

GETTING UP TO SPEED ON ACCE

Accessibility and sustainability are issues that will play an increasingly important role in the publishing industry's future. If the ongoing supply chain issues and the surprising surge in demand for books over the past two and a half years have proven anything, it's that there is no longer any sense of "normal" for business and a key to future growth will be how one chooses to operate a publishing house.

Both issues were the topic of the Publishing Now '22 webinar, titled "The Impact of Accessibility and Sustainability on Your Business," moderated by PW v-p and editorial director Jim Milliot and featuring Kristen McLean, executive director and industry analyst at NPD Books; Bill Kasdorf, principal of Kasdorf & Associates and founding partner of Publishing Technology Partners; and Rachel Martin, global director of sustainability at Elsevier. The program was presented by PW with support from Westchester Publishing Services.

"This is not 'return to business as usual,'" warned McLean, during her assessment of the current sales environment as publishing heads into the fourth quarter. After a historic year for print book sales in the U.S. in 2021, McLean pointed to how "the pandemic elevated the industry in a way that we're going to see elevated growth." She noted that while sales are down about 5% in 2022 compared to 2021, they are still above the pre-pandemic levels of 2019.

Among notable contributions to what is still a strong sales performance for print books is the impact of BookTok. "People are ready for a little escapist fiction, and it's a trend the platform is really pushing," McLean explained. Though BookTok's effects have largely impacted the backlist, McLean cited BookTok as a major contributor in sales of books in the romance, horror, and mystery/thriller categories. Adult nonfiction sales have slowed, but McLean remained optimistic, noting that "we have some very large titles coming" in Q4.

Through mid-September, backlist sales continued to take market share away from the frontlist. This is partly due to the closure of bricks-and-mortar stores where, as McLean explained, "frontlist titles have often been discov-



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ered." Online stores have prioritized the purchase of backlist, limiting organic discoverability for newer titles. "There's some very deep conver-

sation within the trade industry about this right now," McLean said. Publishers are now more than ever analyzing where to invest.

"E-book sales are down from a high point in 2020," McLean said. "Print is about 60%–65% of the business, with 20% or so going to e-books and the rest to audio."

When asked about a projection of sales for the remainder of the year, McLean was optimistic. "I think we're going to have a strong holiday season," she said, noting that in many stores holiday promotions have already begun.

When asked about prevailing issues, including the supply chain, McLean replied with encouragement: "We're seeing people plan ahead, and getting printing done early."

Keys to accessibility

The conversation shifted to the first of the webinar's key topics: accessibility. Kasdorf stressed he is not talking about access issues, such as open access, but rather "the accessibility of your content to everybody, especially people with disabilities." The landscape has changed for the better, particularly in the last few years, Kasdorf reported. Accessibility has hit the publishing mainstream, Kasdorf said, citing how a recent column he wrote for *PW* on alt text received a couple thousand views shortly after it was posted. "People want to get their alt text fixed correctly," he surmised.

Kasdorf said one reason accessibility has become easier

Total Market YTD 5-Year Trend

While units are down in 2022, the market is +14% to pre-pandemic levels



Slide showing five-year unit sales performance presented by BookScan's Kristen McLean.

ACCESSIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

to accomplish is that standards for both the accessibility of content and the systems that deliver content are now based on web standards. The protocols and guidelines within ready access for companies seeking to meet accessibility standards include WCAG, or Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, which are the standard for accessibility requirements all over the world, Kasdorf explained. These guidelines are designed to ensure that not only websites but also e-books and anything utilizing discoverable text (like HTML) can be up to the modern technological standard. The pressure is on for publishers to meet those standards, with Kasdorf mentioning that the European Union is requiring publishers to have their e-books accessible by 2025.

Kasdorf noted that “most of the time, publishers aren’t the ones making the EPUB files.” In many cases, Kasdorf said, it’s vendors like Westchester that are making the files, which he called a good development, since many vendors are already experts in ensuring accessibility of those files. The bottom line, Kasdorf said, is that even if a publisher doesn’t have the technical staff to make its content accessible, its vendor likely can do it. He also advised publishers to be sure the specs they are giving their vendors are up-to-date and encouraged publishers to make sure all their departments, including editorial, are aware of accessibility issues. “Workflows that are more aware of accessibility will ideally contribute to making the content more accessible,” he said.

As more publishers become accessibility certified, Kasdorf said, peer pressure is making their competitors also become certified, and as a result standards are now being met at an encouraging rate. Publishers are seeking certification for their titles, placing renewed importance in meeting accessibility standards. Asked how publishers can make sure they are taking the correct steps in moving toward accessibility, Kasdorf emphasized that they should look for qualified vendors. He said Benetech is an independent, third-party resource that conducts the certifications for both publishers and vendors through its GCA (Global Certified Accessible) program. For an in-house solution regarding e-books, Kasdorf pointed to the DAISY Consortium and its free tool Ace by Daisy, which he said is “spectacularly useful for analyzing an EPUB and reporting any accessibility issues.”

Getting a handle on sustainability

In her remarks, Martin also began by offering up a definition, acknowledging that sustainability means different things to different people, ranging from concerns about the environ-

ment to the sustainability of business models. “For sustainability, it really is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability for future generations to meet their needs,” Martin said. Citing the UN’s 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), Martin stressed the importance of its interconnectedness. “We can’t just focus on one,” she said, in explaining how progress almost never is lateral. “There are two broad buckets to think about” for the publishing industry, she said. “The first is a responsible organization.” This includes routine practices, something as simple as switching to LED light bulbs or being conscious of how much travel employees take every year. “It’s about corporate responsibility.”

Responsibility involves an assessment of a company’s fair work practices, asking questions that include but are not limited to, as Martin offered, “Who are your suppliers? Do you have an ethical supply chain?” In addition to being aware of environmental footprints, increased mindfulness of a company’s workforce contributes to its sustainability now and in the future.

“It all starts with the Publishers Compact,” Martin said. Launched by the International Publishers Association and the United Nations, the Publishers Compact is designed to focus on the various SDGs in relation to the publishing industry. “It’s got over 300 signatures and outlines some really broad and very simple things that you can do,” Martin explained. For example, Martin said, a company can appoint someone like herself who can advocate for reaching certain targets pertaining to the environment or another SDG.

Martin said she is often approached by people asking how they can begin to get involved with sustainability issues. “The practical first step is to make a pledge, make a commitment,” she said, noting that Elsevier signed a climate pledge last year for the publisher to become net-zero on carbon emissions by 2040. To hit that target, Elsevier is asking its vendors throughout the supply chain to give them their emissions data. Elsevier has also pledged to reduce its carbon emissions generated by business travel by 50%, Martin said, noting that in 2019, the average Elsevier business traveler generated nine tons of carbon from air travel alone.

Martin pointed out that publishers are in a unique position among businesses to advance knowledge and research about the environmental health of the planet. A children’s book publisher, for example, can make sure that children are aware of climate issues and help them understand what sustainable behaviors are.