

Rightslink - Facilitating Publisher Efficiency

Not so long ago, Elsevier's Global Rights Department faced a growing automation challenge. Every month, readers and content buyers submitted more than 3,000 requests for permission to use content from Elsevier's over 2,000 journals. The department's 10-member staff processed each request manually. While some requests involved royalty payments, most were for 'free permissions' - no royalty payment was involved, no revenue was realized, but lots of staff time was expended.

Helen Gainford, Elsevier's Director of Global Rights, understood she had a problem. Somehow she had to drive cost out of the business while making it easier for Elsevier's customers to get the permissions they needed. One solution she knew about was Copyright Clearance Center's Rightslink service, which lets customers place orders online. Once thought of as a service mainly for newspapers, Rightslink had in more recent years attracted the business of major STM publishers.

'When I talk with other publishers and rights organizations, Rightslink invariably comes up,' said Gainford. 'It's become part of the environment; it's become a standard. So many people are using it that a lot of our customers were accustomed to Rightslink. They already had a Rightslink account, so it was no adjustment for them to use it.'

Indeed, Rightslink is now in use by a large number of STM publishers. In addition to Elsevier, which launched its Rightslink-powered permissions service in April 2007, CCC's customers include Springer, Taylor & Francis, The Journal of Bone & Joint Surgery, Oxford University Press, Nature Publishing Group, The University of Chicago Press, Blackwell Publishing and BMJ Publishing Group. In addition, Cambridge University Press, the American Psychological Association, Emerald, Mary Ann Liebert and the Mayo Clinic also have just implemented Rightslink.

In all, Rightslink is now in use on more than 11,000 journal, magazine and newspaper titles, as well as thousands of books. STM journals now represent by far the largest segment of the permissions revenue generated by the service.

Since going live at Elsevier in May 2007, Rightslink has performed well, according to Gainford. Elsevier journal subscribers are placing thousands of permissions requests a month through the service, which frees her department to focus on those high-value requests or projects that require personal attention. Most permission requests come directly through ScienceDirect, which has more than 8 million articles online from more than 2,000 peer-reviewed journals.

‘We were amazed at how quickly Rightslink took off,’ said Gainford. ‘Our customers readily accepted it. We had a few who objected at first, but we walked them through it and most of them have told us they now prefer using it.’

One benefit has been speed. Previously, Elsevier’s customers had to file their requests with the rights department by phone or email. They had to provide detailed information not only about themselves and the nature of their request, but also about the content they wanted to use. Frequently, their requests were incomplete or inaccurate, requiring staff to ask for more details. As a consequence, most permissions - even free ones - took about 10 days to process.

But, with Rightslink, customers request permissions by simply clicking on a link on the article. Because the service is integrated with the content itself, it can automatically collect article metadata. Royalties, when required, can be paid immediately by credit card. The result: today, most licenses are issued immediately.

In addition, Elsevier has seen an increase in royalties for its permissions. ‘Rightslink makes it easier to get permissions and has improved our customer service - I think that’s why we’re seeing more royalties,’ said Gainford. ‘If you make licensing easier and respond to customers faster, they are more likely to do it.’

Now Elsevier is poised to expand its use of the service. Starting in May, Rightslink will be used in the e-books division (4,000 titles initially, with 50 more e-books added per month), Major Reference Works (66 encyclopedic works) and Elsevier’s Book Series (nearly 50 titles).

Other publishers say they have had similar experiences after adopting Rightslink. Taylor & Francis, which implemented Rightslink in 2003, reports increased revenues and improved operational efficiencies in a number of areas. In the United States, revenues for author off-prints have increased by approximately 30 percent, while staff time devoted to off-prints has declined by 80 percent. In the U.K., off-prints have gone from being a cost centre to a revenue generator while staff time has decreased by 50 percent. For open access requests, Rightslink has saved Taylor & Francis 30 to 40 staff hours per month, according to the company. Taylor & Francis expects it will increase commercial reprint revenue by 30 percent in the United States.

‘Having Rightslink means that subscribers and nonsubscribers can read the article that they are interested in, click on a link that’s staring them in the face and place their reprint orders without ever leaving the content,’ said Ed Cilurso, Taylor & Francis Production Director, U.S. Journals. ‘This is a huge difference. In the past, if you read an article and you wanted reprints, you had to be a committed customer and seek us out.’

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