Selling in Latin America: challenges and opportunities

In April 2011, Springer opened a new office in São Paulo in response to the tremendous growth in scientific output from Latin American countries. Whilst Springer has been active in Latin America for many years, having a local presence greatly improves the opportunity to work with libraries and institutions to develop products that meet their needs. It also provides an outlet for the significant research output that scientists in the region are producing.

Library Zone spoke to Leon Bolivar (Marketing Manager, Latin America), Maria Lopes, (Vice President of Sales) and Marcio Gama (Licensing Manager) to find out about some of the key opportunities and challenges that this market presents.

What do you think the key challenges are facing the library market in Latin America? Do you think that they differ significantly from the issues experienced by the rest of the world?

There are lots of different challenges facing the library community in Latin America and in many cases these are being experienced in other countries of the world. One that is most regularly discussed is budget. Libraries want to provide access to top quality content, but sometimes feel their purchasing power is restricted due to shrinking budgets and poor exchange rates. At the same time, language presents a challenge and some libraries would like to offer content in their local language (in particular Spanish and Portuguese). They find it hard to convince university rectors and administrators that (scientific) English language content is the industry standard, and that their researchers will be able to use it.

Another key challenge is the significant difference in the searching capabilities of researchers. Whilst some are advanced and can easily find what they need, others require more in-depth and on-going training to understand how to use the databases effectively. And of course, such training is crucial to ensure high product usage and good ROI.

With regards to culture, I think we probably experience similar issues to other emerging markets (such as Asia) where language, local customs and overall need for content dictates how we can do business.

How have libraries in this region reacted to eBooks and indeed Springer’s non-journal/book resources such as SpringerImages? Are they using them? Have you faced any particular challenges in encouraging take up of these resources?

The Springer eBook business model is very popular and respected throughout Latin America. Librarians like having perpetual access to content. They particularly like the unlimited usage, free MARC records and access to usage statistics as well as the lack of DRM restrictions.
For Springer’s non-full-text resources, however, it’s been a slow process to achieve market penetration. Although there is some interest, the library budget is limited, and therefore these databases become a lower priority to journals and books.

*Have there been any particular account development initiatives or activities that you have been involved in? How are you growing and supporting the academic library customer base in Latin America?*

Latin America is a place where a phone call or a personal visit is better received than an email. It is a culture where cultivating personal relationships is crucial to being successful. This being the case, we took the time to establish ourselves as trusted business associates who will provide ongoing support after the initial sale is completed. This strategy has proved successful as all the hard work and time dedicated has resulted in winning new customers.

We also make it a point to be part of as many client meetings, conferences, road shows and library days as possible. These events allow us to meet key contacts who we can work with to develop new usage or awareness campaigns at their institutions. In addition to site visits, training days and meeting attendance, our marketing activities include e-mail campaigns to stimulate ROI and creating local language marketing and sales collateral. We have also increased our social media presence.

*How has Open Access been received by Latin American libraries? Have any of your customers participated in the Springer/BioMed Central Open Access Membership Programs to date?*

OpenAccess is being very well received by Latin American libraries, although there is still some misunderstanding amongst libraries as to what Open Access entails and what Springer’s offering is in this area. By way of example, we recently participated in the SCBILLA meeting in Buenos Aires, Argentina (SCBILLA is the Latin American equivalent of ICOLC with library members from across Latin America, the Caribbean, Portugal, Spain and Italy). Maria Lopes (Springer VP of Sales for Latin America) gave a presentation on OpenAccess which attracted various questions such as: What does Springer offer in Open Access? What are the business models? Are there any special offers for consortia?

Although it turned out to be a productive meeting, it highlighted the fact that more work needs to be done to raise awareness of Springer’s Open Access journals, our relationship with BioMed Central as well as the benefits of the Open Access “author pays” model. So far, we have four institutions who are members of Biomed Central’s OpenAccess Program (2 in Brazil, 1 in Mexico and 1 in the West Indies) plus two supporting members in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago. We also have one society member from Brazil.