

Making Sense of Inventory

Treeline gains traction among booksellers and publishers

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A project by Roberta Rubin's son to help her manage cash flow at the Book Stall, her Winnetka, Ill., bookstore, has turned into a Web-based inventory management tool that has captured the interest of not only independent booksellers but publishers as well. Josh Marwell, head of sales at HarperCollins, went so far as to call the system "revolutionary."

The object of interest is [Above the Treeline](#), which John Rubin founded three years ago. Rubin charges an initial setup fee plus monthly subscriber fees, though he declined to discuss specifics.

Treeline enables booksellers to share information anonymously and allows them to compare their on-hand and on-order quantities for top Treeline titles against those of other stores. Booksellers can also click through to specific categories and break down data into pie charts and graphs. And publishers view Treeline as one of the best ways to get a real-time snapshot of independent stores' sales data. In addition to HC, Random House was an early Treeline member. John Wiley signed up earlier this month, and Simon & Schuster and Houghton Mifflin will join at the first of the year, giving Rubin nine trade publisher customers plus eight in the CBA.

One way of thinking of Treeline is as a Nielsen Bookscan for independents, updated daily with a component for reordering built in. Each evening, information from participating bookstores—approximately 75 trade stores and 150 CBA stores—is downloaded automatically from the stores' point-of-sale systems to Treeline's mainframe in Ann Arbor, Mich. Firewalls ensure that trade stores view only data for like retailers; CBA stores see only info from other Christian stores. Stores with multiple locations can also use Treeline to compare sales among their stores. Rubin is looking into slicing the information even more finely so that children's booksellers, for example, can compare data with each other.

Austin, Tex.-based BookPeople is one of Treeline's early adopters and one of the company's biggest boosters. "There's a way to determine turns. I look at it every day," said buyer Elizabeth Sullivan. In the first year, she said, turns increased and inventory costs decreased by \$100,000.

One of the program's biggest advantages for Neil Strandberg, manager of operations for the Tattered Cover stores in Denver, is its speed; he no longer has to wait overnight for reports to be run using the store's POS system. "Any one of us can look up information in

real time. We know more about what we're buying and how we're buying than we have ever known since the store started," he said. Treeline also helped Tattered Cover streamline its buying department, which went from nine buyers to four. Yet, echoing smaller bookstores that *PW* spoke with, Strandberg said Tattered Cover is using only a fraction of Treeline's capabilities.

But giving booksellers access to information is only half of Rubin's goal. The other half, which Random and Harper were the first to recognize, is to change publishing through Treeline's ability to provide complete sales data at a glance for a single bookstore, as well as an aggregate view of the independent market on a daily basis. Ruth Liebmann, director of independent bookselling for Random, said one of Treeline's biggest assets is that it enables sales reps to log on from any computer and see how a book, or multiple titles, are doing. She also finds the system extremely useful when it comes to determining print runs. "This is the closest publishers and booksellers can see data in real time," she said. "It's all about getting the right books in the right place at the right time. That's our mantra, and Treeline does it."

Marwell likens Treeline to a bridge between booksellers and publishers and anticipates that it will be around for a long time. Impressed by Treeline's ease of use, Harper worked with Rubin to integrate the system into the publisher's new Web-based program for maintaining backlist, EssentialBacklist.com, which is available to all booksellers, not just Treeline subscribers.

So far Rubin has relied on word-of-mouth as well as partnerships with industry associations to recruit new publishers and booksellers, and he hopes to double the number of store participants by the end of 2006.

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