

The Espresso Book Machine: The Marriott Library Experience

In 2009, an unusual combination of circumstances made it possible for the University of Utah's Marriott Library to purchase and install an Espresso Book Machine (EBM). The Library plans to employ the EBM in pursuit of several dovetailing Library strategies, including the distribution and commercialisation of rare and unique materials from the Library's special collections; printing of archival copies of graduate theses and dissertations; printing books on demand (both for purchase and for borrowing) for Library patrons; and making selections from the University of Utah Press's out-of-print backlist more readily available to the campus community. The machine has generated tremendous excitement on campus already, and initial experience and patron response both suggest that the EBM will turn out to be useful in ways not anticipated.



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Background

For us in the Marriott Library at the University of Utah, the decision to buy an Espresso Book Machine (EBM) came about because of an unusual confluence of circumstances.

First: in mid-2009, the Library developed and adopted a set of *Principles and Guidelines Related to Book Formats and Collection Development*¹. The upshot of this document was that the Library would move formally and with considered speed in the twin directions of buying, wherever possible, e-books rather than print books and buying titles based on patron requests rather than librarian speculation.

Second: several years earlier, the University of Utah Press (UUP) had been integrated into the management and reporting structure of the Marriott Library. As is the case with most scholarly presses, the UUP operates on a very lean budget and has an extensive backlog of out-of-print titles, some of which it would very much like to make more easily available to the campus community.

Third: the Library had been looking for ways both to better publicise and (in a limited way) commercialise some of its unique and rare materials. A digital scanning project had long been under way, and the ground was prepared for development of a plan to distribute and market copies of those materials.

Fourth: the economic crisis has inevitably led to an unusually conservative fiscal posture on campus. One expression of that new posture was an instruction from campus administration that funds not be held over from the current fiscal year into the next. The Library had typically carried over a modest but not inconsiderable sum each year. With that practice off the table for the upcoming year, it was necessary to find strategically defensible ways of spending a fairly sizeable chunk of money on one-time purchases.

Strategy

Due to the timing of the economic crisis and the fiscal instructions from campus administration, we made the conscious decision to take something of a 'ready-fire-aim' approach to EBM strategy building. In other words, we bought the machine not because we had a fully-developed program in mind, but because we were confident that once we had the machine in place, it would open up a wide variety of strategic and programmatic options to us.

We ordered the EBM in the summer of 2009, and it was delivered and installed in October of that year. We did not wait for installation before starting to develop programs, of course: once the

purchase decision had been made, we began immediately to work on strategies for putting the machine to work for us. We focused on two primary areas of opportunity:

EBM as a service and collection-development tool. The EBM offered an obvious and powerful tool for implementing our recently-adopted principles and guidelines, which emphasize just-in-time over just-in-case acquisition and patron-driven over librarian-driven acquisition. I had been arguing for some time that we needed to rethink (not utterly reject, but rethink) the whole idea of building a collection based on speculation about future needs. That strategy had made sense when books were only available in print and were therefore difficult to locate and could only be transported slowly and expensively. However, in a world in which books in all formats can be located very quickly and, as e-books, delivered instantaneously, the collection begins looking less like the heart of the library and more like a questionable strategy for meeting patron needs. Granted the ongoing importance of printed books to researchers in many disciplines, the EBM offers for the first time the possibility of providing print books immediately as well, and constitutes a very large step toward what any service-oriented librarian really ought to consider the perfect circumstance: one in which patrons can truly have access to any book they need, without a librarian having to guess ahead of time what that book might be. Obviously, the EBM does not actually provide access to every book there is – but the number of books available through the EBM has grown dramatically in a very short period of time, and at the time of writing is approaching four million and continues to grow. Our general plan is to make EBM titles available to patrons in two ways: either for purchase, or for borrowing. If a patron wants a personal copy of a book that can be printed on the EBM, we will sell it to him/her at a small markup from cost (which, for materials, is roughly one cent per page). If a patron wants only to borrow the book, we will print it up, lend it to him/her, and add it to our collection when it is returned. (Such a policy would require some limitations, of course, and some titles will have to be designated 'for purchase only'. Policy development is ongoing.)

EBM as a tool for distributing access to rare and unique materials, plus the UUP backlist. Researchers have always wanted access to rare and unique library materials for two different, but often

complementary reasons: to see, touch and hold the physical objects themselves, and to get at the information contained within those objects. In the past, libraries have always had to treat those two needs as if they were one and the same. However, by scanning and digitizing such materials libraries become able to separate them – the researcher who needs only to read the words in a manuscript diary or illuminated incunabula no longer has to proceed as if he needed direct physical access to the physical object itself. This marks a quiet but radical development in the way libraries can serve their patrons. Less radical but equally welcome is the opportunity to sell printed copies of these documents. The Marriott Library has already begun selling calendars illustrated with beautiful pieces from its Special Collections, and in late 2009 brought in a team of students from the David Eccles School of Business to help us develop a more comprehensive marketing plan for prints and other products using images from our rich collections of historic photographs, aquatints, maps and rare books. The EBM will play a central part in the manufacture of these products. It also offers the possibility of printing UUP backlist titles on demand for campus users.

The experience so far

The Marriott Library has benefitted significantly from being the second installation of an EBM in the mountain west region of the US. The first such installation took place in the Brigham Young University (BYU) bookstore, where the effects of a dry, high-desert climate caused unanticipated complications that resulted in design improvements from which we benefitted in the Marriott Library. BYU's installation took place over the course of several months; ours was finished in less than a week.

That being said, the machine is still a young product and bugs are still being worked out. An ostensibly permanent valve in our EBM malfunctioned and had to be replaced; the system that prints book covers failed and leaked ink into the machine, requiring not only repair of the printing system but laborious cleaning of the machine's interior.

At the time of writing, our EBM has been in place and functioning for about three months, but it has already generated a tremendous amount of



The Espresso Book Machine (EBM) in situ

excitement – both on campus and (significantly) amongst donors. Those who hear it described show a universal response: their mouths drop open and their eyes shine. Many find it hard to believe that the EBM can print, bind and deliver a 300-page book in five minutes, on good paper and in a high-quality perfect binding. When the machine is demonstrated to them, people are enraptured. A group of German professors on campus were given a demonstration and discovered that a large number of long-unavailable texts in their discipline were now available via Books On Demand (the company that created and supplies content to the EBM); we printed up the titles for them at no charge, and they went away rejoicing. For a recent open house event designed to showcase some of the images from our Special Collections area that are available for printing and mounting, we printed up a pile of blank-paper diaries on the EBM, using as cover images some of the more interesting photos and maps from our rare collections. We offered each attendee a blank book as an incentive to respond to a brief survey. The books were snapped up very quickly, and several attendees attempted to buy them from us.

This experience taught us a lesson that I suspect will be repeated as the EBM program continues to develop: you cannot always anticipate what people are going to want to buy, and the products that seem coolest to us as librarians may be very different from those that are most desirable to our customers. We would never have guessed that blank books would generate the excitement they have.

Two large-scale EBM projects are already underway:

1) The Library has been working with the Graduate School to move to an all-electronic system of thesis and dissertation submission and processing. In the past, the School and the Library maintained a very traditional process: the degree candidate paid for the commercial hardback binding of three copies, one for the Library stacks, one for the University archives, and one personal copy for the student. A sticking point in the transition from a print-based to an online process had been the question of permanent archiving: it was all well and good to put what had once been the stacks copy online and to let the student bind a personal copy only if desired, but were we willing to entrust our permanent archival copy to the online environment? At first, we decided that we would print a copy of each document and place it, unbound (probably in a large archival envelope) in the physical archives. Then the dean of the Graduate School made a simple and ingenious suggestion: why not print the archival copy on the EBM? The EBM's binding is not intended to last forever, but archival copies are not intended for patron use except in highly unusual circumstances – and if the binding on one of them does fail, printing up another is both cheap and easy.

The EBM can print, bind and deliver a book in five minutes, on good paper and in high-quality perfect binding



2) A learned society working in a discipline of great interest to the University of Utah approached the Library about the possibility of printing and distributing its annual conference proceedings to the membership. After investigating the costs in materials, labor and shipping, the Library was able to make a very attractive offer. The Library will make a small amount of money on the deal, but at this stage what is more important is the feasibility study: once we have actually planned and executed this project we will know much more about what works and what does not, about the likelihood of unanticipated problems, about how well the machine can handle extended runs of identical documents, and about whether it makes sense to pursue other such opportunities in the future.

Purchasing and implementing the EBM has had one other unanticipated effect, with which I will close. Librarians who might never have anticipated the incursion of such words into their vocabulary now find themselves openly discussing 'fixed costs', 'leverage', and 'margins' – not to mention discussing marketing strategies in ways that are much more direct and literal than the 'library marketing' to which we have all tended to pay half-hearted lip service in the past. Whether this constitutes a welcome development or the encroachment of Babylon on the sacred precincts of our cultural institution is a topic for another essay. However, I will perhaps tip my hand and say that in the current fiscal environment, I find

the phrase 'revenue stream' to be much less objectionable than I might have 20 years ago – especially when the revenue in question is flowing into campus from without. If our experience and the experience of other EBM hosts so far is typical, then it seems very likely that On Demand Books will soon have direct competitors – and we may find that print-on-demand book machines quickly become as ubiquitous as laser printers are now. There is no way that such a development will fail to bring radical change to our very conception of the library.

Reference

1. <http://content.lib.utah.edu/u/?ir-admin2,20981> (accessed 29 December 2009).

Review © Rick Anderson

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