

November 2013

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John M. Haar

Vanderbilt University, haarjm@ctrvax.vanderbilt.edu

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Recommended Citation

Haar, John M. (1995) "Paperbacks On Approval," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1748>

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Paperbacks On Approval

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