at the ReadersFirst Vendor Roundtable. Participants at the event requested that ReadersFirst members prioritize the requirements, thereby enabling vendors to more effectively organize and schedule new product development to align with the higher priorities. To accomplish this, Working Group members individually ranked the requirements according to the e-lending experiences of their respective institutions. When voting, members rated not only the specific requirements but, additionally, the importance of the overall categories. To complement the new rankings, RF Working Group members gathered user stories to communicate to product and enhancement developers why particular functionalities were crucial to guaranteeing an accessible e-lending experience for library users.

In April 2013, following the prioritization of the requirements, ReadersFirst developed the Vendor Product Evaluation Form, and the form was distributed to different vendors the next month. (See p. 8 for an explanation of the form and pp. 9–10 for a sample form.) RF Working Group members organized into groups to support the vendors one-on-one, assisting them as they filled out the form and answering any questions they had about terminology or a specific requirement. Vendors returned the completed forms to ReadersFirst, and RF Working Group members scheduled conference calls with them to discuss the finished evaluations. After the vendors' questions were answered, the completed evaluation forms were used to create the final vendor scores, which served as the building blocks of the vendor assessments included in this guide.

To create the published edition, the RF Working Group broke into three subgroups: content, communication, and sustainability. The content group was responsible for writing up the guide as well as for turning the vendor scores into easily understood and useful written assessments. The communication group presented plans for distributing and promoting the guide once it was published. The sustainability group was charged with developing plans for accepting vendor and member feedback, updating vendor and product information as new developments are released, and working with new vendors and new products. As one can see, the **ReadersFirst Guide to Library E-Book Vendors** was made possible by the efforts of many people.

Credits

The ReadersFirst Guide to Library E-Book Vendors is a collaborative project of the following professionals:

Michael Blackwell, Columbus Metropolitan Library
Christina de Castell, Vancouver Public Library
Jennifer Ferriss, Southern Adirondack Library System
Thomas Lide, Richland Library
Sam Rubin, The New York Public Library
Michael Santangelo, BookOps

Additional work has been contributed by the following members of the ReadersFirst Leadership Working Group:

Art Brodsky, Montgomery County Public Libraries
Andrew Harbison, Seattle Public Library
Jim Loter, Seattle Public Library
Micah May, The New York Public Library
Christopher Platt, BookOps
Jamie Wilson, Free Library of Philadelphia
Megan Wong, Santa Clara County Library
Rachel Wood, Arlington Public Library

Check out our website at readersfirst.org for additional information as well as updates and news.

For questions and comments, please contact getinvolved@readersfirst.org.

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