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More Booksellers Turn to Publishing

New sideline: print on demand

by Judith Rosen -- 6/5/2006

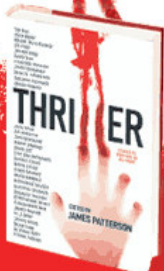


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Forget gifts and cards. In a time of flattening sales, longtime booksellers Eric Wilska, owner of the Bookloft in Great Barrington, Mass., and Susan Novotny, owner of the Book House of Stuyvesant Plaza in Albany, N.Y., have found what could be the ultimate sideline business, printing their own books. Last week marked the soft opening of their joint POD venture, the Troy Book Makers in Troy, N.Y., which is both a storefront business adjacent to Novotny's Market Block Books store and an Internet operation found at www.thetroybookmakers.com.

"One of my mantras is stop carping about Barnes & Noble. Here's one thing you can do: find a profitable niche," said Wilska. After watching his sales level off after climbing steadily for most of the past 32 years, he views on-demand printing as a viable alternative revenue source. "You don't have to be a visionary to look down the pike and see that bookstores, like video stores, aren't dinosaurs, but they are less critical [than they were]," he said.

For Novotny, some of the biggest advantages of the InstaBook machine—which she and Wilska are leasing with an option to buy—are its affordability coupled with its speed. It can produce a perfect-bound book in two to three minutes. Based on the number of first-time authors who stop by their stores with books produced through iUniverse, Booklocker and Lulu, Novotny has no doubts that she and Wilska can keep the InstaBook humming. For a flat rate of \$175, Troy Book Makers will print a trade paperback book of up to 250 pages, with black-and-white text and interior graphics, and a color cover.

In addition to selling the books written by local customers, Novotny and Wilska are planning to reprint local histories to sell in their stores. Other printing opportunities include genealogical memoirs, coursepacks, dissertations and book manuscripts that writers want to print to submit to larger houses. The machine also comes loaded with 10,000 titles that are in the public domain and can be printed when ordered.

"We're hoping it's one of those if-you-build-it-they-will-come things," said Wilska, adding it's only a matter of time before many large independents get involved in print-on-demand. Indeed, during BookExpo America in Washington, D.C., several booksellers visited the World Bank bookstore, which recently installed a new Espresso Book Machine.

Wilska is aware that starting a publishing business is complicated and involves an investment in time and money. Troy Book Makers has its own staff, for example. But while the company is just setting up operations, Wilska believes it is possible that the POD business could expand to four or five storefronts.

Expansion was the result at Book Ends in Ridgewood, N.J., the first independent to install an InstaBook machine. In March, Book Ends co-owner Walter Boyer sold his share of the print-on-demand business to his former partner Tim Harper and business manager James Potter, who relocated the operation and renamed it Long Dash Publishing. "It had done better than anyone had imagined," said Potter. "But it also reached a plateau. We wanted to try new things." Among them, he said, is expanding the POD operation by becoming a trade publisher with distribution to Ingram and other wholesalers. Book Ends continues to carry some of Long Dash's books and to refer customers to the publisher.

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