

EBL EBook Library

This newest entry into the e-book aggregator/distributor marketplace was conceived and created in consultation with librarians and publishers by EBooks Corp., the Australian online bookseller. EBL announced its existence at the 2004 ALA conference and will probably go live in the fall.

EBL specifically aims for the academic and research library market and will focus initially on scientific, technical, and medical (STM) books. Several heavy-hitter STM and scholarly publishers have announced participation and the company continues to line up additional content.

Focusing on the drawbacks of existing systems, EBL intends to build a better mousetrap. It has set out to offer flexible options for publishers to manage access to their content and for librarians to present it to their users.

Its pricing also is adaptable to differing needs. It has built in features—reserves and course pack capabilities, which are especially attractive to academic libraries. Books are full-text searchable and free MARC records are provided.

A basic premise of the EBL scheme is that the content and the e-book lending platform are purchased separately. Libraries make individual title selections from participating publishers that can be purchased from EBL or from designated agents (Dawson's is its U.K.-based distributor and Blackwell's is its North America-based distributor).

Libraries own the e-books they purchase just as they own whatever else they acquire for their collections. The price of the e-book is set by the publisher. EBL recommends the e-price should be equal to the print price, but publishers are free to charge either more or less for the electronic version. Libraries may negotiate discounts for high-volume purchases and special terms are available for consortia.

Libraries buy the EBL platform separately, at a one-time cost of \$5,000 (or \$6,000 if they want to spread out payments). An annual hosting fee is due one year later. This fee is \$1,000 if paid up-front (or \$1,500 per year, if paid in increments). These prices are preliminary. Final prices may be lower.

A pay-as-you-go option also is available. The idea is to give libraries of all sizes a way to provide the service drawing on whatever pots of money may be available.

EBL offers three standard access modes associated with different types of material: Non-Linear Lending, Textbook, and Unlimited—as well as a pay-per-use, Short Term Circulation option. Non-Linear Lending, the usual mode of access, takes a unique approach to publisher anxieties and the digital rights management problem.

EBL EBook Library,
www.library.ebooks.com

By eliminating the one-user/one-book, EBL allows for multiple concurrent use of a title for up to 325 loan days per year. The library sets the loan period and circulations can occur in any pattern: randomly (or evenly) distributed throughout the year or concentrated during certain high-use periods.

If a book has a one-week loan period and three users check it out on the same day, these will be counted as 21 loans. The book will then have 304 loans remaining for the year.

No magical significance is attached to the choice of 325. That number is simply what publishers feel comfortable with as an approximation of a year's use of a book and, in fact, has not yet been set in stone.

If the volume is in use for more than 325 days before the end of the year, libraries can handle this volume either by buying a second copy or by allowing demands on the book to be met in pay-per-use (Short Term Circulation) mode. E-mail alerts are dispatched to the library when the year's allotment of loans is running low.

The pay-per-use rental option also can be used as an alternative to interlibrary loan for access to books in EBL's collection that the library has not selected. Publishers set the rental fee, but they are encouraged by EBL to make charges competitive with typical interlibrary loan costs. The pay-per-use option is limited to a single user.

Though the Non-Linear Lending mode will predominate, publishers also can choose to define an e-book as a textbook or as the kind of material for which unlimited access should be provided. Textbooks will have a limited number of concurrent users. Titles that can be accessed an unlimited number of times by an unlimited number of users are usually reference sources and they will be priced accordingly.

For all books, printing is limited to no more than 20% of the pages in the book for each patron. Each user also can copy or paste up to 5% of total pages. Libraries can apply to the publisher for additional rights if desired.

Users can browse books before checking them out and download them to a PC, a laptop, or a PDA. Once downloaded, they also can transfer books to no more than two other devices. All activities are tracked by the EBL reader that automatically downloads with the book.

EBL has provisions for course reserve use of whole books or chapters within books and also will have a course pack arrangement. Revenue is returned to the publisher for these uses and various safeguards are built in to satisfy publisher concerns:

- Permission is granted to put one chapter per book on reserve at no charge.
- Only one user at a time can use it for a length of time specified by the library.
- If more chapters are wanted for reserve, they can be purchased for a small fee.
- Use of chapters for reserves does not count as a loan against the yearly allotment for the book.
- Books with a chapter on reserve still circulate to other users in the normal way.

EBL presents an example of how an online system can be designed to adapt to a range of requirements. The flexibility in pricing is a plus. The Non-Linear Lending Model provides a way to address multiuser access and peak-use periods.

The reserves plan allows simultaneous circulation of a volume and use of a chapter for reserve.

Giving libraries a lot of ways to benefit from the content they purchase, however, comes at a cost in administrative overhead. EBL requires the designation of a coordinator who, armed with a hefty manual, will set parameters for system operation.

If desired, individual selectors can be authorized to make selections and receive alerts when loan allotments for certain books are running out. Similarly, the interlibrary loan librarian can be designated to manage rentals. The library also would be able to set different loan periods for faculty, students, or other types of users for both books circulated and books rented.

For a large collection, responding to alerts could be a big job. Although the system can be set to automatically to purchase a second copy of a book that has been loaned 325 times before the year is out, most librarians would probably want to have some kind of review before purchasing a duplicate or authorizing rental. Patrons also will need a bit of instruction to understand their options.

All these examples illustrate both the beauty of how much can be done in the online environment and the downside of how complex it may become when the divergent needs of both publishers and libraries must be satisfied.

On the other hand, libraries can make the online environment simple by taking advantage of only some of the opportunities offered by EBL's finely tuned solution for maximizing their investment in e-books. Separating the purchase of the platform from the acquisition of the content and selling the platform at a reasonable cost coverable in several different ways are truly advanced ideas.