Reference Works, from Idea to Reality

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I've been reviewing reference books and databases for more than 10 years now, cracking the bindings on new titles, test-driving the interface features, and summarizing my impressions for reference librarians wanting the latest opinion on the newest content. I can't say that I spent much of that period processing the amount of time, effort, money, and personnel involved in bringing a multivolume encyclopedia or online product to fruition. At the 2010 ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., however, I got a chance to stop and think about that, thanks to the program sponsored by Reference Books Bulletin.

The program focused on the process of creating a reference work, from idea to reality. Speakers Casper Grathwohl (from Oxford University Press), Rolf Janke (from Sage Reference), and Frank Menchaca (from Gale/Cengage) discussed exploring a new topic, selecting a format, publishing a work, and determining when and how to revise content.

Casper Grathwohl outlined five steps in selecting a new topic and format for a reference work. First, understand the market and gather information. Grathwohl referred to studies about difficulty for publishers to stay current. Secondly, it's important to find out what motivates contributors and production. Publishers must find editors and contributors who have the right skill sets and test that skill sets in some fashion. Examining the word count and level of writing (Is it appropriate for the target audience?); removing in-text citations; ensuring artwork permissions are in place; and checking for plagiarism are just some of the steps. Sage uses iThenticate, a plagiarism-detection software, to verify the authenticity of entries.

A new work must fit into the overall company strategy, respond to market conditions, and fill gaps in the literature.

Frank Menchaca, from Gale/Cengage, discussed how he makes decisions on updating materials. He said, "When the focus was strictly print titles, the decision was much easier. I'd take a look at the backlist, find the best content with the most revenue, and determine if it needed a revision." Now, with the advent of electronic reference products, that simplicity has been turned upside down. Publishers must determine which content to update and whether to update with a new edition or supplemental volumes, or to transform the work to a database. Menchaca offered Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia as an example. In print, Grzimek's is 17 volumes. When the time came for a revision of this seminal work, a decision was made to move it online, where more frequent and dynamic updates could occur. Gale/Cengage discovered that online reference products provide an enormous amount of usage data that can be analyzed to improve content and functionality. For example, by examining searches run in Grzimek's, one can determine what topics are popular, what searches are failing because of limited content, and how users enter search terms. The shift to online content also allows the publisher to look at the entire subject area rather than individual topics that will fit smaller print sets.

I have to admit, after listening to these three publishers describe the detailed (and somewhat excruciating) process involved in producing a multivolume reference work or online database, I am happy to remain a librarian and end user of these fine products. I discovered it's not only an art form but an exact science. Kudos to you, reference publishers.