

November 2013

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Recommended Citation

Leisner, Tony (1994) "Faster Than A Speeding CD?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, Article 39.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1572>

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Faster Than a Speeding CD?

by Tony Leisner (Dawsons)

Just slightly more than a decade ago the Macintosh computer teamed up with the laser printer to create a whole new industry. Self published books via desk top publishing systems were born. Within just a few years there were thousands of these fledgling independent/self publishers producing one or two titles each and the total output, while small, was equal to more than 10% of the new titles produced by all publishers.

And the numbers kept growing. No one really knows exactly how many of these small presses there really are because many of them don't tell Bowker or L.C. when they start up. There probably aren't many acquisitions librarians who haven't been approached by an owner of one of these small presses who turned out to reside right in town. The publisher knew nothing about how books are distributed or how libraries select books. As a result, many very good new titles on timely subjects were never offered to librarians. Even when the small press found the wholesaler they were usually disappointed. The wholesaler, it turns out, doesn't actually "sell" books. They take orders for books when

the publisher creates an awareness and demand for the title. The small press with no ad budget and knowing nothing about reviews for libraries is unable to create the demand and so the wholesaler never places any orders. The existing distribution system was set up to serve the traditional way of doing business where large publishers dominated the industry and the name of the publisher was well known. Even new publishers were usually just imprints of the big houses rather than truly new publishers. I was fortunate to have been with a small company during this period that saw the need of the publisher to reach librarians and the need of librarians to obtain reliable information and service for the acquisition of these new small presses. Quality Books, now a Dawson Company, emerged as big player in this fast-growing market because the products had changed but the systems had not.

Why do I recount this story now? Everyone knows it, it is history. Well, it

is said that history repeats itself. I just attended a seminar and exhibition of "new media" in Chicago this week. There were speakers from companies talking about products that didn't exist a year ago. I don't mean the products didn't exist, I mean the *companies* and the *products* didn't exist. These are publishers and in much the same vein as the small publishers of the last technological breakthrough in the early eighties, they don't know anything about libraries. They also don't have very well established distribution strategies, access to reviews or large promotion budgets. Even the large companies like Sony are struggling with the newness. Is the Sony Diskman going to catch on? Where will you find the new "books"? They bombed in the retail outlets that traditionally sell computer software and hardware. They aren't really books like the paper and ink ones that Walden and others sell. These electronic books look more like music CD's but the record shops don't want them. Should libraries acquire them and

"History repeats itself. Historians repeat each other."
— Philip Guadalla

circulate them just as they do with audio tapes and books on tape. If so, where will you get them? Even Sony doesn't know.

This new media stuff really gets going when you include things like interactive multimedia CD-based training programs. It is really good stuff and your library will have customers who will benefit from its use. It is great for working with Dyslexic and learning challenged people. This new media bombards their senses and enhances their learning experience. But how will you find it, acquire it, process it? How will you evaluate it prior to purchase if it is an unfamiliar product from a company you've never heard of? Where will you get service after the sale if you don't know the company?

Well there is good news! Once again the marketplace will take care of these things, if you let it run its natural course. It wasn't too long ago that video was in the same place. There were decisions to

be made about format. Beta or VHS? Curriculum related or entertainment? One determinant was the quantity and format of the hardware in your library's service area. If the number of VHS players was greater than the quantity of Beta hardware, then you bought more VHS tapes. That is part of the same decision process today for Sony, Philips, Multimedia, and other new media producers. How many installed machines are in the market place? Can the CD play on traditional players or is it limited to one manufacturer's brand? Sony now says they are making their electronic books playable on both the Diskman and standard CD players. That is going to be important when you decide to invest part of your materials budgets in new media.

The odds are that the company(ies) that offer you these new media products will have unfamiliar names. Sure some of them will be the old faces. The *Groliers* and *Encyclopedia Britannicas* are there but there are more new start up businesses with really exciting products that you won't know. When should you buy? When there is a clear sign that a standard has emerged in the format.

When you feel confident that you won't get stuck with the next Beta Max or quadraphonic stereo system. One of the best ways to ensure against that is to monitor hardware sales. Bill Gates said he believes over 65% of all new PCs will have CD-ROM players sold with them this year. If he is right, then CD-ROM has longevity assured as a format. The only future changes of consequence will be capacity-related and the players will get faster. After all the audio cassette hasn't changed a lot in more than thirty years and this is mostly because of the huge installed hardware base. The average family in America has three audio cassette players, including the one in the car.

Now we are waiting to see if that same pattern emerges for multimedia portable players because that will be our signal that it is time to get on board. Of course by that time the "new media" will be as old hat as the so called new math is and we will have a new challenge. ☛