

Update on On-Demand Printing

On-demand printing has been getting a lot of play lately—and with good reason. If it can fulfill its promise, it offers consumers, booksellers, and small publishers some real advantages.

It's hard not to like what on-demand printing promises: Publishers could realize sales from titles that are out of stock or out of print—without having to go back on press to print five or ten thousand copies. This is attractive to publishers when the demand for certain titles simply doesn't justify printing this many copies.

The consumer would gain because out-of-print and out-of-stock titles would become available—and not as hard-to-get, expensive antiquarian books, but as freshly bound new books.

Booksellers would win because all of a sudden they'd be able to offer titles that were formerly hard to find or impossible to get. And best of all, they'd be able to do it within days or even minutes.

On-demand printing can be done on the premises of the publisher, of a wholesaler, or of a bookseller. Ingram's Lightning Print facility is an example of how one wholesaler does it. Baker & Taylor's Replica Books is another such implementation. Publishers such as Simon & Schuster and Black Classic Press have used the Xerox DocuTech to produce small book runs for several years now.

However, the DocuTech is much too expensive (over half a million dollars each) for most bookstores to use.

At least three companies are working on machines that could change all that soon. A machine called the Book Machine is being developed by the On Demand Machine Company of St. Louis. Another company, Sprout, Inc. of Atlanta, has already licensed the Book Machine software technology from the On Demand Machine Company. Borders Group, Inc. recently took a minority investment position in Sprout. At some point in the future—probably next winter—Sprout will place their own version of on-demand printing machine in Border's stores so that they'll be able to print quality paperbacks on site in a matter of minutes. Harvey Ross, CEO and founder of On Demand Machine Company doesn't mind that Sprout will be competing with him. "That's fine. It's a win-win situation. We get five percent of what they sell." A third contender in the on-demand sweepstakes is InstaBook Maker of Gainesville, Florida.

The InstaBook Maker and the Book Machine are much less expensive than the DocuTech. The InstaBook Maker is \$29,000 if purchased, or it can be leased for \$650 a month. Ross said there are two versions of the Book Machine. One, at about \$75,000, is not completely automated and is designed for use in the back room of a store. The other, which is fully automated, cannot be purchased, but can be leased for approximately \$1,700 a month, provided the customer buys the paper and toner from his company. This is the only way, he said, that he can control the quality of the printed output. Ross estimated that a bookseller would have to sell between 35 and 40 books in order to breakeven on the unit. According to Victor Celorio, president of InstaBook Corporation, breakeven for the InstaBook Maker is only two or three books a day.

The Book Machine is still under development according to Ross. He now says that a test of the machine will take place at Denver's Tattered Cover bookstore either in December or January of next year.

InstaBook Maker is available now. "We are installing the first systems in publishers' offices throughout the U.S.," said Celorio, adding that it is considerably smaller than the Book Machine of the On Demand Machine Company. He explained that everything, including printing of the text, of the cover, and binding the book is done in a 4-by-3-by-2.5-foot unit. "Everything is done in that space," he said. "That is why it is such a beauty." He added that a 200-page book can be "completed in a couple of minutes. If we consider the downloading time, it means that from the moment you click on the title you want, to have the finished product, you need around five minutes." To operate the InstaBook Maker, said Celorio, requires only ten minutes of training.

On demand printing is clearly going forward. But this progress is not without hurdles. While the machines being produced by the ODMC and InstaBook are considerably less expensive than an offset printing press or a Xerox DocuTech, they still cost too much for many bookstores. Presumably with time these prices will improve. Or maybe bookstores will find a way to share machines.

Another hurdle is titles. The number of digitized titles available for on-demand printing is still quite limited. Celorio said his company now has 2,000 titles. Ross said he expected to have 6,000 titles when they begin the Tattered Cover test. He added that the goal is to have 150,000 to 200,000 titles when he rolls out the final product.

Then there's the problem of deciding whether each machine's digitized books should be in a proprietary format or a standard format that all can use. InstaBook's is proprietary. So is the Book Machine's.

All of this is compounded by a predictable Catch 22 situation: publisher's are slow to provide more digitized titles until they see a demand, and manufacturers of on-demand machines need more titles to justify their equipment.

—Richard T. Scott