

Purchase Books from Abroad?

By Werner Rebsamen – Sometimes good luck does all come at once. In 1995, while starting off on a lecture tour around the world, I missed my first connecting flight through Chicago due to mechanical problems. Re-booked through Washington D.C., my business class seat to Frankfurt, Germany got upgraded to first class without objection. A well-dressed, elegant lady took the seat next to mine. Turned out she was a leading, highly skilled librarian, selected by a foundation to go to Khartoum in the Sudan to teach a university press how to publish, print and bind their own books and publications. The DocuTech printers were already installed - all they needed now was her expertise on how to publish their own works and distribute them. The librarian also mentioned that the foundation she was representing financed such endeavors in many other developing countries. Needless to say, we had a most interesting dialog on the topic of publishing, printing and binding in developing parts of the world.

In the earlier days of my career as a bookbinder and book manufacturer in Switzerland, we, like in the U.S, the U.K. and many other countries, used to print and bind all such foreign publications. Developing nations

new technologies in printing and binding books, such endeavors have spread around the entire world. Those developing countries, however, still needed lots of help. Sure, one can teach them how to publish, but

how to print and bind books in a cost-effective manner is another chapter.

In 1990, a large Santiago, Chile based printer wanted to become a book manufacturer. They purchased a used, rebuilt

Kolbus hardcover binding line and all other supporting machinery from the United States. I was hired to teach them all the necessary, basic skills. Well, I could instruct them on rounding and backing and many other tasks but where were the reinforcing gauze, headbands, and quality cover boards? Since there was no market for such items in this part of South America, they were simply not available! These materials had to be flown in from the United States. Other parts of the world, including China, experienced similar situations.

It is amazing how the world of publishing and the manufacture of books have changed in just a few years! Manufacturers of binding equipment report record setting sales to China and many other countries. Publishers are discovering financial incentives to have their works printed and bound abroad. First, it was Singapore. With great skill, they printed and bound highly priced, quality coffee table books. They got so much work that skilled employees became a rarity and expensive. Now much of such printing and binding endeavors are going to China. They seem to learn fast! My colleagues in India also report ever increasing work coming from the U.S. and Poland. Eastern European countries are also picking



*Book manufacturer in China—
Pop-up books require lots of work by hand.*

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did not have the resources nor did they have the skills to print and bind their own works. Those were interesting times, especially when planning a book with page one starting in the back! Now, thanks to

up much of this business – all in the name of price. Competition is fierce. Much of the children’s book business went abroad, at a considerable loss to U.S. and Canadian book manufacturers.

You now wonder, what has all this to do with libraries? The answer is that there are genuine concerns about quality, especially with regard to the quality of the paper used and the bindings. After all, a purchasing agent’s task is to get a certain publication at the very best price. But unlike a volume placed into a book-lovers precious library, libraries must circulate the books and this is where the problems start.

Librarians Discuss Purchasing Books Abroad

At the 2006 LBI fall conference, there was a dialog among librarians and library binders about the future of books, libraries, book distribution, collection maintenance and the benefits of library binding. One of the topics that came up was the idea of purchasing hardcover published books from abroad for less. This is an ongoing topic still to be investigated and to be further discussed. Some countries mentioned were China, Turkey, Egypt and others. Needless to say, librarians familiar with quality printed and bound books are concerned, yet as one said, “Price is the name of the game” and is the primary concern of purchasing agents for most libraries. But again, as one of the librarians stated, this conversation is in just the beginning stages.

As the former head of the RIT/LBI book-testing laboratory, I observed for more than two decades many problems with the quality of various bindings. Even now, being retired and without promoting such services, problematic books and bindings end up on my desk for professional comments. A publisher in the U.K. through Barnes & Nobles sent examples of a 60,000 run of warped puzzle books made in Asia. Ouch – an entire job ruined all because one piece of paper had the wrong grain direction! It distorted the very first sheet and with it, many others. Puzzle books need to lie flat. Granted, this has not much to do with libraries but let us now discuss some items of concern.

Paper

In the past, librarians on this continent collaborated to convince publishers to use acid-free paper in their books. This was a very successful endeavor which even generated a discussion at the U.S. Senate. Herbert S. Bailey Jr. of the Princeton University Press chaired a committee which established production guidelines for book longevity. I recall many discussions with him on this particular topic. The result was an article in *Publishers Weekly*, May 29 1981, and later an ANSI Z39.48-1984 standard for paper.



This 9 pound heavy, expensive book made in Asia (Japan) had no reinforcements and came apart after the first reading!

The question now is do printers in far away countries honor such guidelines? Most likely not. Then how can a librarian “educate” a purchasing agent in this regard? Easily done - just invite the particular individual to tour the library. Years ago, I went on a VIP tour through the New York Public Library. The preservation officer in charge, Robert DeCandido, showed me their stacks of books printed abroad. Some of the papers were so brittle that the pages broke out of the binding just by turning a sheet! Granted, those were some of the books printed after the Second World War in Eastern European countries on acidic ground wood papers. Maybe these days, some of the papers coming from abroad are better with regard to longevity.

There are book manufacturers abroad who are capable of producing high quality edition bindings. Unfortunately, the majority are not.

What should a librarian in charge of collection maintenance do if such acidic papers arrive at the library? One treatment of course is deacidification. A better solution may be to digitize the content, print it on an acid-free sheet and have it library bound. These days, most library binders are able to offer such services. Best of all, if such a book gets damaged or lost, just ask your certified library binder to print and bind another one if this is within legal guidelines.

Binding Quality

This is perhaps the worst chapter. But as most publications printed abroad are soft cover bound, they can be library bound in North America. Then they will outperform any domestic and foreign hardcover bound edition binding many times over. The trouble is, many hardcover bindings from abroad leave much to be desired and most likely require the same treatments as soft cover

editions. True, there are book manufacturers abroad who are capable of producing high quality edition bindings. Unfortunately, the majority are not. Some still use animal glues on the text blocks which in time

will turn brittle. Others are not aware that hotmelt glue and sheet-fed printed sheets may have an unfortunate interaction.

We investigated at RIT many incidents where expensive coffee table bindings came apart. This, despite the fact that the publisher specified the very best method of binding, Smyth sewing, which is sewing through the fold. What is going-on? In offset lithography, a coated sheet is printed and covered with solid colors of ink in several passes on a 4-color, 5-color or 6-color press. In earlier days, when the presses cycled around 5,000 sheets per hour, the ink had a chance to dry. These days, printing presses cycle between 15,000 to 20,000 sheets per hour. To prevent the wet, printed sheets from sticking together, printers use quick-setting inks which set only on the surface. The chemicals underneath may remain in a wet stage for three months! If those sewn book blocks are then glued off with a hotmelt adhesive, ink solvent migration will occur. Interestingly, the bound books will leave the bindery intact, meeting or exceeding all industry expectations with regard to quality. Degradation and a chemical migration take time. After six weeks, the

covers may detach on soft cover bindings. Sewn, expensive books separate between the signatures. This is when people start to scratch their heads and wonder what is going on - these books were perfect! The editor of the *American Printer* magazine tells me that my article on

"Insidious Solvents," which covers the phenomenon in depth has the honor to be the one most requested from their archives.



Insidious inks or ink solvent migration can destroy even an expensive, sewn coffee table book (Australia)

As you can imagine, if a binding comes apart, it is not necessarily the binders' fault. How can you tell if ink solvent migration took place? The adhesive feels "sticky," not dry. With the exception of Antarctica, we investigated such migration problems coming from every continent!

The use of substandard materials is another major problem, especially on books coming from Asia and South America. This can have serious consequences as we discussed in a previous article on board warping.

Reinforcements

The lack of reinforcements is most often the reason why bindings coming from abroad are problematic. I have been asked to evaluate "library bound volumes" coming from other continents. Most bindings had serious shortcomings in this regard as the necessary reinforcements were absent—worse, many or most featured substandard materials. Have you ever seen a children's book bound abroad with muslin-drill reinforced endsheets? Most binders in these developing countries are not even familiar with such reinforcing materials or our superior endpaper structures used in library and text book bindings. For more than 25 years, we tested many school text books and library bound volumes at the RIT/LBI book testing laboratory and found that such books, bound in North America and in accordance with existing standards, are truly the very best in the entire world!

Covering materials are another chapter. In the U.S. and Canada, there are strict standards and best of all, tough performance specifications. In over 100 years and in close cooperation with material suppliers, book manufacturers and library binders, librarians representing the American Library Association (ALA) and schoolbook administrators have worked with the industry to develop the very best materials for binding. Outside the U.S. and Canada, such standards are virtually nonexistent.

Suggestions on Books Purchased Abroad

Recently, ABC-TV rated the Internet as one of the seven New Wonders of the World. I'm sure we all

agree. Librarians searching for specific printed works now have the entire world at their fingertips. While access to information these days is just incredible, we must admit that books still, and will for a long time to come, play a very important role. For example, if I search for specific, technical information on bookbinding, my extensive library and files of trade magazine articles are still far superior to any research on the Internet.

There is nothing wrong with purchasing printed works from abroad; in fact, it should be encouraged to satisfy the many needs of a very diverse population. Just look back at the task of my "first-class" librarian in Khartoum. Thanks to new technologies, we now have printed works coming



The author with his in-plant class at a book manufacturing facility in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

from virtually every corner of the world. But, the maintenance of a library collection back home is still another chapter. Luckily, as the well-respected preservation librarian Jan Merrill-Oldham once stated, "there is a growing interest among librarians in commercial library binding technology, this being fueled by the increased attention being paid to the preservation of library collections. These days, librarians are looking beyond sturdiness to user-friendly volumes that can easily be read and photocopied easily."

Librarians from ALA have had nothing but praise for the ANSI/NISO/LBI Z39-78-2000 Library Binding Standard as it does recognize and address the fact

The use of substandard materials is a major problem.

that different volumes may require different treatments in order to achieve the combined qualities of durability and quality. Therefore, if books arrive from other parts of the world, you should consider doing the following:

- Check for acidity in the paper.
- Evaluate the binding. Consider and estimate how many times the publication is going to be circulated.
- Consider library binding options.
- Digitize the content (some library binders offer such services).
- Keep the original and distribute facsimile, library bound copies only.

Finally, we are fully aware all library binding options are rather complex. To aid newer librarians in the maintenance of their collections, ALA will be publishing a revised and up-to-date *Guide to the Library Binding Institute Standard for Library Binding*. Jan Merrill-Oldham and Paul Parisi, the guide's co-authors, make understanding library binding a rather easy task. This publication is a worthwhile and useful tool for those working in our profession who share an interest in maintaining and improving the condition of library collections, no matter where the printed materials are coming from. 

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40,000 books bound in Asia arrived in this condition in the USA!