

## Johannes Gutenberg and the Twenty-First Century

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I think that **Johannes Gutenberg** went to the grave without knowing what a fortunate man he'd been to have lived, worked, and invented in the 15th century, rather than in our own, and so able to develop movable type and change the world without need of a vision statement, probably without much of a marketing plan, and even with no statement of values.

He did it all without the benefit of focus groups, or of discussion groups. Websites and listservs were far into the future. He probably did do FAQs, but he did them orally, as needed.

Mailing lists, direct mail, space ads, color brochures, and packets full of literature all later became necessities, thanks to his invention, but he had no need of them himself. Press releases and newspaper feature stories, also, were unnecessary.

Gutenberg could afford to skip the strategic alliances and didn't have to locate customers who would partner with him, since he needed no beta sites.

If Gutenberg had lived today, he would have had to pin on his yellow exhibitor's badge, and attend ALA. And in 1999, there's no doubt he would even have had to register for a pre-conference, maybe even speak at one, and somebody would have had to explain to poor Gutenberg what that meant.

All of this probably would have discouraged him and Gutenberg might have burned his press, opened up a high-end scriptorium instead, muttering, "Let's just forget about the whole idea."

Actually, Gutenberg must have been quite a salesman of a kind, because he had to attract the best craftsmen to his shop and had to raise lots of capital in support of his idea. He went into debt past a million of today's dollars in order to produce his famous Bible in the 1450s. But he attended to the demands of invention and printing better than he did to matters of business. Gutenberg delivered the functionality, in today's terms, but he went broke doing so, and it was others who finally brought his invention to market.

Today, in the realm of e-books, we have the marketing end of it down pretty well; but we're still working on the functionality. Even the word "e-book" itself is a little odd, since what about them are like a book? Not all that much, if you think about it. The text probably starts out the same, and the original author is the same, and probably the title; past that, parallels get harder to

find. We use the word "book" as a convenience, since we haven't thought of a better one.

Potential users of e-books are by and large taking a cautious, I'm-in-no-hurry, type of attitude. That stance is the one that library book vendors, at least until now, also have taken. The vendors, by the way, have also been extremely busy and somewhat distracted, maybe to a degree more than wise, by the need to deal with the 50,000+ new printed books published annually in the United States.

There also are plenty of electronic texts, or e-books, out there. But, in considering the possible role of the traditional book vendor in the dissemination of e-books, what has not yet happened is the ongoing demand for a large number of products from a large number of customers willing to pay for them; customers who buy them in such a way as to create a large number of decisions and transactions requiring certain routine task, which are repeated over and over and over again; repeated so often, in fact, that it makes sense for buyer and seller to hire out, for pay, some of these tasks to a third party, the vendor, that is.

That's the part we always get, the drudgery. But we're pretty good at it by now, used to it even, and in fact have developed certain structures effective in the print world that might transfer well to the world of e-books.

First, we consolidate orders. For the library, that means fewer publishers and distributors to deal with directly. For the publishers and distributors, that means fewer customer transactions to have to process. Following the order, we consolidate the billings, with the same benefits.

In between, and before and after for that matter, we help to consolidate the flow of information between original seller and ultimate buyer. This ranges from macro-level product information, to micro-level information, such as order status.

Not all of these things will necessarily work the same at all in the e-book world as they have worked in the world of print. Title-by-title orders, for example, may not happen; and if they do we'll have to re-think, for one more small example, statuses such as "temporarily out-of-stock," and instead work on new ways of saying, "the server's down."

Conversely, there may well be new transaction-consolidation opportunities. Rights transactions, for example, unneces-

sary in the print world, are one of the major hurdles in the way of today's e-book, a problem looking for a solution.

One set of vendor-based structures with particular potential for the e-book might be the approval plan. Through the approval plan mechanism, vendors already know how to gather information about new titles from publishers and distributors; know how to verify, supplement, and arrange that information; then how and when to present the information, in both paper and electronic formats; even know which libraries will be interested in a given title and sometimes who within the library needs to be alerted; have some experience in linking different versions of the same title in their systems; know what to do when a customer doesn't want what has been provided; and, at the end of a period or whenever a customer wants, can generate all kinds of reports tabulating what's happened.

If, as the e-book develops, the pattern becomes title-by-title purchase, as is true with printed books, many of these parallels have a chance of holding up. But if, instead, the dominant model for libraries will be to buy e-books as blocks of subject content, not one-by-one, what then? There'll be no need for the jobber or vendor or wholesaler, that is, someone who knows how to consolidate many small transactions into larger ones. Yet we may still need a middleman, but of a different kind, the broker or agent, someone who knows how to facilitate smaller numbers of larger transactions.


But wait, isn't that what an organization like netLibrary already does? Yes, it is, of course, and perhaps we will end up with two separate types of book vendors, one for print and one for e-books. Or, there will be two types but the lines will blur, as they learn to cooperate with one another, with the e-book vendor drawing upon what is the real expertise of today's traditional book vendor, the intimate knowledge of library customs, cultures, routines, and workflows, and the personal and organizational relationships and credibility hard-earned by the book vendor over the years. Or, perhaps these separate vendors will merge into one. We might see a significant level of production and demand for free e-books, where there won't necessarily be a commercial transaction at all. Per-

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haps the dominant model on campus will be departmental purchase of e-books, without library involvement. Or perhaps it will be consortial buying.

Or, perhaps all of these things will happen, maybe all at once, maybe in some kind of disordered sequence. Perhaps this will be a brand new area of publishing chaos.

We in the business of being vendors can't promise, today, to succeed at any of those more attractive possibilities, but I do know that all of us will be working as well as we know how to avoid that last one. 

*“Linking  
Publishers, Vendors  
and Librarians”*



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