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The schoolbook challenge

Schoolbooks are subject to particular market forces and are the product of an entirely different creative and industrial process than is the case with popular works of literature. Cornelsen provides an insight into the publisher's work and the conditions under which it operates.

Curricula

The topics and educational aims of a German schoolbook are not determined by the publisher, but rather by the curricula as issued by education ministries of the individual German federal states. These curricula are axiomatic for the editorial departments and their authors. With 16 federal states, myriad school subjects, an entire spectrum of school types from primary to grammar school to vocational college – some of which school types are unique to specific states – the education ministries issue over 2000 curricula in total. For the work of the publisher, this can entail producing 16 different regional editions of one particular title. This extreme is, however, to be avoided. In order to cover the costs of developing and printing a particular title, the editorial departments create comprehensive synopses of the curricula, thus making it possible to cover the educational requirements of several states in one edition. It is nonetheless commonplace to develop and produce up to ten editions of one title, each with a relatively low print run in comparison to an edition sold nationally.

Approval process

The so-called submission or approval process analyses the majority of all schoolbooks in Germany for conformity to the specifications of the curriculum in question. Each state decides whether this process is necessary and for which school subjects. Titles subject to this process must be completed and submitted to the education ministries by a particular deadline up to a whole year prior to the planned date of publication. For a period of several months, two or more especially seconded assessors analyse whether, based on a long list of criteria, the book in question is suitable for use in a particular state. Can teachers in that state use this book to cover the topics and achieve the aims laid out in the curriculum? Have particular aspects of the German constitution, such as equality of the sexes, been taken into account? And indeed many more questions of this ilk. It has been estimated that, for the approval and extension of approval process alone, involving an average of 1000 books per year and per company, in excess of €200,000 is paid in fees by each company to the education ministries. This calculation does not, however, take into account the costs incurred by each company in terms of personnel, printing costs for the

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approval copies, as well as carriage and handling for the delivery. The official stamps of approval are furthermore only issued for 5 years, after which approval must be re-applied for.

High development costs

In comparison to the majority of literature and non-fiction publishing, the editorial expenditure incurred by the creation and production of a schoolbook is immense. Schoolbooks do not arise out of finished manuscripts which arrive in the post. Cornelsen's course book English G 2000, for example, is conceived and developed by a team of up to 30 employees, consisting of the specialist editorial department, authors and series editors. Over and above this number the process further involves evaluators chosen especially for the task, as well as advisors for the regional editions.

Expenditure in time and money also quickly mounts up when it comes to the design of educational materials. An 'operational' schoolbook must demonstrate a holistic approach to content, design and didactic concept. The burden on resources both human and financial created by the layout, printing and binding of such a book is commensurate with this demand. From the conceptualisation of a teaching book to the publication of the title can involve a process stretching over 3 years. It is, furthermore, often the case that the development of a teaching work takes place simultaneously with the development of materials supplemental to that book. Extensive and labour-intensive teacher handbooks, without which no schoolbook would be accepted, elaborate upon the didactic concept, offer detailed lesson suggestions and provide course plans. These handbooks have to be financed by the sale of the course books, as is also the case with many other supplementary materials such as software or copy masters.

Expensive schoolbooks?

The discussion of schoolbook prices is currently taking place in Germany against a background of empty public coffers and an increasing parental contribution. The impression that schoolbooks are expensive arises foremost as a result of the fact that parents are compelled to buy a whole range of schoolbooks at once. In many federal states, however, the financial burden on the parents is not permitted to exceed a set maximum. The argument that schoolbooks are expensive further loses momentum when one takes into account the quality and complexity of what one is actually buying and the expenditure in resources necessary to produce such a title. Schoolbooks must be durable. A book for use in German lessons is estimated to be in use for around 2000 hours before it has to be replaced. A novel on the bookshelves in your own home, on the other hand, gets used for about 20 hours. Thread-stitching is therefore a matter of course for

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schoolbooks; the paper quality must meet the demands of producing a large quantity of full-colour illustrations; the binding must take into account the less than gentle manner of the book's users and the long-term use for which it is intended.

Marketing schoolbooks

Even although the distribution of schoolbooks is carried out by bookshops, the purchase and ordering decisions are made by the schools themselves and the bookshop only acts as a conduit. As a result of this, educational publishers do not employ company representatives, but rather school advisors who present new titles directly in the schools, advise teachers in their purchasing decisions and organize information events. Unlike company reps, however, these advisors do not deal with orders and purchases. Cornelsen Publishing alone employs over 70 school advisors covering every part of Germany. By comparison, a popular publishing house generally employs 6–10 freelance representatives for the same geographical coverage.

The regionalization of teaching works naturally has an effect on advertising and marketing. Advertising literature is delivered directly to the target group and its decision makers, namely schools and teachers. Aside from the annual product catalogues which are produced in multi-million print runs according to school type and subject and sent to Germany's 700,000 and more teachers, single-item adverts for new publications are tailored to the needs of individual states and distributed accordingly. Unlike popular publishing houses, educational publishers cannot engender demand for their products with a few well-placed adverts in national newspapers and magazines. Educational publishers are furthermore required by law to keep titles in print for a fixed period of time, regardless of whether there is any demand for the book.

Guaranteed profit margins and print runs?

Forecasts of school rolls for the near future provide education publishers with a tool with which they can estimate the number of pupils they can expect in each school type and in each federal state. This does not, however, guarantee sales of schoolbooks. For the publisher, the number of pupils represents only a hypothetical market demand. In order to establish an appropriate print run for a title, market developments and market share are analysed in great detail. The market for new schoolbooks in Germany is competed for by around 70 educational publishers and the teachers and schools make their own decisions as to which titles they will order from which publishers. This planning is further complicated by the loaning-out period – the period in which books are passed on from one class to the next – which is currently between 8 and 10 years in most schools.