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Electronic Books for Evangelical Libraries A Progress Report

John Jaeger
Dallas Baptist University

Gregory A. Smith
Liberty University

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Electronic Books for Evangelical Libraries

A Progress Report

John Jaeger
Dallas Baptist University
Dallas, Texas

Gregory A. Smith
Liberty University
Lynchburg, Virginia

AUTHOR NOTE:

John Jaeger is Doctoral Research and Reference Librarian at Dallas Baptist University. Gregory A. Smith is Administrative Services Librarian at Liberty University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gregory A. Smith, Integrated Learning Resource Center, Liberty University, 1971 University Blvd, Lynchburg VA 24502. E-mail greg@liberty.edu. Phone: (434) 592-3293

In recent years, members of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL) have clearly stated their interest in seeing publishers – especially those with evangelical affiliation – offer electronic book products in formats that are friendly to libraries. This subject has generated conversation at our business meetings and on our listserv. In the summer of 2006, some 100 members of ACL's Christian Library Consortium purchased a collection of 400 religion-oriented electronic books from NetLibrary®. At the 2007 conference, which convened in Grand Rapids, Michigan, representatives of four local Christian publishers participated in a panel discussion that was dominated by the subject of electronic distribution.

The Board of Directors has actively considered ACL's potential role in helping publishers transition to electronic dissemination. In the spring of 2007, the Board determined to initiate contact with several dozen publishers of interest to the ACL membership. President Linda Poston sent a letter of inquiry to 40 such companies. Digital Content Manager Greg Smith followed up with numerous telephone and email contacts to explain ACL's interest in electronic products and gauge publishers' willingness to offer them.

This communication process has identified 15 publishers that may be interested in marketing electronic books to libraries affiliated with ACL. These companies include major evangelical houses, denominational presses, mainstream academic publishers with religion lines, and specialty presses. None of them have yet been asked to make a specific commitment (whether of specific titles, of a number of titles, or to a particular electronic book vendor). Rather, the discussion is purely exploratory at this point. The Association's experience thus far suggests that inducing publishers to develop electronic

books for evangelical libraries will be a complex process – one that requires knowledge and skills not widely available within our membership. We librarians are known for our organizational skills and service attitude, but we may have to develop our marketing acumen and become more familiar with contract negotiation.

Our exchanges with publishers have already shown us that they are concerned that electronic distribution may trigger losses in print revenue. Since our libraries will depend on publishers' output for the foreseeable future, it is imperative that we look out for their economic wellbeing. As we encourage publishers to experiment in the electronic realm, it is in our long-term interests to do all we can to ensure that our partnerships are as beneficial to them as they are to us.

When publishers' reluctance to adopt new technologies leaves us frustrated, we will do well to remember the risks involved in implementing a new business model. Nevertheless, we can draw encouragement from the fact that some of the publishers we have targeted are already taking steps to distribute their content electronically (not always, of course, in ways that are attractive to the library market). In our conversations with publishers we have found that one is already in the process of making more than 100 of its titles available through NetLibrary®, and that another is planning to expand its online Bible reference service with the intent of serving the needs of libraries. We have also learned that several already have, or are currently developing, ebooks of the downloadable sort, and that some have exposed their content to Google™ Book Search.

As time moves forward, we need to expand our contact with our publisher colleagues. We hope that many of them will eventually come to see the merits of developing Web-based

products and services that can meet the needs of individual consumers *and* libraries. Perhaps we can influence a company to offer a significant portion of its backlist online – a decision that could lead other publishers to follow suit. One concrete way that we can increase our contact with publisher representatives is to meet them on the exhibit floor at conferences where they are marketing their books. Events that attract large numbers of religion-oriented publishers include the International Christian Retail Show and the annual meetings of organizations such as the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. Also of interest is a consumer-oriented event announced by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, Christian Book Expo Dallas 2009.

The next step ACL will take is contacting two of the major publishers and determining what requirements they have for distributing their works electronically. By contacting these two publishers, we hope to identify specific details for a viable purchasing model in the electronic

book format. Hopefully other publishers will find that these specifications address their concerns. After this step, we will contact two electronic book vendors, probably Ebrary® and NetLibrary®, to ascertain their level of interest in the project. Hopefully, when they discover the many publishers represented and some specifics from the publishers' side, they will be interested in going forward as well.

ACL has a vision for encouraging the development of electronic book products and services that meet the needs of its constituents. ACL leaders have taken proactive steps to communicate with publishers about the interests of evangelical libraries. As in other areas of life, our responsibility in this venture is to offer faithful service – to our Lord and to one another – and to pray that God will reward our efforts with outcomes that bring glory to Him. †