

Above the Treeline Becoming Firmly Rooted

Inventory management system adds retailers, publishers

by Judith Rosen -- 11/6/2006

What a difference a year makes. Since partnering with the ABA in January, John Rubin has criss-crossed the country to demonstrate Above the Treeline, the Web-based inventory management tool that he designed specifically for stores like the Book Stall in Winnetka, Ill., owned by his mom, Roberta Rubin (PW, Nov. 28, 2005). In the intervening months, Treeline has gone from servicing 75 trade stores and 150 CBA retailers to a total of 350 stores, divided evenly between ABA and CBA; Rubin has doubled his staff to six full-time employees.

Late last month Treeline rolled out its latest iteration, or "upgraded interface," which incorporates many of the suggestions Rubin heard at various trade shows and at last spring's Treeline-a-Palooza—a meeting held in Denver with booksellers and reps. Among the improvements Rubin cited is expanded title-level detail, which includes bibliographic information matched with real-time sales and on-hand information from other retailers, wholesalers and publishers. In addition, the Treeline upgrade allows booksellers to search books in BISAC categories, as well as in more idiosyncratic store categories, and to compare sales per linear foot so that booksellers can use their space more effectively.

Even before Treeline introduced these changes, along with more e-mail reporting, a number of stores were hooked. Susan Boucher, owner of Lake Forest Book Store in Lake Forest, Ill., called Treeline "pretty astounding." Although Boucher's sales have stayed constant since she signed on in April, she explained, "I have decreased inventory, increased turns and there's cash in the bank. I'm not used to having cash at this point in the year." Using Treeline has allowed Boucher to eliminate dead titles, so she has more shelf space, which she has used to display more books face out. And the look of Treeline, with its clear diagrams and pie charts, makes it more user-friendly for Boucher to manage returns than IBID.

At A Book for All Seasons in Leavenworth, Wash., the entire staff uses Treeline. "We love it," said owner Pat Rutledge. "It opens up on my [computer] screen every morning. We use it to see how we're doing in comparison with other stores."

Retailers using Treeline range from small stores with sales of less than \$400,000 to regional chains in the ABA market and the large Cokesbury chain in CBA. And while sales may not have gone up at Boucher's store, many Treeline outlets have reported improved

turns and increased sales, along with reduced inventory. A recent case study of four multistore independents conducted by the company (see chart) found that aggregate sales rose 13% over the past 12 months, while average inventories were reduced by 0.5%.

On the publishing side, Treeline enables sales representatives and others in sales and marketing to see—with bookseller consent—how their books (and only their own books) are doing. So far, 15 of the leading CBA publishers use Treeline, including Thomas Nelson and Zondervan, and 10 of the 11 largest trade houses have enrolled. "Our big push," said Rubin, "is to get this in front of more midsize publishers."

Annual fees for publishers begin at \$3,000 and increase based on the company's size. Bookstores pay a monthly subscription fee of between \$50 and \$350. Set-up is \$1,500.

"I'm a big fan," noted Workman sales director Steven Pace, who invited Rubin to give a demo at the company's October sales conference. "We have great reporting from the chains and wholesalers, but not the independents. What it allows us to do is a bellwether report for a book, everything from are we fully landed to how are sales looking a week or a month out."

Treeline tries to offer publishers and booksellers the closest thing to the manual inventories of the past, by enabling publishers to view a store's inventory and compare it with the company's top-selling 100, 300 or—in the case of a large house like HarperCollins—1,500 books. In addition, publishers can use Treeline to upload special deals and make sure booksellers are aware of them.

John Zeck, Midwest sales rep for HarperCollins, uses Treeline daily to drill down to specific information for his accounts. "When I approach a customer with a suggestion, the market research behind that suggestion from 'like' customers is pretty compelling," he said. As a result, Harper's top 300 titles are now stocked in 99% of Zeck's Treeline stores. "This was absolutely not the case two years ago, when they started out on Above the Treeline. That alone is worth the price of admission," said Zeck.

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