

Publishing Educational Books and Materials—Part 3: Marketing Textbooks and Professional Books

by Mary Ellen Lepionka 2/24/08

My previous article suggested ways to cross-market children's literature and young adult books to school markets, especially to school libraries and school district reading programs. Strategies include earning reviews and awards, getting on approved reading lists, submitting to Lexile-based reading programs, determining readability and curriculum fit, having a library binding option and cataloguing information, working through library wholesalers and the catalogs of other school publishers, making school visits, and becoming a vendor of record to school bookstores.

This article now surveys what is involved in marketing textbooks and other instructional materials, which is different from cross-marketing tradebooks, I also address how higher education textbook markets differ from those for professional books.

Elhi textbooks (for elementary and high school students) cover the core curriculum and are the province of big players in the industry. The cost of creating, producing, vetting, and fielding core textbooks, such as language arts readers and histories of the United States, may be prohibitively high for small publishers. Yet small publishers fill an important niche in this market by providing print and electronic supplements and consumables for classroom use. Small publishers also provide titles that big players cannot, such as supplements about local and regional subjects that tie in with district and state curricula.

Even more than in cross-marketing trade books, publishers of textbook supplements must know how their products fulfill national, subject area, state, and local standards. Submitting a product for textbook adoption involves a lot of paperwork, because publishers must demonstrate how their project meets all relevant standards. It's important to find out about relevant standards well in advance, preferably when your product is still in development. That way, you can modify your product for better market fit and can develop the marketing tools you will need to sell your product to citizens and educators.

Educational materials normally are held to higher standards for accuracy, completeness, currency, and authority. High-profile subject area experts, educators, and classroom teachers need to review, test, and endorse your product. A teacher's guide needs to accompany student supplements intended for distribution as class sets. And your non-fiction product needs to include references or a bibliography somewhere in its package. Educational materials for private, parochial, and home schools often have additional requirements for acceptability.

For more information about national standards in school English, mathematics, social studies, history, geology, technology, and art, see <http://www.education-world.com/standards/>. This site also has links to all the state standards, by state. Other links will take you to national content standards for science, physical education, civics, music, and other areas. The standards also include skill sets (such as reasoning, critical thinking, problem solving, reading, writing, or calculating) and are calibrated to grade levels. How does your product fit in with these subject area and skill standards? To get ideas on how to align your product with the various standards, see Teacher Tap, a site

for teachers seeking to align national and state standards with their local curriculum standards (<http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic28.htm>).

Understanding standards and aligning your products with them are only the beginning. You also need to understand the textbook adoption process, which varies from state to state. In about half the states, state departments of education handle the approval process that makes books eligible for adoption throughout the state. School districts can order only textbooks and ancillaries that are on the approved list. In the other half of the states, individual school districts manage open textbook adoptions.

One of the best resources for understanding the textbook adoption process in general is provided at www.tea.state.tx.us/textbooks/adoptprocess/index.html by the Texas Education Agency. Texas defines its state standards in terms of Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and at http://math.escweb.net/textbook/Presentation_Files/index.html there is an audio slide show explaining how to submit instructional materials that meet the TEKS in math. This is a good example, and many other states have online explanations of their adoption processes as well.

Whether you are seeking a state adoption or an open adoption, submitting a product in a bid for adoption is an involved process requiring long lead times. Long lead times are needed for sampling and approvals, as everyone on the adoption committee must receive and examine a copy of your product and discuss and vote on it, often after a public hearing. In addition, adoptions are by grade level and subject area and do not come up every year. New products for 5th grade science, for example, may be considered for adoption only once every three or five years. State adoption schedules, procedures, and standards contribute to the costs that make it difficult for small publishers to compete in the elhi market. Sampling costs and book depository fees add to the expense.

In addition, textbook supplements often must meet product acceptance criteria put forth by adoption committees. These criteria vary widely and may affect publishers' bottom lines. Some states and districts even specify acceptable trim sizes, paper quality, binding, print run quantity, pricing, shipping standards, and so on. Thus, as you can see, finding out in advance about the adoption standards and process in a state or school district is a critical task. For a comprehensive list of state contacts for getting information about textbook approval procedures, see Linda Carlson's article, *Selling to the Elhi Market: Part 2, Getting Books Approved and Adopted* (*PMA Newsletter*, July, 2007).

Research confirms widely held beliefs that state adoption processes are deeply flawed, as pointed out in a 2003 Fordham Institute study (see www.edexcellence.net/institute/publication/publication.cfm?id=335).

Reforms in state adoptions are slow to come, however, so it would be wise to decide at the outset if potential ROI (return on investment) is worth the hassle for your products and company. It's easy to feel overwhelmed in the elhi textbook market in any case. Savvy small publishers start by working within their own school district and state and then expanding within their region.

Note that books for teachers are not in the elhi market, just as books for college instructors are not in the college market. The elhi and college markets are for student distribution. Books for teachers and college instructors, on the other hand, are professional books and are sold to end users and academic libraries through direct

marketing, catalog sales, library wholesalers, and online retail stores. An exception is books for teachers that are intended as supplements in teacher education courses, which are sold via college stores through course adoption. College stores may be independent or managed by chains such as Barnes and Noble (www.bkstore.com) or Follett (www.fheg.follett.com). In any case, college stores do not buy textbooks or supplements unless they have been explicitly ordered by an instructor, academic department, or academic institution.

Some distributors, such as Independent Publishers Group (www.ipgbook.com) have divisions specializing in academic books that may be adopted as course supplements, but distributors sell principally to bookstores. See also John Kremer's list of academic wholesalers and distributors at www.bookmarket.com. Library wholesalers with divisions specializing in academic books include, for example, Baker and Taylor's Yankee Book Peddler (www.ybp.com) and J.A. Majors (www.majors.com). Small publishers sometimes can coattail on the catalogues of larger publishers in their market and can exhibit along with bigger publishers at academic library shows and at the conventions of academic associations.

Some state college and community college systems adopt books for courses on a statewide basis, similar to state adoptions of elhi textbooks. More typically, however, in the college textbook market, individual instructors or committees formed in academic departments are the adopters. Adoptions are by semester or academic year, so less lead time is involved than in the elhi market. Nevertheless, instructors often must choose texts a semester in advance to enable college stores to acquire them and students to buy them before the semester starts in which the course is taught. College textbook adoptions are guided by course syllabi for the courses listed in the institution's course catalogue. As a result, governmental and educational standards are less relevant. Rather, your product must fit what instructors who teach the course want. As always, market research remains the crucial first step.

Last September I gave a podcast about higher education publishing (still accessible, I believe, through www.meetingbridge.com/mwy/pmamasterlp.htm). Also, developing and publishing academic materials is the subject of my blog, accessible at my web site, where you also will find many relevant links for small publishers. This article is the third and last in a series that explored how to determine where your products fit in the education market, whether those products are market ready, who your real customers are, and how to reach them. I wish readers the best of luck!

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Mary Ellen Lepionka founded Atlantic Path Publishing in Gloucester, MA, in 2002 (www.atlanticpathpublishing.com) and is the author of professional books and articles on academic writing and textbook publishing. Mary Ellen is a member of SPAN and PMA and also a board member of the Independent Publishers of New England (www.ipne.org).