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Ed Goedeken

Iowa State University

Ivan Hanthorn

Iowa State University

Pam Rebarcak

Iowa State University

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

To Buy or Not to Buy: The Cost Implications of Purchasing Paperbacks

by **Ed Goedeken** (Principal Bibliographer for the Humanities, Iowa State University)
Ivan Hanthorn (Head of Preservation Department, Iowa State University)
Pam Rebarcak (Head of Monographs Acquisitions, Iowa State University)

Introduction

Libraries have long maintained a tradition of preparing newly-acquired materials for the shelf in a manner which insures durability during handling and use. In that vein, binding remains the principle library treatment of volumes needing structural support. There has also existed the long-standing habit of acquiring hard bound library materials whenever a choice was available between paperback and hard cover. Until recently, the usual result was that the book that went to the shelf was either bound in a publisher's hard cover volume or was put into a hard cover by a commercial library binder. New economic forces have ravaged materials budgets in recent years, and the temptation of paperback acquisition, with its significantly reduced pricing, has had a very expected result. Many institutions committed to this new track not only acquire paperbacks to accrue a cost differential, but they also avoid binding their paperback material until it shows evidence of treatment need. This certainly represents a profound reversal of traditional attitudes concerning the nature of a resident research collection. It has also become evident that those who are

responsible for choosing formats are not always aware of all of the effects of ordering materials in paperback.

Background

With very few exceptions, hardbound versions of monographs have been historically ordered for the Iowa State University Library collection. Monographs Acquisitions Department personnel order hardbound books unless paperback is specifically requested by the bibliographer or selector on the order form. If the hardbound is no longer available, they are occasionally notified in advance of receiving the paperback; more frequently, the paperback is sent at a lower price without forewarning. Should the reverse hold true (paperback or-

dered, but hardback received), the hardback must cost at least 50% more than the original paperback order before the Monographs Ac-

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If Rumors Were Horses

Wow! What news has been flying for this issue! First off, just as we were "in press" we learned that the 81-year-old *Wilson Library Bulletin* will cease publication with the June 1995 issue! Citing rising paper and postage costs, reduced advertising revenue, and a declining subscriber base, Frank Miller, CEO announced the plans of the H.W. Wilson Company to concentrate on its indexing, abstracting, and reference publishing business and to look at a cyber presence for the *Bulletin*. What can I say? As an old librarian, I was weaned into librarianship reading the *Wilson Library Bulletin*. It truly is the end of an era! Read our

brief interview with GraceAnne DeCandido, the Editor of *WLB* in this issue, page 80.

Other news: the splendidly fabulous Mike Markwith, the man who stuck with

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quisitions Department personnel notifies the fund manager.

Once paperbacks are received and cataloged in ISU's SCHOLAR database, they are forwarded to the Monographs Acquisitions Department marking unit where one of three possible treatment paths is selected: (1) book is sent to shelf untreated; (2) book is routed to the Preservation Department for in-house treatment such as stiffening; or (3) book is routed to the Preservation Department's bindery unit. The path is determined by the Preservation Department staff who review paperback materials placed on a review shelf by Monographs Acquisitions Department personnel. Although step (1) accelerates the processing time of the volume on its way to the shelf, steps (2) and (3) enhance the shelf-life of the volume from the outset.

Approximately 85% of paperbacks received are reviewed in this manner; treatment of the remaining 15% is governed by pre-established treatment arrangements determined by location.

Treatment Costs and other Issues

One of the most often cited reasons for selecting paperbacks is that they cost less. An informal survey of recent responses from relevant listservs and discussion groups indicated that paperbacks would be purchased if the price difference between hard and soft cover ranged from as much as \$25.00 to as little as \$5.00. Certainly, any price savings in these times of tightly constrained budgets should be construed as advantageous. Unfortunately, the issue is rarely this straightforward — the initial price is often only the beginning.

After investigating the various costs involved in handling paperbacks, the authors suspect that an additional \$10.00-15.00 must be spent at Iowa State to cover processing of paperbacks, which includes associated binding and treatment in the Preservation Department. It should also be noted that, since the Library of Congress may not catalog paperbacks, creating quality cataloging from member library bibliographic input in OCLC increases cataloging time and expense. These cataloging delays can compound the processing time required to treat or bind paperbacks and is an important factor in determining whether or not to purchase paperbacks. After all, what is the value of an inaccessible book?

Moreover, how a monograph is treated has a direct impact on its shelf life. Paperbacks that receive no initial treatment can

end up later in the Preservation Department in need of repairs or binding because of circulation stress. Thus, the initial treatment decision can have a significant impact on eventual staff time and budget needs. Also, because many more items can be ordered in paperback format than hardcover for a given dollar amount, a significantly increased workflow may prove burdensome for current staffing in the Preservation and Monographs Acquisitions Departments. Personnel allotments in these departments have been geared toward traditional hardback acquisition rates.

Publishing characteristics are also an important consideration. First of all, the notorious narrow inner margin of contemporary publishing means potential text loss or reduced readability when paperbacks are

"After all, what is the value of an inaccessible book?"

subsequently bound. Use of inner margins for continuous photograph presentation is also an increasingly common publishing practice. Therefore, visual information is lost when this book type is purposely acquired in paperback and then subsequently rebound: art books in particular are at risk. Size and shape is also a relevant concern, since unusually-sized paperback volumes are damaged very quickly if not protected by binding.

Observations

As in many academic libraries, bibliographers and selectors at Iowa State have broad discretion in choosing between hardback and paperback versions of monographs. Obviously, some collectors have tight budgets which they need to stretch as far as possible. Additionally, some librarians collect in areas that get weeded on a very frequent basis, so they are naturally less concerned with long-term physical effects. In the current climate, publishers have little incentive to produce quality bindings; many customers are simply not willing to pay higher prices for added book durability. Therefore, the responsibility for reinforcing vulnerable acquisitions falls squarely on the library as a hidden cost of operations. Planning a preservation response that systematically addresses the protection of new acquisitions purchased in paperbound formats is essential to the long-term maintenance of a research library collection. Deferred maintenance does not eliminate the need for treatment actions; it only postpones them — to a time when costs may be greater and the magnitude of the problem larger. It is crucial that collection development and acqui-

sitions personnel stay informed regarding the issues. What may initially appear to be a savings in their own narrow area may actually cost the institution additional dollars in other areas, negating the perceived savings. Finally, the consequence of buying paperbacks without a specific strategy represents short-term gain. This creates a collection increasingly vulnerable to physical damage, thereby ultimately inflating the library's overall cost. In the absence of fully developed strategies and programs for protective treatment for paperback acquisitions, it would appear prudent for a library to be rather circumspect in its rate of acquisition of paperback formats. The Iowa State University Library is currently cautious in its acquisition of paperback library materials as it continues to explore the total impact of large quantities of this format on a research library system.

For further exploration of the many facets of this issue,

the following publications are recommended reading.

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Paperbacks On Approval

by John M. Haar (Assistant Director for Collections, Central and Science/ Engineering Libraries, Vanderbilt University) (HAARM@ctrvax.vanderbilt.edu)

In 1993 the Central and Science/Engineering Libraries at Vanderbilt University selected Blackwell as its new North American-British approval plan vendor. In reviewing proposals from the major vendors in the field, we considered speed of delivery, publisher coverage, profile design, discount, and the other standard services libraries expect of their approval contractors. We did not, however, query prospective vendors about their ability or willingness to supply books in paperback when both hard and paper covers are available.

In retrospect this seems a major oversight, particularly since our previous vendor had supplied us with paperbacks in cases of dual paper/hard cover publication. Even when Blackwell began service, the absence of a paperback feature did not seem a serious shortcoming to many of us involved with the transition. Our (read: my) working assumption was that, in proportion to the entire plan, the cost differential for the minority of titles published in dual covers was insubstantial. Subsequent experience proved this assumption, like so many others, to be questionable. One of our bibliographers, in fact, put the assumption to the test by analyzing one week's worth of book receipts from our former vendor; fortunately the vendor's slips accompanying the books indicated publication in dual covers. She found that 26 of the 82 books (31.7%) were paperbacks also published in hard cover. Moreover, the average price difference between paper and hard cover editions was an eye-catching \$26.01. She repeated the study using a subsequent week's shipment and reported similar results.

My curiosity piqued (and my embarrassment growing), I attempted to replicate her findings by reviewing three weekly book shipments. Of the 294 books shipped, 69 (23.5%) were dual cover publications. Had the vendor supplied these titles in hard cover our cost for the three shipments would have increased by \$1,907.39, or 18.8%. The average paper/hard cover price difference was \$27.64.

These figures argued strongly for reassessing our arrangement with Blackwell. But it was also necessary to evaluate the potential savings in light of our additional costs to bind the paperbacks received in lieu of hard cover. I estimated — liberally — our binding costs, including bindery charges and internal staff time, at \$7.60 per book, a total of \$524.40 for the 69 dual cover titles. Our total savings less binding were \$1,382.99. This figure represented 11.5% of the cost of the three shipments had all 69 titles been supplied in hard cover (\$12,065.42). Thus our annual savings based on our anticipated \$250,000 Blackwell plan would be \$28,750.

Our former vendor had been supplying us with paper only for titles where the price differential exceeded \$25, so I recalculated the estimated savings on this basis. Our total savings less binding costs

became \$1,028.34, or 8.5% of the cost of all three shipments in hard cover. Our annual savings still amounted to a substantial \$21,250, far more than enough to justify instituting a paperback addendum to our Blackwell agreement.

My study was admittedly quick and dirty and included a small sample, but it confirmed observations reported by others. First, the proportion of scholarly books simultaneously published in paper and hard covers is surprisingly high: 23.5% of my sample by number and 15.8% by cost. Second, the difference in cost, both for individual titles and in the aggregate, is significant: it is worth noting that paperbacks priced at least \$25 less than hardbacks accounted for 81.4% of the total savings in the sample.

The only disincentive to paperbacks-on-approval was the need to rebind the paperbacks. Sending books to our commercial bindery meant a four-to-six week delay in their reaching the stacks, lengthening the compressed publication-to-shelf cycle that is one of an approval plan's chief advantages. On the plus side, however, was a preservation bonus. Since trade paperbacks generally use the same paper stock as hardbacks, the only difference between the two formats is the quality and design of the cover. Rebinding would enhance the book's potential shelf life because commercial bindings are superior to publishers' hard covers. We could also choose a binding that incorporated the paper cover, retaining any useful illustrative material.

Presented with the evidence, our bibliographers agreed that trading a processing delay for meaningful savings that could be applied to their firm order budgets was a sound decision. The fact that a paperback provision had long been a part of our approval service made the decision appear a policy continuation rather than a revision and therefore non-controversial.

Blackwell agreed to provide North American paperbacks priced at a minimum of \$20 less than hardbacks, a limit we accepted in light of our finding that the average cost differential was much higher. The only subject area we exempted was fine arts, where hard cover design sometimes contributes to a book's aesthetic value. In March 1995 we became the first Blackwell customer to receive paperback coverage of British imprints. Though we expect our cost reductions to be smaller than on our North American plan, they will further improve our bottom line.

When the British plan has been in effect for a few months we can evaluate our actual paperback savings to see how they compare with my projections. Meanwhile we have begun to firm order paperbacks when our verifiers determine their availability. All of this may not mean that Vanderbilt's volume count will skyrocket, but we can take comfort in the knowledge that we are stretching every budget dollar as far as possible.

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Up to You," *Against the Grain* 5 (June 1993): 9-12, 71.

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