

SOURCE: PW PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

DATE: 10/12/2011

HEADLINE: **Is POD Ready for Prime Time?**

*The Espresso-Harper deal moves the needle, at least a little.*

By Judith Rosen

HarperCollins's announcement that it will make 5,000 backlist titles available through On Demand Books' Espresso Book Machine in November—with Zondervan and HarperCollins Canada titles to be added early next year—brings a print-on-demand tipping point a step closer, but with more hurdles to overcome. Harper is the first of the major trade houses to do a deal with ODB, and to date the availability of books from smaller houses like University of Pittsburgh Press and Shambhala Publications has not resulted in much demand for Espresso titles or the machines. There are fewer than two dozen book machines in general bookstores in the U.S., with Politics & Prose in Washington, D.C. adding one last month. Still, with bookstores cutting backlist because of space limitations and tight credit, the idea that a book machine could make up the difference and enable bricks-and-mortar stores to compete with Amazon is an appealing one.

Certainly some of the numbers being thrown out are impressive. "Depending on the size of the store, 25%-80% of our backlist titles are not stocked. Digital-to-print-at-retail technology means the books will be there for the consumer at small and large bookshops," says Harper president and CEO Brian Murray. At McNally Jackson Books in New York City, owner Sarah McNally expects that Harper sales will grow by 20%. Coupled with Harper's 90-day dating on print backlist and pay-as-you-sell for its POD program, that could make for a very merry Christmas for the store. On top of that, ODB is now registering its full catalogue of more than seven million titles with Google Merchant Center; earlier this year it began offering two million public domain works.

Even after acknowledging that few booksellers are affected by the Harper-Espresso deal, American Booksellers Association CEO Oren Teicher praises the publisher for creating a program that enables indies to feature a broader array of in-store titles and meet customer demand. "Harper is demonstrating the sort of creative thinking that our industry needs as we work together to fashion new business models that will help all segments of our industry better serve readers and sell more books," Teicher says. "ABA hopes Harper's decision will encourage more stores to take a closer look at POD."

But adding Harper backlist doesn't necessarily mean that customers will come or that their books will be ready in the time it takes to drink a cup of coffee or even before the store closes for the day. As Bill Fehsenfeld, owner of Schuler Books & Music, who has one Espresso machine for his five stores in western and mid-Michigan, points out, "Even turning on the machine and getting the glue pot heated up takes more than 15 minutes."

Then there are logistical questions, like what to do if the machine is in the midst of printing a run of 50 self-published books? "We are still noodling over the practical matters," says Chuck Robinson, co-owner of Village Books in Bellingham, Wash., who notes that for now self-published titles and the store's own Chuckanut imprint will dominate what the store prints. However, he adds, "We're seeing a growing number of Google Books, and we're hopeful that we'll now do more Harper books."

Although he regards the Harper deal as a "vital first step," Peter Wannier, co-owner of Flintridge Bookstore & Coffeehouse in La Canada, Calif, who had his Espresso delivered in February, says that it's not enough. "The machine's been disappointing to us. Hardly any customers found us yet. We had very specific books that we wanted to print and we couldn't do that" because the titles weren't in the system, he notes. For him, the machine's advantage won't be felt until he can have digital-to-print access for all of the Big Six, since he wants to use it to print required school reading.

Others, who would like a machine but don't have one, such as Margot Sage-El, owner of Watchung Booksellers in Montclair, NJ., are concerned about finding space. Like many indies, her store is only 1,100 sq. ft. At Tattered Cover, it comes down to cost of the machine, which can be bought for about \$180,000 or leased at various prices. "The minimum number of units to break even to cover the lease would be a push," says Neil Strandenberg, manager of operations. "Things like getting Harper backlist are pretty useful. It's really an invitation to a whole lot of work, even if we got it to break even. I don't know if that puts us in a golden age of inventory management and customer service."

The **National Association of College Stores** is trying another tack, using regional POD to enable college bookstores to get open source books and foreign textbooks in a timely and cost-effective manner. "Our pilots this summer went very well," says [Mark Nelson](#), CIO of NACS and v-p of NACS Media Solutions. Although NACS had to stop the test with 10 stores printing from one location when Hewlett-Packard discontinued its cloud-based computing program, the association plans to announce a new partner in mid-October and do a soft launch of the program with 24 locations around North America in January. If all goes as planned, regional POD will be available to NACS stores in time for the fall 2012 book rush.