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Paperback Conundrums

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Paperback Conundrums

by Heather S. Miller (University at Albany, State University of New York) <hm766@cnsvox.albany.edu>

Sometimes, although not very often, I talk to regular folks, that is, people who are neither librarians nor in the book trade. To them, the paperback book is a simple thing. It is cheaper than the hardcover edition of the same title, easy to carry around, inexpensive enough so that few have compunctions about reading one while eating, while they are at the beach or in other situations where the book may be damaged, or even writing in it. Both the paper and the binding may be of poor quality, but that seldom matters. Low price and portability are paramount. As with many other aspects of library work, paperbacks present many questions that are not only not apparent to others, but that would leave them shaking their heads in puzzlement.

The question of bibliographers' preference for paper or cloth editions is on a plane quite separated from the many issues that occur in a technical services department and in a vendor's offices on a daily basis. These puzzles may have no answers or they may lead to major policy decisions and considerable expense.

Following are some observations on paper and cloth editions and some of the challenges they present gleaned from personal experience and a questionnaire to which a number of North American book suppliers responded. No doubt the reader will be able to contribute additional situations.

Consider the question of paperback vs. cloth editions of firm orders. This might seem simple: just order the one the bibliographer wants. But suppose the bibliographer, while preferring one binding or the other, basically just wants the book as fast as possible. Maybe it is going to be put on

reserve for a class that has already started or a professor is apoplectic because the library does not have the book and he needs it yesterday. In this situation, everyone involved — from the bibliographer to those who search and prepare orders and communicate with vendors, to the vendors themselves — must be able to deal with a duality, an "either/or" situation.

If this "either/or" situation is not dealt with, "rush" orders may be reported "not in stock" at a particular vendor while the other binding might actually be resting quietly on the shelf. The library may be wasting time and energy in a single-minded determination to get the binding specified by the bibliographer. A bibliographic record had been selected to serve as the order record on which one ISBN would print. That is the crucial element — that ISBN which may or may not match an ISBN in the vendor's database. If it matches, the book may or may not be in stock. If it is not in stock, a report to that effect will be sent to the library.

How could it be arranged so that the vendor would report and/or ship the other binding if the preferred one were not in stock? A number of well-known North American vendors were queried on this subject. The standard response is that the library can set this up in its profile. In other words, the library can request that such reporting on other editions/bindings can be done for all orders. Without such a stated preference, most vendors simply report on the specific item ordered. This includes out of print reports. It is then up to the library to determine that another edition/binding is in print and issue an order for that. Much time is wasted this way, but it is quite possible

that a library may not want a blanket substitution policy for all orders.

Perhaps in most cases, the library wants the specified binding, but for "rush" orders will take any binding as long as the desired text is inside. In this case, the library must include a note on the individual order stating what it will accept in the way of substitution. The trick is in making sure that the vendor's clerk gets the message. Standard printed order forms with "vendor note" fields may not be enough. It is useful to use yellow highlighter on selected messages and/or to circle and annotate in red marker. One vendor candidly admitted that it is necessary to be bold and blatant about this or their clerks might not absorb the message.

It is no doubt for this reason that most vendors prefer a standard policy to be set up in each library's profile. One vendor reported that only five of its customers specified that they want only the edition matching the ISBN specified on the order. Most have combinations of price, edition, author, title that determine acceptable substitutions. Even if the library's profile states that cloth bindings are preferred, the vendors still want to see the cloth (not the paper) ISBN on the order. Using the paperback ISBN could easily cause confusion and delay the order. Likewise, libraries sometimes use the ISBN for the cloth edition, but state on the order "paperback preferred," another formula for confusion and delay.

Only one vendor reported that they routinely report on editions and formats other than the one specified on the order. For this vendor, a global policy and notes on individual orders are equally acceptable even though they attempt to do it as a matter of

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Cloth, Paper, or Both?

How Publishers Decide, and Buyers React

by Jennifer Ruark (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers)

It used to be standard practice for scholarly presses, like trade presses, to publish their books as hardcovers first. If the initial printing of 1500 to 2000 hardcovers sold quickly, then the press would consider bringing out a paperback edition. In the early eighties, dramatic cuts in library budgets changed all this.

Shrinking library sales could no longer support such large hardcover printings, so publishers began printing only a few hundred hardcovers. With the production and printing costs for each book amortized over fewer copies, publishers were forced to raise prices. Between 1979 and 1983, academic book prices rose nearly 30 percent, according to the 1994 *Bowker Annual*.

As sales shrunk even further, scholarly publishers began to realize that hardcovers were becoming too expensive for individuals to buy. Some, like Rowman & Littlefield, decided to make books available in paperback right away. Doing so, they reasoned

correctly, would open up new markets, encouraging sales to retail bookstores and course adoptions by professors. Currently, between five and six thousand new scholarly books every

year are published in cloth and paper at the same time, estimates Marcia Romanansky, head of operations at Blackwell North America (BNA).

Not every book is right for immediate publication in paper. Publishers are more likely to produce a very special book — one with a narrower audience and little change of being adopted for course use — in cloth cover only, to save money. By the same token, reference books are usually printed in cloth cover only, because libraries are their major market. Libraries traditionally have bought almost exclusively the hardcover books, which can withstand constant use by multiple readers.

As Budgets Shrink, Libraries Eye Paperbacks

But as book prices continue to rise in response to increased production costs, and university and college library budgets shrink or, at best, remain static, librarians are reexamining their traditional “hardcover only” policies. Academic book prices increased almost 84 percent between 1983 and 1991, according to Bowker.

Smaller, liberal arts college libraries, with tighter budgets and less traffic than university research libraries, have been more inclined to shift to paperbacks. Janice Wilbur, acquisitions librarian at Assumption College, which has a collection of under 200,000 books, has “a pretty hard and fast rule: if [the vendor] has a cloth and a paper and if the hardcover is over two times the price of the paper, we go with the paper and have it bound.” With a 1995 budget of just \$118,000 for new books and journals, Wilbur is forced to be especially price conscious. “The cost of the hardcover is usually more than twice the cost of the paperback, so at least three-quarters

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course. This is an expensive policy which accounts for its rarity.

Another vendor stated that, prior to the institution of ISBN numbers, such reporting on other editions/formats was routine, so it seems that the ISBN may be the cause of some lack of flexibility here, but that is another story entirely.

The other side of this coin is how the vendor obtains the book from the publisher. If the focus is the ISBN number, that same narrow focus on one binding will be perpetuated. Only one vendor reported that they simply do not use the ISBN at all when ordering from publishers. They will attempt to obtain the book they think the library wants (or will accept as a substitute), whether through information on an individual order or through the library’s profile. With no ISBN and no stated binding preference, they may be reduced to trying to deduce from the price on the order which binding is wanted.

This is a very imperfect science. One of the pitfalls for vendors is the library’s preference. Many libraries want the paper edition. If this is published some time after the cloth edition, the library will have to wait. Meanwhile, the cloth edition is in bookstores, reviews are published, and patrons may not be able to understand why the book is not yet on the library’s shelves.

Approval plans present another paperback vs. cloth puzzle. In this case, also, a library may have specified a particular binding. If cloth and paper editions are not simultaneously published, the vendor may not know whether there will be another.

The vendor may not supply the cloth edition because the library wants paper, but the paper may be long delayed or never published. At best, in such a situation, the library will have to wait if it is insistent on getting the paper edition. At worst, it may not get the book at all.

It is also necessary for the vendor to prevent shipment of both paper and cloth editions of the same book on an approval

plan. Obviously, both will fit the library’s profile, so extra work is needed to make sure only one is shipped, especially on plans that do not specify binding. Vendors should have knowledge of the existence of both editions and must link the information for the cloth and paper editions. Thus, careful searching by title should eliminate duplicates of this sort. This becomes more difficult if the two are not published simultaneously. When cloth and paper duplications do occur, they are attributed to “human error,” but preventing them requires a sophisticated system and careful personnel.

The above illustrates some of the pitfalls, for both libraries and book suppliers, caused by the existence of paper and cloth editions for the same titles. The vagaries of human nature and of publishing being what they are, cloth vs. paper dichotomies and confusion will not go away, but as is often the case, clear, precise, accurate information supplied to the vendor can go a long way toward preventing difficulties.