February 2000

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Recommended Citation

Terry, Ana Arias (2000) "Innovations-Books on-Demand: The Lightning Print Story," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 34.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3432>

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Innovations — Books on-Demand: The Lightning Print Story

On-Demand Printing and Distribution Offer Book Publishers An Alternative Business Model.

by **Ana Arias Terry** (President, Redstone Publishing Consulting)
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On demand. If word-associations were solicited for this term, it would probably produce descriptions such as “accessible,” “fast,” “when needed.” If we narrowed this association to book printing and distributing, the associations conveyed would probably be a tad more cautious.

But, in fact, on-demand print technology today is no slouch. At **Lightning Print Inc. (LPI)**, an Ingram Industries subsidiary, they’re close to having their 6,000th book in their digital library available for the on-demand print and distribution program.¹ As of September, when they surpassed their 5,000 title mark, they had already printed and shipped 500,000+ books to customers.²

What Does On-Demand Offer Publishers?

On-demand technology at **LPI** means that titles can be submitted in either hard copy format or digital form. They’re electronically stored and printed, a book at a time, as they’re ordered by librarians and booksellers, through wholesalers.³ The customer decides the size of the order. New, front list, back list, out-of-print, and out-of-stock titles are candidates for the program. Lightning can handle ultra-short runs, galley proofs, drop shipping, and large print.⁴

While the delivery of a book varies on bookseller shipping criteria or wholesaler parameters, a book of 300 pages can be churned out in less than 60 seconds. The majority of titles are printed within 48 hours of order placement and then shipped to Ingram for regular distribution. The printing of hardback books and titles bearing the largest trim sizes can take as long as a week.⁵

Publishers, who remain responsible for paying author royalties and establishing the suggested retail price, retain all rights to the titles. For every net sale,

the publisher receives a wholesale price minus a printing fee, and they receive payments monthly.⁶ **LPI** claims that the quality of their books is almost indistinguishable to the offset original counterparts.⁷

According to Vice President and General Manager Larry Brewster, what’s at stake for publishers is a printing and inventory management issue. If demand drops below a level to which it’s economical to do a re-print, on-demand printing offers an attractive option. By using the services offered by Lightning, says Brewster, publishers don’t have to deal with billing, shipping and handling issues, or the cost of excess inventory. Instead, they could invest the savings in new titles and content.⁸

More than 250 academic publishers have chosen **LPI** to process nearly 6,000 books. **University Presses**, including **Cambridge**, **Johns Hopkins**, **Louisiana State University**, **New York University**, **Oxford**, **Princeton**, **Stanford**, and the

University of Chicago, have played an active role in submitting over 1,000 titles.⁹

Cambridge University Press was an early participant and will soon have up to 500 books within the **LPI** distribution system. **Michael Holdsworth**, Press business development director, notes, however, that Cambridge is continuing to take short-run stock of all their titles into their Cambridge, UK, and Port Chester, NY, distribution facilities for fulfillment parallel with **LPI**.¹⁰

Holdsworth would like to see some additional services, some of which will no doubt be along this year anyway: affordable color, distributed printing (internationally and within the bookstore), improved hardback finishing, and higher print resolution on halftones. But his assessment of **LPI** remains very positive. Holdsworth sees access to quality ultra-short printing as the primary advantage to the Press. By being able to use **LPI**,

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Cambridge—is able to keep paperbacks available longer than they could with traditional lithography. And approximately 25% of Cambridge LPI titles are “back-in-print” previously out-of-print titles, something from which both sides of the market are clearly benefiting.¹¹

For Librarians & Vendors

The benefit to the library is that no special sign ups or paperwork is required by LPI. The library simply places its orders for LPI titles along with its standard Ingram order.¹²

Actually, in most instances, the process is transparent to both librarian and bookseller, who may not even know that the title being ordered will come to them thanks to on-demand technology. So in this context, no news is good news because it means the process is working without glitches or issues. Brewster knows this first hand. When a customer complains, it’s because some part of the system didn’t operate as it should have. But this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. “The best thing for me to hear from a bookseller or a librarian is nothing,” says Brewster. If the process goes well, as it usually does, there’s no complaint. And that’s a win scenario for all involved, he adds. The publishers sell more books, the author is able to see his book stay in print longer and collect royalties, the wholesaler sells, the bookstore can get what it ordered, the librarian is able to provide the material requested by patrons, and the end-user gets what he or she wanted.¹³

Perhaps one of the most interesting

challenges for LPI has been reckoning and reconciling with the bookseller internal systems that were originally designed and set up to run on the premise of book inventory. Publisher systems were designed to track inventory based on sales. Fortunately, Brewster says the systems to handle the on-demand processes are beginning to change and become more compatible.¹⁴

A Peek at the Future

For a company that got its start in the summer of ’98, LPI is turning heads. Brewster was instrumental in building a business case for it and implementing the vision. With the likes of IBM as the technology partner to

Endnotes

1. Brewster, Larry. 1999. Telephone interview by author. La Vergne, TN., December 16.
2. “LPI print on demand distribution program passes 5,000 title milestone.” Lightning Print news flash. Nov. 23, 1999, vol. 1, issue 7, available at http://www.lightningprint.com/press/vol1_7.asp
3. Lightning Print, Inc., website, available at <http://www.lightningprint.com/>
4. “How it works [for publishers]” available at <http://www.lightningprint.com/Publishers/Default.asp?nav=publishers>
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7. (See 5)
8. (See 1)
9. “University publishers give lightning print high marks for print on demand distribution, drop-shipping services for the academic press.” Press release, September 30, 1999, available at http://www.lightningprint.com/press/09_30_99.asp
10. Holdsworth, Michael. 1999. Email interview by author. Cambridge, UK, December 17.
11. Ibid.
12. “For bookstores & libraries” available at <http://www.lightningprint.com/Bookstores/Default.asp?nav=bookstores>
13. See footnote 1
- 14-17. Ibid.

whom LPI outsources the printing at LPI’s own facility, it’s in good company.¹⁵

Brewster sees a future that will continue to offer growth opportunities for LPI. Even the advent of e-books on the horizon doesn’t phase him. “I don’t think the printed word will go away,” says Brewster. In no way does he see e-books replacing on-demand printing of hard copy books. On the contrary, he believes on-demand printing will be enhanced by e-books because the number of books will increase dramatically. Why?

Because the Web is dropping the barrier of entry for books. “With the advent of e-books, this means more low-volume books will be needed.”¹⁶

When asked if he saw LPI joining the e-book bandwagon, Brewster said this was a space that a lot of companies are pursuing right now. They’re observing the developments, he added, but their focus is to continue to work on building a significant title base.¹⁷

While on-demand printing and distribution services may not be the right answer for all book publishers, it’s clear that such services do offer some attractive benefits and savings. Given the increasing expectations of end users due to technological advances—and as such of the library institutions that must support the information needs of those constituents—on-demand printing appears to be carving out an interesting niche in the techno-publishing environment.

Did you know?

Presses represent a broad array of universities — large and small, public and private. The largest American university presses publish nearly 300 book titles each year; the smallest may publish less than 5 titles. Most presses fall somewhere in between.