

eBook Issues for Libraries

by Matthew Williams, Director, Kearney Public Library

Because ebook questions and comments are on the forefront of the questions and comments received during our strategic planning process, we're featuring a guest columnist who is active in our ebook consortium, and whose patrons deal with all the same ebook issues as our patrons.

Kearney Public Library has a great service that most of you, if not all, have heard of. We offer eBooks free. If you own a Kindle or a Nook or an Ipad you can go to our website and click on the link for downloadable audio and eBooks and you are taken to a site run by Overdrive where you can borrow the books.

However, as wonderful as this service is there are serious problems with the system of bringing eBooks to libraries. We constantly run into people who ask us why the library doesn't buy more titles or offer all the best-sellers. Are we falling down on the job? Asleep at the wheel? The answer is a definitive no. We actually have no choice in the matter. This column will address this issue with fact and informed opinions.

The first thing you need to know is that the reason we can afford to offer this service to you is because we are part of a consortium of over 100 libraries that all chip in to buy the service. And we are consistently the number one library in terms of use of the service. Books are chosen by a team of librarians from various libraries. We also have a service whereby we buy extra copies of best sellers that are only for our users to make the waiting list go faster for you. So, is it the consortium's fault we don't have more titles? Are the choosers not doing their job? No, again.

There are a handful of companies that offer this service to libraries. We use Overdrive because they offer the greatest selection. Overdrive negotiates with all the publishers and then provides the software and the eBooks in one handy place for us. So, is Overdrive holding out on us? Of course not. That would make no sense at all from a business standpoint. They want us to buy titles from them.

So, who does that leave to blame? There is only one stop left on this train ride – the Publishers (with a capital P). There are only six major publishers in North America (the world, really). They are known as the Big Six. And they are afraid. The eBook market is a fledgling business and they want to make sure they are not undercut. And as ridiculous as it sounds, libraries have become the target of their fears. Why should people buy them when they can just download them for free? And eBooks don't wear out like hardcovers so libraries don't have to pay to replace them and the publishers will lose money there as well. It seems like a case of the publishers vs. the big bad libraries and it is frustrating. What really is happening is that the publishers are struggling to build a business model that will benefit both them and libraries. Because I do think in the end they realize how important libraries are to them.

I believe the fears of these publishers are unfounded. It is my sincere belief that libraries aid the sale of books much more than they harm them. And recent studies by the Pew Charitable trust back me up. Libraries introduce readers to authors. People will take a chance on an author they can check out for free at the library and if they like them they may very well purchase it or their next book. The studies show that readers are both borrowers and buyers. It is not an either or equation.

Here is a snapshot of the stance of the Big Six concerning libraries and eBooks:

- Random House. This publisher marks up their eBooks up to 300% for libraries. No, that is not a typo. What you can buy for \$19.99 on Amazon could cost us \$59.97. Can't buy too many copies at that price so we get only the top 10.
- Simon & Schuster. This publisher won't sell eBooks to libraries. No Evanovich for our patrons. Sorry.
- Harper Collins. This library will sell the eBooks to libraries, but only for 26 checkouts. Then the library must rebuy the book. As if it is a hardcover wearing out after use. Libraries were very mad at this move and the consortium voted to boycott Harper Collins. However, compared to not selling, or a 300% markup, it seems positively sane even though the premise is nonsensical on its face. (Ever try to replace a hardcover after a couple years? Out of print. And isn't the point of an eBook is that it doesn't wear out?) My opinion is the boycott should end. Enough is enough and our patrons deserve to get these titles. And when the fervor dies down we don't have to repurchase. Note: Kearney Public Library does purchase these eBooks on our own when possible. Also, there are books we purchased before this went into effect.
- Penguin. Penguin use to provide backlist eBooks to Overdrive and we have the ones we purchased then. Penguin felt that when Overdrive made a deal with Amazon to download to kindles by routing through the Amazon site they made it too easy. So, the only Penguin books available are ones already purchased before they withdrew. Recently Penguin did negotiate a deal with Queens Public Library to provide eBooks to that library.
- Macmillan. This publisher also won't sell eBooks to libraries.
- Hachette. This publisher won't sell eBooks to libraries.

So without most of the Big Six what is available? Overdrive works with well over 200 smaller publishers including Allen & Unwin, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Little, Brown and Company, McGraw-Hill, Pottermore (Harry Potter), Thomas Nelson Inc., Tyndale House, and Zondervan. Some of these publishers are pretty large even if they don't make the Big Six. This makes Overdrive the source with the best selection for libraries.

What does the future hold for eBooks? I am going to be optimistic and predict that within five years libraries will be able to provide books from every publisher. I

really believe that most publishers want to work with libraries and that they will come to a compromise that will benefit everyone involved. My advice to frustrated patrons is this: write to the publishers and complain. If everyone does this they will respond. Meanwhile, enjoy what is available and support your local library.