How to sell books good

Someone wrote in the other day to ask whether indexers had ever thought of using a computer to produce their cards. Some author announced he was doing a book on indexing [!] and was ‘astonished that [indexers] seem invariably still to be using pre new technology methods’. On the other hand, there are still people calling themselves indexers who seem to think an index is a vaguely alphabetical list of words in the text having capital letters. And an awful lot of authors and publishers would agree.

The fact is, of course, that like many other products, information has no value whatever to people who don’t know they need it. This is why the information industry these days is about packaging: it is the packaging which promotes recognition of the information need, and therefore sells the product. Now packaging is not just the carton the personal computer comes in, or the jacket on the book: it is the thing that creates an image for the user. A packaged holiday is not about the cheapo air fare and the hotel, it is about the sun, sand and sex the purchaser hopes to enjoy. An executive superdeluxe desktop PC is not about getting last Monday’s production figures on screen instead of on a piece of paper: it is about all those hi-tech bleeps that tell the executive he is doing something big and macho instead of just pushing paper.

And the book? We can all think of misleading titles, dirty pictures on the jacket, and text apparently lifted randomly from some blurb-bank. But the kind of books we are concerned with are surely different? Surely our publishers are not selling fantasies? Are they not selling information? I am afraid the answer is, no, they are not. They are selling an exam pass, a well cooked dinner, a weapon in the struggle against capitalism/sexism/communism, a job done a little better, an evening’s entertainment, inflation to the intellectual ego. Remember the package holiday: the product is what readers hope to achieve; what they are prepared to exchange value for.

So the question the reader is asking is, ‘Will it get me where I want to be?’ An effective book packager knows that the presence or absence of an index will help the intending buyer to answer those questions. Unfortunately, the provision of an index is frequently a knee-jerk reaction: this is a serious book therefore it must have one of those double-column bits on the spare pages at the back. Like the musical bleeps on the PC, the index just has to be there—it doesn’t have to do anything.

The bitter truth is that we have to prove to publishers that good indexes sell books, otherwise there is no reason on earth for us to be paid to do them. Book indexes—like databases—have to be judged as effective mechanisms for information retrieval. Book indexers must package themselves as information professionals—not as artists—and most certainly not as filing clerks. Professionalism implies a basis of knowledge and research, the promotion of standards by which the product can be judged, and, crucially, some guarantee of the professional competence of practitioners.

At this point I began to be amazingly didactic about professionalism, international co-operation, common ground among back-of-the-book and collection indexers, and do you realize it is 26 years since NLM started to computerize indexing? It sounded horribly familiar. So I will get back to what I intended to say, which is that the cover price of The Indexer will increase to £7.50 from the next issue. Members of the four societies will receive a substantial discount, bringing the charge to them down to at most £4.25, less if we can do it for less. And you will be relieved to hear that we don’t envisage another price rise for the foreseeable future. For the last two years, the Society of Indexers has been selling the journal at a loss, which means that SI members have been subsidizing all the other subscribers. We can use this money better in raising the profile of the whole profession to the benefit of all indexers.

In part this means increasing the international coverage of the journal, and the American Society of Indexers and SI are looking at ways of achieving this. In part also it means looking at other kinds of international co-operation, particularly in professional and indexing standards. Initial discussions among the four societies make it clear that this is not going to be easy, or happen very quickly. SI, in particular, has members spread over four continents. In all the many countries where indexers index and unemployed envelope addressers make their weird lists and authors with PCs occasionally remember to tag significant words for the computer to sort in ASCII... the problems are the same, and so are the opportunities.

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