

InfoD-Cafe: Books on demand (was: Perishing publishers)

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In response to some interest in what I wrote earlier about equipment for producing single copies or short print runs of bound books produced on demand...

There are probably several systems in development or on the market, but one that was reviewed by the venerable George Alexander of The Seybold Report in June 2002 will serve as an example.

The InstaBook Maker is the brainchild of Victor Celorio, born in Mexico into a family of inventors, and a novelist and short story writer from his teenage years onwards. Celorio now lives in Gainesville, Florida.

The machine consists of an assembly of OEM components and some specially engineered bits, and is oriented towards the production of monochrome books with colour covers, to a size of 8.5 x 5.5 inches (or A5 in Europe).

The machine includes a computer which is fed the source material in MS Word, PDF or HTML. George didn't review the text composition aspect of the software, and I would have thought that many of us here with something we wanted publishing would have chosen the PDF route, front-ended by whatever software and fonts we thought appropriate.

The computer paginates and imposes the pages, then sends them to a duplexing laser printer (a Kyocera, I believe). As the printed pages emerge from the output slot, they are automatically fed to a slitter mechanism and collect on two sides of a V-shaped receptacle. When the printing is finished, the operator can gather the two halves into a book block and check the job; a little manual jogging may be required to line the pages up better.

Meanwhile, a colour cover has been printed on an inkjet printer. The checked book block is replaced in the collection tray, the cover is placed in a separate tray, and a button is pressed. The slightly rough edge cut by the slitter, at the back of the book, is dipped into a shallow tray of hot-melt glue and the cover is drawn on, and folded around the book block by the mechanism. The nearly-finished book is removed from the machine, left to cool for a minute or so, and then manually trimmed e.g. with a precision Triumph Ideal guillotine.

That is the machine in theory, but how does it work out

in commercial practice?

InstaBook runs a distribution company in Canada, from which anyone can order editions-of-one over the Web. The titles are from culture's ultimate back catalogue, and the authors (such as Aristotle, Descartes and Sun Tzu) have generously waived their fees. Books ordered will be manufactured and mailed within three working days. An average price for a book would be about ten US dollars.

See: <http://www.instabook.net>

There are a few bookshops and small printshops which have installed InstaBook Makers; the deal is usually financed through Celorio's company supplying the machinery for free up-front in exchange for a per-book service charge. Two of the earliest adopters were, unsurprisingly, also based in Florida:

Denlinger's (Edgewater, FL):
<http://www.the-bookden.com>

River City Press (Jacksonville, FL):
<http://www.titanservices.com/rcp/index.htm>

I haven't checked to see how those companies are getting on. But I have looked at the business offering of Bookends in Ridgewood, New Jersey, one of the more recent installers of InstaBook equipment.

A customer can drop by at Bookends and order from the same back catalogue of digitised titles that are offered by the Canadian outlet; but can also bring their own materials to be printed and bound in this format.

The prices they quote would imply a minimum order of ten copies, and go like this:

First 10 copies:	US \$ 150 for up to 250 pages
Next 10 copies:	US \$ 100
Each 10 copies after:	US \$ 75

There is an unspecified surcharge for books longer than 250 pages. You can read more about Bookends and their on-demand offering here:

<http://www.booksbybookends.com/index.html>

Interesting to read the list of customers that Bookends envisage to be their likely customers:

- * First-time authors who want to get their books in print.
- * Professional writers re-publishing out-of-print books.
- * Nonfiction authors who want their proposals to be bound like books.
- * Novelists who want their manuscripts bound to show agents and editors.
- * Professors and teachers who want their course materials in a single volume.
- * Companies and institutions that want their handbooks in book form.
- * Graduate students who want their theses to look professional.
- * Family historians who want a book for relatives, and for posterity.
- * Journal-keepers and memoir writers who want their recollections preserved.

* Cooks who want to compile their recipes in their own personal books.

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Incidentally, I fail to see how Jean-Luc Picard could afford to collect that shelf-full of original print books on a Starfleet captain's salary, even allowing for the possibility he inherited something from the family estates in France. It's more likely that he got access to the molecular specifications of those books from some digital archive, transferred them to the pattern buffer of one of the ship's replicators, and ... well, you get the drift.

Conrad

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