Alternative Presses-Making Decisions on Alternative Books

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Alternative Presses
by Bob Nardini (Yankee Book Peddler)
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NB: This was first given as a paper at the Southeastern Library Association Annual Meeting.—KS

Most of us would probably be a little hazy if asked to say what an “alternative publisher” is. If pressed, I’d boil it down to two things: an alternative publisher’s books must 1) contradict the opinions or grate on the sensibilities of most people; and 2) be hard to buy.

Of course, number two ensures that number one rarely comes to pass. Publishing is the easy thing about publishing. Marketing and distribution are the hard things.

I’d refer you to an essay entitled, “The Culture of Everyday Venality, or A Life in the Book Industry.” It outlines four common views on alternative publishers:
- they’re ineptly run by visionary but incompetent people living in former dolly factories in Brooklyn or quaint Rustinesque cottages in Oregon;
- they have no money for quality production, promotion, or royalties;
- they owe printers a lot of money;
- you can’t find their books anywhere.

They’re idealistic and poor, but there’s another reason why they fail: “these presses are not able to function adequately because they are day in and day out screwed by the routine and hardly- worthy-mentioning venality and psychopathology of everyday American business practices”—which practices, all centered on book distribution, the author, Margaret Wehr, describes in hilarious, depressing detail. I recommend the essay. It’s in the Spring 1997 issue of the Review of Contemporary Fiction.

Fortunately for me, her essay is about retail, not distribution to libraries, where a book vendor actually might help to put books from alternative publishers onto shelves.

For larger academic libraries today, the approval plan is the predominant way to acquire new books, and approval plan sales account for most of the business of the company I work for, YBP. Approval plans have been criticized for channeling libraries toward mainstream books. So, as a kind of report card, I compared our approval plan list to the list of alternative publishers contained in the directory of alternative publishers.

If Rumors Were Horses

Let’s see! What a surprise! Who would have guessed? RoweCom (NASDAQ: ROWE) has purchased Dawson Information Services Group including Information Quest, Faxon, Dawson Espana, Dawson France, Dawson UK, Faxon Canada, Ltd., Faxon Compan, Inc., and Turner Subscriptions for a minimum of 30 million pounds (29 million pounds cash, 1 million in shares, with about 4.5 million pounds to come depending on performance over the coming year). Dawson will retain the book business as well as EOSI library software as well as the right to use the IQ Internet software. “The disposal of the Subscription business will enable the Group to focus on its core distribution skills in newspaper, magazine and books activities. The Group will also be seeking new ways to utilize and expand its distribution network,” said Lyndon Haddon, the Chairman of Dawson Holdings Plc (London: DWN.L), in his letter to shareholders. The deal is subject to approval by Dawson’s shareholders. The acquisition is expected to add more than $350 million in annual revenue and significantly enhance RoweCom’s gross margins and accelerate profitability. The acquisition is being accounted for under the purchase method of accounting. The units acquired are all companies involved in subscription services, Web-based electronic information delivery, and library information management software and services. The group employs approximately 500 people and serves over 20,000 clients, most of which are in RoweCom’s core verticals and academic markets. All of Dawson’s clients will ultimately be converted to RoweCom’s Web-based kStore or kLibrary from Dawson’s current services. The Dawson acquisition includes operations in nine locations: Folkestone, UK; Paris, France; Madrid, Spain; London, Ontario; Montreal, Quebec; Westwood, Mass.

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Publishing is the easy thing about publishing. Marketing and distribution are the hard things.
SoftBook Reader by SoftBook Press, (http://www.softbook.com) is currently the only e-book device that can obtain content without the use of a PC and is fully OEB compliant. It weighs in at 2.9 lbs., and currently has about 100 digital books. Rocket eBook by NuvoMedia Inc., (http://www.rocketbook.com) has excellent ergonomic features but its downloading process is a bit cumbersome. It offers some 700 titles and weighs 22 oz. It also offers eRocket software that allows users to read unencrypted RockEditions on PCs. Everybook Dedicated Reader by Everybook Inc., (http://www.everybook.net) is currently the only e-book in the market offering two color hinged screens (at 450 dpi) that look like hardcover books. Its primary target is textbook and reference publishers because of its capacity to reproduce complete graphic material, such as simple video and animation. Everybook's three models are due to debut in late 1999, 2000, and 2001 respectively.


In the End

At the end of the day, the decision to venture into the e-book frenzy will be a highly personal one for the consumer. Among the criteria will be gadget preference, assessment of improvements in online reading technology, cost, ease of use, and practical applicability to work or play. In the academic field, some libraries will want to take advantage of the student population as formal or informal focus groups. In addition to product cost, service, and user-friendliness, assessing student interest and usage levels will become part of the equation in defining how, when, or if universities and libraries will embrace the e-book realm. Will e-books on campus become the next technological movement and become as popular as the now-ho-hum Web?

Publishers will want to keep eyes and ears close to the ground, particularly in terms of standardization initiatives to ensure their intellectual property is viewed as the publisher intended regardless of hardware. Will the standardization of e-book file and format structure cause a temporary flurry of direct sales by academic and professional publishers instead of using digital booksellers?

What role will the serial and book vendor play in this new territory? Will they be able to strategically jockey into position between publisher and e-book content seller to service the needs of thousands of library customers?

If e-book content sellers such as alternative presses and device vendors intend to stay in the e-book game, they will want to pay special attention to the demands of the market and heed their preferences. Otherwise, they run the risk of finding themselves in the print pages of historical discussions.

NOTE: Independent reviewing sources for PDA's, Laptops, and Palm PCs: 20-20 Consumer, (http://www.20-20consumer.com)

Additional information on e-book related matters: eBook Connections, (http://www.ebookconnections.com)

Endnotes