E-BOOKS; AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

An e-book is a written work readable on the screen of a PC, PDA (personal digital assistant), or a reader specifically designed for that purpose. The titles may be older public domain titles, out-of-print titles, or copyrighted titles that continue to be available in print. A very few have been written expressly for e-book publication.

E-book sales have never been what their publishers expected, but the numbers are getting better. Total sales in 2003 amounted to $10 million, reflecting unit sales of a little more than one million. That was an increase of 32 percent over 2002. However, “best sellers” rarely achieved numbers greater than 1,000 units. The only series that consistently topped the list during the year was CliffsNotes, the popular John Wiley & Sons publication that sells for $5.99 in either the print or e-book version. Generally, reference publications fared better than other categories. Fiction did less well than non-fiction.

Many explanations are given for lackluster sales. The most widely cited is the lack of good readers, especially readers designed specifically for the reading of e-books. Two readers that were widely sold, the Rocket eBook reader and the SoftBook Reader, were withdrawn from the market in 2003 when their sales dropped sharply after the introduction of lighter-weight readers with more attractive displays. Unfortunately, both machines used proprietary formats, meaning that titles purchased to read on them cannot be read on other readers.

Even the recently introduced readers that use general purpose technology configured with special software for reading e-books are far from popular because they sacrifice screen size in order to reduce weight. The Zire 21 from palmOne, Inc. weighs 3.2 ounces, but has a screen the size of a PDA (personal digital assistant). Hewlett Packard’s iPAQ Pocket PC H4150 has a screen that is only slightly larger. One of the few exceptions is Toshiba’s Portege M2000, a tablet PC that weighs about the same as a book and has a screen that can accommodate an entire page with a font size that most people are able to read. It might well be the most popular unit on the market were it not priced at nearly $2,500.

Lack of commitment by distributors and retailers has also been cited. Barnes&Noble.com stopped selling e-books in the third quarter of 2003 because of poor sales. Critics said that it should have waited longer for sales to increase. Given all of the hype that surrounded the introduction of e-books, it is not surprising that there were unrealistic expectations.

The unwillingness of publishers to experiment with pricing is less frequently mentioned, but there is considerable evidence that few have offered e-books at prices considerably lower than the currently available print versions. The major exception has been Simon & Shuster, which sells many of its e-books at 60 percent of the print versions.

Poor sales to consumers should not prejudice libraries against e-books, however. The libraries that have purchased them report that while use is modest, there is no wear and tear as with print titles, and there is no labor cost for circulation charge and discharge, and reshelving. One major public library tallied an average of four downloads per title in 2003. Another public library that introduced e-books in the third quarter of 2003 estimated an average of two downloads per title in a single quarter. More recently, a number of large public libraries that have begun to offer the bestsellers available through OverDrive report much more substantial use. However, none of the libraries contacted have statistics on the average use per title; instead, they have singled out popular titles that have been used scores of times to document what they deem to be successful introductions. It is too early to tell whether it is because of the novelty of the new service or the combination of the choice of titles and the user friendly software for use on PC or PDA.

Availability of e-books at libraries is more convenient for patrons than purchasing titles on the Internet because the library offers a single source of titles that have been selected by professional librarians. There is no need to go to the Web sites of a score of publishers and distributors, and the quality is reliable.

Most of the titles purchased by libraries in the past year can be downloaded to a desktop machine, a laptop, notebook, tablet PC, or PDA, whichever the patron prefers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of patrons are using e-books for look-up, rather than for reading in their entirety. However, no survey appears to have been done of how patrons use e-books.

E-book publishers are beginning to realize that libraries are an alternative market to the consumer market. They began to work with Baker & Taylor, a major distributor to public and academic libraries, and Follett, a major distributor to school libraries, in mid-2003.

The most important player in e-books for libraries by far is netLibrary, a division of OCLC. Founded in 1998, the company was purchased by OCLC in 2002. Since that time, the number of titles has been increased from fewer than 40,000 to more than 60,000 scholarly and reference works in behavioral sciences, social sciences, physical sciences, management and public relations, law, and technology. A library can purchase a collection of titles tailored to its needs and budget. Only one user at a time per title can be accommodated, but the library is free to set the check-out period. Printing/copying is limited to 50,000 characters. MARC records are available to enter into a patron access catalog. The titles can be read on any computer.

netLibrary offers full-text searching, a dictionary with audio pronunciation, and personalization features, including bookmarks, annotations and “my
The number of libraries that have purchased from netLibrary passed the 2,800 mark in mid-2003.

netLibrary launched a new user interface called "netLibrary 2004" in January, 2004. It requires Microsoft Media Player. In the opinion of the author, it is the best user interface yet developed for e-books. A demo is available on netLibrary's Web site.

Libraries that want more popular titles than netLibrary offers, including fiction, should consider OverDrive (is limited to the index and links to the FTP sites). There are a number of drawbacks to Project Gutenberg: the user interface is poor, formatting is uneven, response time can be very slow, and downloading is very time consuming unless one downloads the zip file version of a title.


Among the libraries that have considerable experience with e-books are Maricopa County Library District (AZ), Solano County Library (CA), Ventura County Library (CA), Chicago Public Library (IL), Rochester Hills Public Library (MI), Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Public Library (NC), Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (PA), San Antonio Public Library (TX), and King County Library System (WA).

Prepared by Richard W. Boss, January 15, rev April 28, 2004