Against the Grain

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Bet You Missed It-What do Apple, Amazon and the French have in common?

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Notes from Mosier
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prehensive a level of approval coverage as possible. So, in addition to the sci-tech houses and university presses, vendors included trade publishers, museums, small presses, societies and associations, importers and distributors, and other publishing bodies. Usually exempted were mass market publishers, children's books (outside of awards plans), and books from publishers who would only sell direct.

This effort to be comprehensive had to satisfy some commercial and business realities, though. In order to justify the cost of providing approval coverage, vendors generally needed at least some discount, some degree of return privilege, and a sufficient customer base to warrant keeping a publisher on the "core list." One rule of thumb was this: you needed at least five "hits" against customer profiles to cover the costs of having approval editors assign the subject and non-subject parameters used in the profiling process.

Back in those pre-Web days vendors issued publisher lists to show prospective customers which presses were included on their approval plan (and there were also lists of publishers not covered). I put out those lists for a major approval vendor in the 1980s, and I began to notice one of our largest competitors always seemed to match our coverage. So, just for the fun of it, I started adding a fake press to my list each year. Without fail the competitor included them the following year. This was highly gratifying, although I wonder how many acquisitions modules ended up populated with fake publisher names.

Some vendors also sought to inflate their coverage numbers by augmenting the titles they actually processed with data obtained from third-party sources. This seems pointless to us today — what library could afford to buy all those titles anyway, even if they were germane and represented sound scholarship? Nonetheless, there were libraries that used coverage as a criterion for vendor evaluation. This fact influenced vendor behavior.

In fact, one vendor (now long gone, and for reasons at least in part about to become apparent) had a flagship customer who demanded coverage of a very extensive list of publishers. The vendor complied and for years provided slips for thousands of books. However, the library's expenditures fell every year. After several years the vendor appealed to the library, asking to suspend coverage of publishers the library was not buying (or at least buying from the vendor in question). No one, it turned out, was buying these books from the vendor — they were simply incurring the cost of locating, acquiring, profiling, and stocking books that didn't sell. The library threatened to drop the vendor if coverage wasn't sustained. The vendor gave in, for a time — but eventually went out of business.

Approval vendors also developed value-added services which were initially targeted at their core audience, but which in time grew to become much more. In the early 1980s **Don Stave**, the head of **Blackwell** North America's approval program, sought to provide a tool to help customers answer some basic questions: has a given title been published? If not, what's the expected date of publication? If so, what action, if any, has been taken on behalf of my library (approval book, notification form or slip, standing order)?

The original product, known as the *New Book Status Report*, was a monthly catalog distributed on microfiche. For free.

NBSR became **Blackwell's** *New Titles Online*, or *NTO*. *NTO* was a telnet-accessed, character-based service that enabled libraries to see these same approval-related data, but also additional information — most notably, the Table of Contents. **Blackwell** attempted to break with the established precedent of free access by charging a nominal annual subscription for the TOC features but met with limited success.

NTO eventually morphed into **Blackwell's Collection Manager**, which was expanded to include several firm-order-only features as well as out-of-print (OP) and other records beyond the scope of the approval plan. **Yankee's GOBI**, **Coutt's OASIS**, and similar vendor offering were brought to market to address the same library expectations and demands. And almost always, for free.

So, fast-forward to 2010. Fewer libraries get books on approval. Fewer libraries get fewer books, period. Do the remaining vendors still endeavor to facilitate some level of comprehensive coverage? Some do, but have changed the game in that they no longer support across-the-board discounts, but instead provide some books at list price and others at list plus a handling charge. Some publishers have been dropped because of low activity.

How long will this gradual shifting of vendor offerings go on? What then is the future of the approval plan? How reasonable is it to expect vendors to continue to invest in systems upgrades, new features, and ongoing support for a service that's geared to a market segment in decline? Can they sustain this model without substantially revising pricing policies? Will the strategy pursued by some to attempt some delivery of eBooks alongside print prove successful? This presumes the profiling engines can work at least as effectively for e- as for print; probably a given — but put in question by the timing of availability of e- versus print. If e-content continues to be embargoed, what does this mean for efforts at an eBook approval plan? And can this be successful using the current generation of eBook readers or eBook providers, or is some other solution needed?

That's probably enough for now — we'll come back to this in my next column. Stay tuned!

Bet You Missed It

Press Clippings — In the News — Carefully Selected by Your Crack Staff of News Sleuths

Column Editor: **Bruce Strauch** (The Citadel)

Editor's Note:** Hey, are y'all reading this? If you know of an article that should be called to **Against the Grain's** attention ... send an email to <kstrauch@comcast.net>. We're listening! — **KS

WRITING FOR PLEASURE ALONE
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Literary agents and authors are reeling from the dinky advances for new fiction. Lower eBook revenues mean fewer book deals and less money for the aspiring author. eBook income for the author is half that of a hardback, and advances for the tyros run in the $1,000-$5,000 range. And the agent gets the 15% cut out of that.

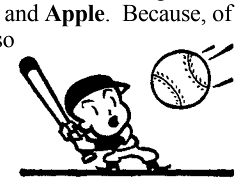
Publishers are not going to wait through two or three piddling books hoping for the writer's evolution into the big break-out. This means that writers like **Anne Tyler** and **Elmore Leonard** would not get published. **Nan Talese** of the **Talese/Doubleday** imprint warns the aspiring author to keep that day job.

The monster best-sellers have been driving the industry for a long time. And these are the books most read as eBooks. So what will become of those authors?

See — Jeffrey Trachtenberg, "Authors Feel Pinch In Age of E-Books," ***The Wall Street Journal,*** Sept. 28, 2010, p.A1.

AND YOU CAN BET THE FRENCH ARE UNHAPPY
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

French law bars heavy discounting of books, keeping the small shops in business. But eBooks are not covered by the law which refers to "printed volumes." So the French now have to figure out how to stop the juggernauts of **Amazon** and **Apple**. Because, of course, the French regard a book as not so much business as a cultural identity.



But meanwhile, **Hachette Livre** has signed an eBook deal with **Apple** to sell 8,000 French titles.

See — Max Colchester, "Discounted E-Books Spark Outcry From French Shops," ***The Wall Street Journal,*** Sept. 24, 2010, p.B1.