June 1995

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Recommended Citation

Ruark, Jennifer (1995) "Cloth, Paper, or Both? How Publishers Decide, and How Buyers React," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1750>

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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.

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of our acquisitions [in 1995] will be paperback," Wilbur says.

Now, even large research libraries are considering paperbacks. "Interest in [buying paperbacks] has been expressed by a wide range of academic libraries, not just the small ones," says BNA's Romanansky. "If a book is likely to be heavily used, the library might choose cloth," she says. "But if a library wants to expand a certain area of its collection, it may opt for paperbacks to build an in-depth collection more quickly."

The University of Maryland library, a large research library with 2.3 million volumes, has a 1995 budget for new titles of \$4.5 million — no more than the library had to spend in 1990. "Obviously, any price increase represents a drain on a static budget," says Desidor Viktor, head of collection development at the library. Having long preferred the durability of cloth bound books, the library's first line of defense has been to purchase fewer titles rather than switch to paperback.

"We've had to be more judicious in what we buy," says University of Maryland acquisitions librarian Wilford Devine. "We're buying less stuff but probably buying better stuff because we have to choose more carefully." To maintain the range of volumes in its collection, however, the library may be forced to select paperbacks when they are available, particularly from vendors who will have the paperbacks bound with cloth for a few additional dollars.

"We'll be seriously reviewing [that possibility] over the next several months," says Viktor. "A binding costs six or seven dollars a volume, so we still would be paying significantly less than the list price for hardcovers."

Vendors, Publishers Shift Strategy

Book distributors, who have long relied on library sales of the more expensive hardcovers, are worried that they may lose this important market and are responding by making paperbacks more easily available. Yankee Book Peddler was one of the first distributors to accede to library demand for paperbacks. About a year ago, Yankee began giving some libraries with approval plans the option of selecting cloth or paper on titles for which both were available. "We started in a test mode with three libraries that wanted to be guinea pigs," says Yankee's Helmut Schwarzer, "Now we have about twenty libraries signed up for that option." Schwarzer admits that Yankee made this move "reluctantly," since library purchase of paperbacks cut significantly into the vendor's revenues. In addition to the financial disadvantages, paperbacks are damaged more easily, posing the risk that publishers will not accept returns. Yankee decided to accommodate library demands for paperbacks simply "to retain customer loyalty," Schwarzer explains.

Blackwell North America recently announced that it also will give libraries on approval plans the option of selecting paperbacks. "In order to remain competitive we have to do it," says Romanansky. Naturally, publishers as well as distributors make smaller profits from less expensive paperbacks than they do from hardbound books. But both industries are looking on the bright side. "We hope that making paperbacks available may actually increase orders from small libraries that were acquiring very few books even before the budget crunch," says R&L editor-in-chief Jonathan Sisk.

Jennifer Ruark is an acquisitions editor at Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

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