

The image shows a tablet computer lying on a surface surrounded by several physical books. The books have various colored covers: purple, brown, blue, green, and dark blue. The tablet screen is white and displays the title of the survey in a bold, red, serif font. The text is centered and reads:

***Survey of
Ebook
Penetration
and Use
in U.S. Public
Libraries***

November 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Electronic books have been around in some form for decades, but it has only been in the last several years that a more or less significant market for them has emerged, driven largely by the introduction of next-generation ebook readers like the Amazon Kindle, the Sony Reader, the Barnes & Noble Nook that have made e-reading a convenient, comfortable, and relatively inexpensive activity.

According to Association of American Publishers data, in 2008 ebook sales accounted for approximately 0.5% of all U.S. book sales; a year later, they accounted for 1.3%.¹ At present, ebooks represent a tiny fraction of all book sales, but they are growing. In fact, between 2002 and 2009, ebook sales had a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 71%, the highest of any book category. (By way of comparison, adult hardcover books had a CAGR in this same period of 1.3% and adult paperbacks of 2.6%.)

As interest in and a preference for ebooks grows in the culture at large, libraries need to follow suit. Ebooks exist alongside printed books, and serve a variety of needs for library patrons. Electronic reference books can be easier to navigate and search than their printed counterparts, making them favored among students. One highly desired feature of electronic reading devices is the ability to enlarge or reduce the font size, giving visually impaired readers the ability to create, in essence, their own large-print edition of a book. Ebooks also solve some problems for libraries. They don't wear out or get damaged,² they don't need to be replaced, and they can't easily get misplaced by careless users. They also don't require physical storage space; many libraries are strapped for space. Ebooks also allow libraries to serve and offer books to remote users, customers who may not be able to physically make it into the library.

One of the disadvantages of ebooks, and in fact one of the factors that has impeded ebook adoption in the book-buying/reading population as a whole, is the plethora of mutually incompatible formats and often draconian digital rights management (DRM) schemes.

Public libraries have some unique concerns that make them different from other book buyers and ebook users. Chief among them is that—especially in the current economic climate—budgets are not typically lavish. At the same time, libraries must serve the needs of a diverse population, whose members span the entire length of the technical literacy spectrum, and who all bring their unique hardware devices to attempt to read library ebooks. Making ebook holdings accessible to all users who want them can be a challenge.

The following data is based on 781 U.S. public libraries answering our survey.

¹ Association of American Publishers 2009 SI Report: Estimated Book Publishing Industry Net Sales 2002–2009, Management Practice, http://publishers.org/main/IndustryStats/indStats_02.htm.

² Yes, files can get corrupted, but not as easily as, say, exposing a library book to rain, household pets, and other sources of damage.

Ebook Collections

Almost three-fourths of public libraries (72%) say they currently offer ebooks to users. On average they own or subscribe to more than 1,500 ebooks (mean 1,529; median 813). These libraries regard ebooks in terms of vast collection development, not one-off purchasing.

“This is one of our fastest growing services. We have centralized collection development, and one selector now concentrates on downloadables. It is as important as any other concentration, and that is what we attribute the growth in circulation to.”

As for the 28% of public libraries that currently don't offer ebooks, 32% plan to offer ebooks in the next 12 months, while a further 28% plan to offer ebooks in the next couple of years. Small libraries with materials budgets of under \$50,000 are the least likely to be planning to offer ebooks.

| We plan to offer ebooks... | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| In the next 12 months | 32% |
| 1 to 2 years from now | 28% |
| Longer than 2 years from now | 16% |
| No plans to offer ebooks | 24% |

The 24% that say they have no plans to offer ebooks may end up changing their minds as demand from users grows. Still, there is a segment of the overall library market that has not been seeing demand for ebooks. A preference for ebooks is not universal (remember that ebooks only account for 1.3% of all book sales), and while it's growing, it's not growing everywhere or at the same rate everywhere. It's even conceivable—given many of the verbatim comments that we received from our survey respondents—that libraries and users may become less enthusiastic about the idea of ebooks, especially given the challenges that many have with regard to mutually incompatible formats, user-unfriendliness, high cost, and lack of technical and customer support.

When we ask about the primary driver of ebook purchases, the majority (77%) of public libraries cited “projected usage” based on current usage statistics, with “user request” not far behind (64%).

Looking ahead, the overwhelming majority of survey respondents (84%) expects ebook circulation to *increase* this year compared to last year, while only 15% expects it to remain the same. A slight 1% expects a decrease in ebook circulation. A decrease is mostly predicted by the very largest libraries. We speculate that this might be due to not having enough range of titles to meet demand.

When averaged out, the overall change expected in ebook circulation next year is an increase of 36%.

Ebook Readers and Formats

The laptop computer tends to be the hardware device on which most library users read ebooks, followed by a dedicated ebook reader such as a Kindle, Nook, Sony Reader, or even Apple iPad (which isn't really a *dedicated* ebook reader, but is often thought of as one). A full one-fourth of respondents “don't know” on what hardware their users are reading ebooks. (One of the purposes of offering ebooks is to facilitate remote or at-home access to the library's collection, which means that the library staff would really have no idea what users were reading on.)

| Device(s) on which library users most often read ebooks... | |
|---|-----|
| Personal laptop/Computer/Netbook | 61% |
| Dedicated ebook reader | 52% |
| Other portable device | 36% |
| Library computer | 16% |
| Don't know | 25% |
| Other | 2% |

In terms of ebook formats, the open standard ePub tends to be the most favored for ebooks—this is also the format required by the Apple iBook app on the iPad and iPhone. Other ebook readers can also read the ePub format. The near-ubiquitous PDF format garnered 42%; at one time, it was hoped that PDF would be the de facto standard format for e-books—and maybe to some extent it is. Again, though, 23% of respondents say that they “don't know, ebooks haven't caught on.”

| Preferred ebook format(s)... | |
|--|-----|
| ePub | 44% |
| PDF | 42% |
| Optimized for dedicated ebook device | 35% |
| Optimized for other mobile device | 24% |
| Don't know yet, ebooks haven't caught on | 23% |
| Full text HTML | 20% |
| Other | 8% |

The search for a single standard format for ebooks is highly desired by users, libraries, and even publishers. In many ways, all these folks are caught up in every ebook hardware manufacturer's desire to be the one offering that single standard. Each manufacturer offers its own proprietary format that is optimized for its particular reader, and which integrates its unique DRM scheme. Until the market shakes out further and a clear “winner” emerges, publishers and libraries will be required to offer titles in all formats, lest they run the risk of alienating users who can't find the titles they want on the device they prefer. The analogy is the old VHS vs. Beta situation back in the 1980s, when video rental shops were required to stock both formats, until Beta finally lost out.

“I feel ebooks are a big part of our library's future, but we are handicapped by lack of overlap in e-reader applications and the fact that many of the current readers do not work with library models.”

Ereader Circulation

We also asked if libraries circulate actual ereading devices and, overwhelmingly, they do not; 71% of all public libraries do not circulate preloaded e-readers, while a scant 5% do. But then 24% are considering it. Naturally, cost is a big barrier; there isn't just the one-time-only purchase cost of a device, there are upgrades, as well as the need to support and replace broken, lost or stolen ebook readers. Librarians are also likely awaiting device standardization before entering this arena.

Libraries that do circulate ereaders are most likely to offer the Sony Reader to patrons. The Sony Reader is currently the most library-friendly device for ebooks (particularly with OverDrive), however apps for the iPad, iPhone and android are currently in development by OverDrive.

Usage License and Circulation Interval

The vendor is typically the party that determines the usage license, and different vendors have different models, which is why 41% of public libraries say their license allows only "single ebook use at a time," 12% say "unlimited access/simultaneous use" and 39% say "both."

| Ebook usage license model... | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Single ebook use at a time | 41% |
| Unlimited access/simultaneous use | 12% |
| Both | 39% |
| Other | 8% |

In the verbatim comments we solicited from libraries, the inability to offer simultaneous use of ebook titles was one of the biggest complaints—and rightly so. This is one area where vendors need to do some work to take into account the difference between libraries and general consumers. It can be frustrating for libraries as well as users to have to put a hold on an ebook title—when there is little real need for it.

"Multiple access would be useful. The long list of 'holds' discourages some readers, particularly those who are used to the immediate access provided to many texts over the Internet."

Two or three weeks is, on average, the circulation interval for ebooks. One-fifth (21%) of respondents allow the user to specify the circulation interval, likely because the library (or, actually, the vendor) limits the number of ebooks that can be accessed simultaneously.

In those cases where specific ebook titles can't be accessed simultaneously, libraries generally let customers place holds on downloadable ebooks. More than three-fourths (78%) of public libraries allow holds on ebooks.

Ebook Categories

Today, libraries carry ebooks in just about every category in which printed books are available. For public libraries, we asked about their top three circulating fiction and nonfiction categories of ebooks. The top three circulating fiction categories are bestsellers (83%), mystery/suspence (62%) and general fiction (48%). Biography/memoirs (50%), political/current events (35%), and self-help/psychology (25%) are the top three circulating non-fiction ebook categories.

| Top three circulating fiction ebook categories... | |
|--|-----|
| Bestsellers | 83% |
| Mystery/Suspense | 62% |
| General fiction | 48% |
| Romance | 30% |
| Classics | 14% |
| Young adult | 8% |
| Science fiction/Fantasy | 7% |
| Children's | 2% |
| Other | 1% |
| Don't know | 4% |

| Top three circulating nonfiction ebook categories... | |
|---|-----|
| Biography/Memoirs | 50% |
| Political/Current events | 35% |
| Self-Help/Psychology | 25% |
| Business/Careers | 24% |
| History | 22% |
| Computers/technology | 18% |
| General reference | 17% |
| Medicine/Health | 16% |
| Travel | 13% |
| How-to | 12% |
| Cooking | 6% |
| Religion/Philosophy | 3% |
| Home decorating & Gardening | 2% |
| Other | 4% |
| Don't know | 7% |

LIBRARY RESEARCH SYNDICATE

Brought to you by Library Journal and School Library Journal.

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