2003

Inside Pandora's Box -- Thoughts Coming Out of the ALCTS Out-of-Print Discussion Group at ALA-MidWinter: "Not Dead Yet! Out-of-Stock, Out-of-Print and Remainders"

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has been awarded is from his loyal customers and his hard work. His catalogues are mostly online as PDF files but worth receiving and reading, too. I actually had a catalogue (online) waiting for me when I began work at St. Edward’s University. If Michael can find out where I am, he can also find most of that desiderata list that you keep looking for on the Web without really knowing what you might be buying.

With most of our library catalogs online now, the Barney Rosenthal approach can be replicated from the comfort of the bookstore’s back room or wherever the computer is located, so if you find a bookseller whom you like and trust (it will take time), the bookseller can become part of your collection development program and help you acquire those titles you missed the first time around or that weren’t reviewed but became important, if not seminal, works through readership.

The booksellers who I have mentioned, are members of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America. I urge you to visit the ABAA Website (abaa.org), see who belongs, what their specialties are, and lots of other things such as condition (of books) and conditions (of sale) and the ABAA Code of Ethics. We need these independent booksellers who depend on us for their livelihood. And we depend on them to continue to make available to our libraries, the books of the past that we need for our future.

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“remainder” status while in print. Practices differ among publishers and across trade vs academic publishers, but a decision to “remainder” a title is basically an accounting decision based on the fact that there are more copies of a title in the warehouse (or on their way back to the warehouse) than are likely to be sold — potentially by ever.

Remainders houses differ as well, but their basic role is to purchase stock that has been substantially written down and redistribute it for sale at drastically lower prices through stores and online. For trade books, remainders houses increasingly play a role in processing returns as well — again, often at drastically lower prices than the original publisher’s list price.

**Out-of-Stock (OS)**

Out-of-Stock means that the title is out-of-stock with the publisher; at the same time or separately, distributors may be out-of-stock as well or may have stock on the title. As Bob Rooney, from Taylor and Francis, noted, the first time this happens to a title, it’s the publisher’s best friend — it means that demand actually exceeded supply, thereby at least partially funding the vast number of titles for which supply exceeded demand (and those that were remained).

Publishers try to monitor demand and supply, but clearly imbalances will happen. Publishers also try to ensure that demand gets met — it’s in their best business interest — but practices vary as to how well this gets managed. Typically, titles should be able to be brought back in print and available in a three to six week period. This gets quickly messy if there are overseas sourcing issues, printing issues, or other multi-party problems.

**Out-of-Stock Indefinitely (OSI)**

OSI is a status that essentially means that a book is not only out of stock, but that there are no plans to put it back in print. OSI is a legal designation as much as a print run decision — it’s the publisher’s method of holding on to the rights to publish a title instead of having those rights revert back to the author(s) by declaring a book out-of-print.

**Out-of-Print**

An official declaration that a title is so far out of the realm of probability of ever creating sufficient demand that a publisher was willing to give the rights back to the author.

**Technologies**

The advent of digital printing and print-on-demand will have impact over time on the number of titles that go OS (and for what period), OSI and OP. That impact has been much slower than most expected, but other than DVD players such is the course of many recent technology innovations.

The adoption and usage of these new technologies are mitigated by several factors; many of these will be moderated over time, but some will:

- Not all electronic files are made alike.
  Just because there is an electronic copy in some format of a title does not mean it is ready to print, even presence of a PDF file, while a help, doesn’t prepare for all the different potential print methods (or even some of the basics). This will likely change over time, but will be slow and back catalog will present serious questions about level of investment warranted.
- Quality isn’t at offset levels. Particularly for graphically intensive titles, digital print technologies range from adequate to murky. Again, this is in part dependent on the source materials, but also on print quality. This too is likely to improve over time.
- Setup and support costs are not zero. Beyond setting up files, the process of continuing rights management, author management, marketing and distribution are not zero. Thus, publishers have to decide whether it’s worthwhile to continue to invest behind a title even if the print run economics support very short print runs. This issue will always exist.

At the same time, online resource like Alibris have increasingly brought together a wider range of materials (used in print, remainders, OS, OSI and OP titles from global sources) with a broader range of ways to purchase them (directly shipping from the seller, consolidated with purchase orders and invoices, through major distributors and wholesalers). The technologies here are a lot more straightforward, if challenging once you’re dealing with over 30 million books.

**Choices**

One of the more interesting points of conversation and debate was where different librarians handle the “cutoff” on trying to still acquire a title based on its OP/OSI/OSI status, and how they handle resolution after the cutoff.

A wide variety of practices exist regarding when or if to “give up” acquiring a new copy of a title from traditional sources. Some libraries continue to claim OS/OSI titles from distributors/publishers for up to 540 or even 720 days (1.5 to 2 years). Some libraries immediately assume that OP/OSI books are essentially unavailable, and decide to cut their losses on those titles more or less right away, and cancel (as there are plenty of other new books to buy). Some other libraries set a decent mourning period of six months or so before trying to acquire any combination of OS, OSI or OP titles via the relatively new array of reliable secondhand sources.

Practices for acquiring used and/or remaindered products vary as well. Some libraries have staff search across multiple online vendors and manage the purchase, shipping and processing from individual sellers using Websites like Bookfinder or AddAll, or directly on Alibris’ consumer Website, ABE, Amazon.com, Half.com, eBay and other sites. Others use some variety of Alibris Services to manage larger lists themselves or use Alibris’ Library Services staff — some even extract files from their library system monthly and transmit in EDIFACT. Others use partnerships that Blackwell’s, YBP Library Services, Ingram Library Services, Baker & Taylor, Ambassador Books and Media, Franklin Books Company, and Eastern Book Company among others have developed with Alibris to fulfill their needs. Typically, these are made on the basis of availability of staff and desire to minimize systems costs of acquisition (costs such as product, shipping, receiving, processing, invoicing, accounting, and vendor management) versus individual copy costs.

I would invite an activity-based cost approach on an independent basis to the assessment of these alternatives — it would be instructive for all involved.

**Column Editor’s Note:** Comments and feedback (and corrections!) are always welcome. Feel free to reach Brian at (510) 594-4530 or via email at <briane@alibris.com>.

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**Talk of the Trade**

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**LITERARY WORLD SHOCKED, SHOCKED, AS PUBLISHING CEO TELLS THE TRUTH**

When Bertelsmann’s Peter Olson, head of American book publishing (Random House, Knopf, Ballantine and more) fired Ann Godorf, chief of Random House, he did not say she left the company to “pursue other interests” or “spend more time with her family.” Instead, he explained that she had a profit goal of $6 million for 2002, but only made $2 million. The furies descended on Olson, criticizing him for being too obsessive about profits and for taking only a few minutes with Godorf to tell her the bad news. Most strange was the New York Times column by Verlyn Klinkenborg. He writes a charming weekly profile of the comings and goings at his upstate New York farm, his daily chores, the weather, the flora and fauna, the delights and hardships of rural life. In a bizarre departure from his usual country life musings, Klinkenborg lampooned the driving force of profitability in commercial publishing, the ruthless pursuit of money over art, the big bucks paid big time authors, and the consolidation in the publishing industry. He portrayed Godorf as a victim of a greedy system that is spinning out of control. However, the business pages of the Times provided actual facts and continued on page 96