

Something Old, Something New: The Evolution of the Out-of-Print Book Business: A Report of the ALCTS Out-of-Print Discussion Group

This well-thought-out panel produced an outstanding afternoon, despite its being after lunch in a warm, filled-to-capacity room (producing some lapses in reporting coverage and a plea to ALA for a bigger room next time). Discussion focused on the ways in which automated applications have transformed the out-of-print market and the players in it and what the implications of this might be for the future of the out-of-print book business.

The panel included Jacob Chernofsky, editor of the venerable *A. B. Bookman's Weekly*, Joel Chapman of Acorn Books, an established San Francisco store, and Sam McDonald of Amazon Books, more commonly referred to as "amazon.dot.com" and resorted to with some guilt by this writer when not up to the drive to the local independent bookseller. The panel also represented three generations of book men—the reader should not have much trouble sorting out which generation was which.

Joel Chapman and his wife founded Acorn Books (www.best.com/~acornbks/acorn.html) in 1970 in San Francisco and were among the early adopters of technology due to Mrs. Chapman's involvement with real estate and a large mainframe owned by her firm. Acorn purchased a PC in the early 1980s as soon as they became affordable. In the 1970s, the store maintained files of 3 × 5 index cards—a card for each customer. When a book came in, postcards were typed and mailed to those who had expressed interest in the book's topic. Not many customers responded. It was a lot of work. With the PC, all the customers and many of the books were recorded online. The computer matched them and spit out the postcards. It was, says the proprietor "so cool—we just loved it." (Just how librarians felt about our first automated acquisitions systems.) The response rate to quotes went up, but only about 10%. Two years ago, Acorn went with the Web. Forty percent of its business is now mail order. There are seven computers instead of one. And there is no longer time between customers for needlepoint.

Sam McDonald of Amazon Books described its founding by a far-sighted stockbroker who watched use of the Internet rise and saw it as a retail opportunity not to be wasted. After considering various products, books were chosen. Why? Among their other virtues, ISBNs organize them efficiently and the market is huge. Seattle was picked as a location because of the proximity of Ingrams, Baker and Taylor, and software developers. In addition to its huge in-print business, Amazon acts as a matching service between readers and the 8,000 or so bookstores it works with. Is Amazon a threat to smaller dealers? Not really. Amazon buys from them and finds customers they are unlikely ever to reach. Nor does Amazon compete in purchasing books—as Chapman noted: "they're not going to go out on house calls." Amazon hopes in the future to have a site where people can list books they want to sell, and to provide more focused information on edition, binding, and condition.

Jacob Chernofsky of *A. B. Bookman's Weekly* (also the Director of the Out-of-Print and Antiquarian Book Market seminar held each year in Colorado, which has influenced generations of librarians and booksellers) has seen all the changes and known all the players, both in the trade and in libraries. He gave a thoughtful analysis of the OP market, which led to a more general discussion and questions and comments from audience members. One theme emerging from his presentation and the discussion was changes for dealers: For dealers, the Internet is a new way to market books, offering exposure to customers worldwide including many who have never entered an OP shop. Acorn has gone from taking six packages a day to the post office to taking 20 or 30. Online selling replaces the pleasant but time-consuming process of visiting libraries, looking through the catalog for missing titles, and offering them to the library, and means that librarians, rather than developing a network of dealers, buy from a wider variety of sources. On the down side, stores have rent and employees—it's hard to compete with people working out of a garage. And dealers are getting nixed out of the agent market. The ratio of sales to quotes is not necessarily better online, though customers do tend to respond to e-mail more quickly and reliably. Dealers must be cautious about buying books they haven't seen from dealers they don't know.

A second theme was changes in pricing mechanisms. In the past, dealers maintained libraries of price guides and bibliographies on which to base prices. This is no longer necessary; the most current price information is online. It is easier to ascertain value and know what to pay for a book. But it is also easier for customers to compare prices so that each dealer has to be competitive. Another theme was the new Internet middlemen. The following Internet addresses dominated the discussion.

- Interloc (www.interloc.com)
- Advanced Book Exchange (www.abebooks.com)
- Bibliofind (www.bibliofind.com)
- Amazon Books (www.amazon.com).

Each offers free access to a database of books for sale and charges dealers a fee to list titles. Other services such as matching want lists with items for sale, maintaining customer want lists, and automated systems for OP dealers equivalent to integrated library systems are offered. The first three connect buyers to the individual OP stores offering the titles for sale. Amazon, which offers OP books (labeled "hard to find") integrated into lists of in-print titles, works directly with the customer, with the result that the dealer does not know the identity of the eventual purchaser. As Chernofsky said, "Who knows what will happen? It can go in any direction." Will the changes prove to be good or bad for libraries? For dealers? Panelists and audience agreed they will largely be good. Given the millions of books not on the Internet or likely to be so anytime soon, traditional ways of moving books into the hands of collectors and librarians seem certain to continue indefinitely. And probably would even if every OP book was available online. Stores have a certain attraction; and the fun of discovery, of holding a book and smelling it, cannot be replicated on the Web. At the same time, a new audience of OP buyers is developing and libraries may well devote more resources to OP buying now that the experience is more likely to be successful.

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