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Bookseller Sales of Special Reference Sets — What's the Story?

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Reference sets — both in book and CD-ROM format — have grown in importance for publishers, booksellers, and academic libraries. This was demonstrated during 1997 by articles in Publishers Weekly and Library Journal and in presentations at the Charleston Conference. In addition, reference publishers say that they see no downturn and expect their production of reference titles to increase. Despite not the name of the situation, academic libraries continue to buy the books (and to a lesser degree, the CD-ROMs). To meet the increased production and demand, library booksellers have greatly expanded the special sales of reference sets.

The following paragraphs reflect Blackwell's experience and are also indicative of other library booksellers’ efforts. Blackwell's began offering special sales of expensive reference sets to libraries in 1982. Until recently, only a few expensive titles were handled each year, usually in science and technology. However, as more titles appeared and demand increased, Blackwell's and other booksellers expanded the number of titles offered and included titles in the softer sciences and humanities. CD-ROMs, either standalone or combined with books, were added in 1995.

Today Blackwell’s is poised for another large expansion of special reference promotions. In the past, all titles have been handled from the Lake Oswego, Oregon Office. The availability of the Oxford, UK office as well. This provides access to more titles and allows Blackwell’s to offer the best value price for reference works that fit the criteria for coverage. In addition, Blackwell’s specialists, both in the US and UK are working with publishers to get access to more titles. There are still a few reference publishers who do not want to sell through library booksellers. But we are all steadily chipping away at their numbers. The ability to offer the best available price to libraries is an important option for library booksellers and the libraries they serve.

Answer from Savly Trojman, Bowker:

"Future reference publishing will be mostly Web-based, with the best information still at a premium. Video streaming will allow us to see and hear reference material rather than just viewing it in a compiled format."

Answer from Cris Maloney and Jay Johnson, Peterson's:

"Reference users will want more power over their materials in the future, ushered in by the freedom of surfing the Web for information. Students and adults will want access to a lot of pieces of information and will want to arrange them in formations that meet their needs. This means giving reference users the tools to customize and the library information in interactive formats. In a library, this may mean technology access to subscription online services that allow users to search for content, rewrite it, link the source with the main entry text with multi-media (including their own voice-overs), and printing or delivering the end product to their homes, teachers, family in far-off places, offices, or friends.

"Print, however, is here to stay. Print will always be a reliable user-friendly storage device for reference materials — easy on the eyes, portable, immediately accessible without added cost, and tactile. Many end-users only trust what they can touch. And when it comes to narrow-interest titles that don’t warrant big development budgets, print will accommodate the complete gamut of individual reference users and their needs and tastes. That kind of open access of information for all is the cornerstone of our library system and the foundation of reference publishing."

Summary from Angela D'Agostino, Bowker:

"The electronic environment is a natural for reference publishing. The challenge to librarians and publishers is to differentiate between true reference material, which requires significant resources on the part of the publishers to collect and maintain (and therefore requires payment on the part of librarians or consumers), and the ‘fluff’ data posing as reference material which is free because it is supported either by advertising or product sales.

"If we want to maintain the editorial integrity of reference works, I believe we need to avoid the trap of relying on sources of income other than subscriptions in order to support our reference publishing. Ultimately, I think the answer will be on the professional librarian to discern the differences between true reference material and ‘fluff’ and guide patrons to the legitimate resources. Otherwise, much incomplete information or misinformation could find its way into research work."