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Matt Nauman

Blackwell's

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Bookseller Sales of Special Reference Sets — What's the Story?

by **Matt Nauman** (Blackwell's) <nauman@blackwells.com>

Reference sets — both in book and CD-ROM format — have grown in importance for publishers, booksellers, and academic libraries. This was demonstrated during 1997 by articles in *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal* and in presentations at the **Charleston Conference**. In addition, reference publishers say that they see no downturn and expect their production of reference titles to increase. Despite sometime shaky budget situations, academic libraries continue to buy the books (and to a lesser degree, the CD-ROMs). To meet the increased production and demand, library booksellers have greatly expanded the special sales of reference sets.

The following paragraphs reflect Blackwell's experience and are also indicative of other library booksellers' efforts. Blackwell's began offering special sales of expensive reference sets to libraries in 1982. Until recently, only a few expensive titles were handled each year, usually in science and technology. However, as more titles appeared and demand increased, Blackwell's and other booksellers expanded the number of titles of-

ferred and included titles in the softer sciences and humanities. CD-ROMs, either standalone or combined with books, were added in 1995.

While only six titles were offered in 1993, the total increased to 29 titles in 1997 and sales continued to increase dramatically. The total is sure to increase in 1998. During this period of growth, the basic criteria for coverage have remained the same — a pre-publication list price of \$300 or more, plus a publisher discount. These criteria ensure that special promotions do not interfere with Approval sales (due to cost) and that the best price possible can be offered to libraries.

As recently as 1994, all special offers were made by way of North American mailings of publisher brochures and Blackwell's offer sheets. Since then, mailings have expanded to international markets and many markets are now serviced by email announcements. Titles were also offered via Blackwell's World Wide Web homepage. Web sales have now been made interactive. What was once a simple listing now includes an order icon and wherever possible, a link to the publisher's Web site. Not surprisingly, sales made via the Web have in-

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Today Blackwell's is poised for another large expansion of special reference promotions. In the past, all titles have been handled from the Lake Oswego, Oregon Office. Offers are now being made from the Oxford, UK office as well. This provides access to more titles and allows Blackwell's to offer the best world price for reference works that fit the criteria for coverage. In addition, Blackwell's specialists, both in the US and UK are working with publishers to get access to more titles. There are still a few reference publishers who do not want to sell through library booksellers. But we are all steadily chipping away at their numbers. The success of selling other publishers' products has not been lost on the last holdouts. The ability to offer the best available price to libraries is an important option for library booksellers and the libraries they serve. 🐱



Reference Materials

from page 24

nificantly fewer of them. The books will also need cross-references to electronic products for more complete information.”

Answer from Diane Lewin, Bowker:

“One of the trends is to become more consumer oriented (see *IAC's LifeCenter*). Another is to offer ‘one stop shopping’ — search a citation database, retrieve the fulltext article, receive notification on a regular basis of new articles of interest to you (user profiling), chat with a specialist re any questions you may have. In addition, end-user customization is a trend certainly evidenced with ISP's, and starting to happen more in the publishing industry.”

Answer from David Nazaruk, Bowker:

“CD-ROM usage will dwindle in favor of the Web alone (or a combination of static information on disc and updated information via the Web). Enhancements will be more forthcoming as information expectations (accuracy, currency, etc.) continue to be higher. Fulfillment of those expectations will be key to publisher survival in the face of increased traditional and non-traditional competition. Future collections will archive paper (or fiche), but the majority of research will take place electronically.”

Answer from Salvy Trojman, Bowker:

“Future reference publishing will be mostly Web-based, with the best information still at a premium. Video streaming will allow us to see and hear reference material rather than just viewing it in a compiled format.”

Answer from Cris Maloney and Jay Johnson, Peterson's:

“Reference users will want more power over their materials in the future, ushered in by the freedom of surfing the Web for information. Students and adults will want access to a lot of pieces of information and will want to arrange them in formations that meet their needs. This means giving reference users the tools to customize and the library information in interactive formats. In a library, this may mean technology access to subscription online services that allow users to search for content, rewrite it, link it, illustrate it with anything from a chart to a photo, mainstream text with multi-media (including their own voice-overs), and printing or delivering the end product to their homes, teachers, family in far-off places, offices, or friends.

“Print, however, is here to stay. Print will always be a reliable user-friendly storage device for reference materials — easy on the eyes, portable, immediately accessible without added cost, and tactile. Many end-users only trust what they can touch. And when it

comes to narrow-interest titles that don't warrant big development budgets, print will accommodate the complete gamut of individual reference users and their needs and tastes. That kind of open access of information for all is the cornerstone of our library system and the foundation of reference publishing.”

Summary from Angela D'Agostino, Bowker:

“The electronic environment is a natural for reference publishing. The challenge to librarians and publishers is to differentiate between true reference material, which requires significant resources on the part of the publishers to collect and maintain (and therefore requires payment on the part of librarians or consumers), and the ‘fluff’ data posing as reference material which is free because it is supported either by advertising or product sales.

“If we want to maintain the editorial integrity of reference works, I believe we need to avoid the trap of relying on sources of income other than subscriptions in order to support our reference publishing. Ultimately, I think the onus will be on the professional librarian to discern the differences between true reference material and ‘fluff’ and guide patrons to the legitimate resources. Otherwise, much incomplete information or misinformation could find its way into research work.” 🐱