

A few small steps for print-on-demand

InstaBook plans new machines, more marketing, but trade is still cautious

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An Ontario firm is stepping up its campaign to bring print-on-demand to the Canadian book retail market. The Hamilton-based InstaBook Canada will install POD machines in two new locations this summer, and has also made headway in its quest for content from Canadian publishers.

So far, the trade's embrace of the InstaBook business model has been cautious at best. No bookstore has yet laid out cash to buy or lease one of the machines, and even with expected additions from a dozen or so publishers, the selection of titles on the firm's database will likely remain relatively limited. Like most new formats, InstaBook faces a catch-22: retailers won't sign on without strong content to sell, while publishers won't provide that content without a strong retail market.

Still, InstaBook president Dave Di Marcantonio has made small gains in both areas. An InstaBook machine will go up in the Oakville, Ontario, store Bookers this month, and an as-yet-unnamed Toronto-area library will receive another in September. (The sole existing machine, at Book Express in Cambridge, Ontario, will remain up indefinitely.) And Arnold Gosewich, an industry veteran who's been working as a consultant and business adviser for InstaBook since last summer, says 10 publishers have agreed in principle to provide content, and should do so over the next several months. (At press time, Di Marcantonio said five publishers had signed deals.) This fall Di Marcantonio plans to step up publicity and advertising efforts, and he's got an ambitious expansion plan: he hopes to roll out up to 25 new machines throughout Ontario over the next year.

InstaBook's early strategy has been to minimize the risk for its business partners. As with Book Express, both the Bookers location and the library machine will be no-cost trials. (While the Book Express trial period runs indefinitely, the other two will last for one year.) And for publishers, there's no up-front charge beyond the in-house cost of preparing usable PDF files of their titles. "The costing of that seems to have come down significantly lately," says Dundurn Press president Kirk Howard, who's considering InstaBook's proposal.

Among the firms to sign on is ECW Press, which has agreed to provide about 100 titles. Co-owner Jack David says the company will look at titles that are easily convertible to PDF, which means anything on file in QuarkXPress format — as all ECW projects since around 1997 are. (David is less keen on converting old formats or scanning books.) ECW won't make much

money from the arrangement, says David, who is skeptical on consumer interest in the format. But he's interested in being able to supply books for, say, a graduate seminar without having to commit to a short run. "The notion is keeping the book alive."

Raincoast Books has also been in talks with InstaBook, but will not commit at this time. "Right now it's just not enticing enough," says executive vice-president of business development Kevin Williams. Like David, Williams sees the technology as primarily a short-run solution, but he notes that InstaBook's model is designed for the retail market. "Price structure is the issue, not file conversion."

For titles sold through InstaBook machines, booksellers take a 40% cut of the list price, with InstaBook and the publisher

splitting the remainder. (Booksellers also provide supplies for the machine, such as paper and toner.) Under normal leasing conditions, says Di Marcantonio, retailers must sell six to 10 titles per day to break even. Early-adopter booksellers are enthusiastic. "I think it's something that within a few years a lot more people are going to be doing," says Bookers manager Roger Humphreys. And Anne Laird of Book Express, which has had its machine since early 2002, is pleased with the performance. "I think we'd be inclined to keep it" even if the free trial ended, she says.

Although InstaBook currently has around 5,000 titles in its database (about 95% of them public-domain), at Book Express the majority of the machine's cus-

tomers have been self-publishing authors. "The problem with the classics is we have most of them on the shelves," says Laird. "That's not the way the business is going to go long-term." By contrast, one local author printed 150 copies of their own out-of-print title after the rights had reverted, and followed up with multiple reorders. Elmira author Doug Thomas has printed more than 100 copies of his novel *The Bloody Boy* with the store, says Laird, and has upgraded the InstaBook cover stock by bringing in his own separately printed covers to run through the machine. (For such projects, retailers charge the author at their discretion, while InstaBook takes a fee of 1 cent per printed page.) *With files from Paul Spendlove*