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Where to Buy CD-ROMs

by Norman Desmarais (Providence College) <normd@providence.edu>

Library-oriented CD-ROMs have tended to be subscription items until relatively recently. Many titles still remain subscription items; but the number of products of a non-serial nature sometimes present problems to acquisitions librarians trying to identify sources to obtain them.

Subscriptions

Because libraries are a vertical or niche market, most CD-ROM publishers targeting this market deal direct, through subscription agencies, or through library networks or consortia who can buy in quantity and pass savings on to their members. Vertical market titles tend to be more expensive than titles aimed at the general consumer market. Publishers have a limited universe in which to sell, yet data preparation and development costs can be quite expensive. Critics often focus on the low production costs (about \$1.00 to \$1.50 per disc), without taking into consideration the high development costs. Publishers expect to recoup their costs despite low sales volume, accounting for the high prices of such products.

Add to this the high marketing costs. Most subscription publishers use a direct marketing approach. They use direct mail to

their subscriber lists and to potential buyers from non-customer libraries. They have their own sales agents and company representatives who attend professional conventions and meetings, call on customers, etc. This adds significantly to a publisher's costs.

Libraries find the easiest way to obtain subscription items is to order through a subscription agency. However, most subscription agents only deal with print media. CD-ROM distribution channels still have not developed to the point that agents, familiar with the well-established channels for print media, want to blaze the frontier. One notable exception, **EBSCO**, stands out in this regard. They saw the potential early on and seized the opportunity.

In addition to being a subscription agent, **EBSCO** is a major library CD-ROM publisher. Instead of the two divisions operating independently, or worse at cross purposes, they cooperate to strengthen their offerings. For example, the electronic publishing division can take advantage of subscription figures to identify which are the most popular titles that libraries subscribe to. They can then negotiate with publishers to include the full text of publications in their index and abstract titles.

Some library networks, like **NELINET**, **PALINET**, **SOLINET**, etc., may broker some titles for member libraries. In doing so, they expand their services and revenue sources at the same time that they offer libraries discounts based on volume purchase agreements that they can negotiate with publishers and pass on to their members. These networks may operate like subscription agents; but the number of titles they offer is quite limited.

Monographs

The largest number of available titles are one-time purchase items, comparable to a "monograph." Most of them are targeted at the general consumer or the home or business user; but they may also have a particular interest for libraries. Sometimes, because libraries are secondary markets that do not seem as large a potential source of revenue as the consumer market, they may be overlooked by the marketing people. These "monographic" titles often present particular purchasing challenges for acquisitions librarians.

First of all, because the target audience

does not include libraries, they are generally not promoted and marketed through library channels. Second, vendors usually treat CD-ROMs as software or as non-book materials, like videotapes and sound recordings, rather than books on which they might be based. This raises organizational issues within libraries as to who does the collection development, acquisition, and management of CD-ROMs — the library, the media center, or the computer center. If it's the library, does collection development responsibility fall on the subject specialists or on the media selectors? Who does the purchasing? In concert with this ambiguity, book vendors seem more reluctant than subscription agents to broker CD-ROM titles. Only the largest, like **Baker & Taylor** or **Ingram**, have media divisions. **Ambassador Book Service, Inc.** recently opened a new horizon by creating a media department to sell and distribute educational videotapes, audiotapes, and CDs.

So where do librarians turn if they cannot obtain CD-ROM titles from their book vendors. Many library media distributors carry some selection of titles. There are also several distributors who specialize in CD-ROMs. Companies like **Update**, **Educorp**, **Mr. CD-ROM**, **CD-ROM Warehouse**, and **Crazy Bob's**, among others, have a large selection of titles in stock. Because the distributor's role is basically to fill orders, they do not promote the products they stock. This means that they rely on the publisher to create demand for the product; and they will stock those titles for which they expect sufficient demand. While these sources generally have more titles in stock than those who deal in a variety of media, it may still be difficult to get particular titles; and the librarian may have to order direct.

Sometimes, CD-ROM publishers enter into "affiliate label" arrangements which is something like co-publishing. This type of agreement lets the small publisher share costs and risks with the affiliate label provider. The publisher can bring products to the marketplace alongside those of well-known and well-established vendors. Affiliate labels also give a title the prestige of a larger product line. Companies that have affiliate label programs include **Cambrix Publishing**, **Compton's New Media**, **Electronic Arts**, **IBM**, **Maxis**, and **Sony Imagesoft**. While they sell through their own distribution channels, they also sell through other distribution channels as well.

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Computer software companies and software catalogs like those put out by retail outlets such as **Babbage's Software**, **Egghead Software**, **Electronics Boutique**, **Tiger Software**, etc. often include many CD-ROM titles. However, no single company can expect to have every title.

When librarians try to purchase titles through computer software channels, these companies usually want prepayment or a charge to a credit card. However, few, if any, libraries have institutional credit cards on which to charge such purchases. Using a personal credit card and applying for reimbursement from one's institution does not provide a satisfactory solution because of delays and added paper work. It might also smack of impropriety and cause some concern in auditing. Computer software companies usually do not send proforma invoices; so often a library's only recourse is to prepay the purchase or to set up a credit account with the seller.

Dealers — retailers and resellers who sell directly to the end-user — like **Free Spirit**, **CD City**, **Groupware**, and **Crazy Bob** offer another purchase option. Within

the past year, CD-ROM has begun to find its way into some book stores, especially those with a large computer clientele. Some are even adding CD-ROM sections. Maybe this will encourage more book vendors to take **Ambassador's** lead in dealing with CD-ROMs in addition to books.

License

Vendors selling to the library market have, for the most part, dealt with the license and pricing issues for multiple users and networks. However, most consumers think they own a product when they purchase it. Few realize that the programs are only licensed for use and that the publisher usually retains rights of ownership. Putting license restrictions in small print in the manual or on the packaging may cover the publisher; but very few people read it.

Unlike the average consumer, librarians who have dealt with license agreements that require the return or the destruction of outdated products know the implications of a user license. Many of them have networks on which they want to mount their CD-ROM products; and few consumer titles take this into consideration in their license

agreements. Those that do, often want to charge on the basis of the number of workstations on the network rather than on the basis of the number of concurrent users.

Others want to charge a network fee even if the product is mounted on the network and limited to a single user. The advantage to putting a title on a network is to make it accessible to any user on the network, regardless of location. This eliminates the need to have a dedicated workstation to run one or a limited number of products. Some patrons may not find it convenient to use a dedicated station.

Sometimes, publishers fear losing control over their products. If they allow networking, they want to monitor the number of users through their own software. They do not seem to want to let the librarians monitor it themselves, even though there are several good programs to control and monitor CD-ROM access in a multi-user environment.

CD-ROM has made great strides in the decade since its introduction. The format has become more uniform, more compatible, easier to use, and widely accepted. Distribution channels have become more clearly defined; but they still do not satisfy many of the librarian's needs.

CD-ROM Review Sources

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At the last **Charleston Conference**, there was some discussion of sources for CD-ROM reviews and possibly including some in *Against the Grain* or starting another publication for that purpose. The general reaction seemed pretty much opposed to both of these approaches. Comments seemed to prefer putting reviews on the Internet. While this matter is still under consideration within the library community, other groups have started filling this need.

The **CDROM-L Listserv** (CDROM-L@UCCVMA.UCOP.EDU) posts reviews on a sporadic basis. **Joe Rinehart** (joe@CONFIG.COM) posted quite a few reviews during March that might interest our readers. Also, game lovers, will have a **Games Domain Listserv** from which to get reviews of games (HTTP://WCL-RS.BHAM.AC.UK/GAMESDOMAIN).

For those who prefer the printed word, **ProMotion, Inc.**, publisher of **BookPage**, a tabloid review source for book stores and their customers, will soon begin a new publication entitled **BookPage NewMedia**. This quarterly publication aims to help booksellers communicate with their customers; but it might also be a useful tool for libraries. For further information about **BookPage NewMedia**, please contact **Ann Shayne** or **Ellen Myrick** at 2501 21st Ave. South, Suite 5 Nashville, TN 37212 1-800-726-4242 or e-mail at Ann_Shayne@bookpage.com.

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