Refining the A-Z Database List

Vendor-Specific Titles

In the Fall of 2015, Memorial Library, via Galileo, added a significant number of ProQuest databases to its existing list. Some of these ProQuest resources presented a potential discovery issue for library users. While many ProQuest products are given stand-alone titles – *Banking Information Source, Biological Sciences*, and *LION* would be good examples – others simply append the ProQuest name to a broad subject area – *ProQuest Computing, ProQuest Religion*, and *ProQuest Sociology* would be examples of these. The former titles present little difficulty for the A-Z list. They suggest appropriate subject areas, while fitting naturally into the alphabetical framework. But the latter titles caused us to wonder, “How likely would our users be to search for a database by vendor?”

In order to address this potential discovery issue, Memorial Library enlisted sixteen members of its student-work staff as a target group. The target group was asked to perform a research operation using an appropriate subject-specific database. The steps followed by each group member were individually observed and noted. Roughly 43% of respondents made their initial database selection directly from the A-Z list – scrolling to the “Ss,” for instance, in order to discover sociology databases. The other 57% utilized somewhat more complex strategies, selecting by discipline from the “subject” drop-down menu and/or using the search box to narrow choices. This suggests that 43% of respondents would never identify *ProQuest Sociology*, say, as a database choice, because it wouldn’t appear in the “S” range.

As a follow-up, a brief card sort exercise was given to the same group of respondents. Each card contained the name of a database and a description, much as they would appear on an A-Z list. While several alternative subject areas were used, the card sort followed the pattern below…

- Subject Alone, i.e. *Sociology*
- ProQuest Subject, i.e. *ProQuest Sociology*
- Subject from ProQuest, i.e. *Sociology from ProQuest*

Respondents were asked to rank the cards/titles in the order that they’d be most likely to select them, based on their previous search experience. The results are listed below…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rank 1</th>
<th>Rank 2</th>
<th>Rank 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject Alone</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProQuest Subject</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject from ProQuest</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the table suggests, respondents were fairly evenly split on the relative ranking of Subject Alone and ProQuest Subject choices, perhaps reflecting their individual tendencies to search for databases either directly from the A-Z list or from the Subject drop-down menu. While Subject from ProQuest ranked neither high nor low on the overall results, it consistently ranked second among selectors. Subject from ProQuest has the advantage of appealing to both A-Z list searchers and Subject searchers and would be readily identified by either method.

We, therefore, conclude that, while stand-alone titles – Banking Information Source, Biological Sciences, and LION, for instance – continue to be listed according to their product name, those titles incorporating the ProQuest moniker directly be amended to follow the Subject from ProQuest pattern. Titles like ProQuest Computing, ProQuest Religion, and ProQuest Sociology, thus, would be rendered on the A-Z list as Computing from Pro-Quest, Religion from ProQuest, and Sociology from ProQuest, thereby becoming more discoverable by a wider audience of potential users.

While the impetus for this change was prompted by the inclusion of specific ProQuest titles, the rule of thumb could be expanded to any databases following a similar pattern. Exceptions to this rule might include instances where the title of the database is inextricably linked to the provider – as with the Oxford English Dictionary, for example.

To summarize…avoid using the vendor name as the title prefix, unless the provider name is integral to product identification, opting instead for the Subject from Provider pattern.

**Database Descriptions**

Having observed that database descriptions in the A-Z List appeared repetitive and potentially overburdened, a literature review was conducted. Most commentators, including Springshare, suggest that patrons tend to skim resource lists for relevant keywords and subjects, and, therefore, numerical accounts – number of journals indexed for instance – are comparatively unimportant to the immediate needs of those users. As a guideline, the vendor provided descriptions are a good starting point, but they may be customized and abbreviated to better connect with patron selection behavior. Succinct, jargon-free resource descriptions, averaging about two to three sentences in length, are preferred. When creating resource descriptions, therefore, it might be helpful to ask…

How will this database help the user’s research objectives?

Why should the user select this database over another alternative?

As evaluation continues, liaisons may be asked to further address database descriptions for their subject areas.