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Carol Tenopir
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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BY CAROL TENOPIR

CD-ROM Best Sellers Lists

ONCE IN A WHILE, a "top ten" list for CD-ROM titles is published, often by CD-ROM vendors such as the Bureau of Electronic Publishing. Like the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, CD-ROM top ten lists typically are based on the number of units sold for each title. Just because something is sold does not mean it is ever read or ever used, however.

Unlike the *New York Times* Best Sellers list for books, CD-ROM best sellers lists cannot be used as a prediction of patron demand or as a safe acquisitions guide. In fact, they can be quite misleading. I began to get suspicious when I noticed titles like *Between Heaven and Hell* and the *CIA World Fact Book* showing up on some lists.

Bundling

The CD-ROM best sellers lists bear little relation to what products are being used in libraries or will be popular with patrons. A title may get on one of these lists because the producer worked a deal with a hardware manufacturer or vendor to bundle its CD with the hardware. One such offer includes the "Sony Laser Library" with the purchase of a Sony CD-ROM drive [see *Automation News*, *LJ*, November 15, 1991, p. 26]. The Laser Library includes Compton's Family Encyclopedia (not the multimedia version), Microsoft Bookshelf (new edition), *Languages of the World*, *National Geographic Mammals*, and the *Mixed-Up Mother Goose*. If a purchaser never cracks the seal on *Mixed-Up Mother Goose*, it still counts as a unit "sold."

Many such bundles are advertised in computer magazines. Tiger Software has a special "Multimedia Everything Bundle" including hardware and "the hottest CD titles." In

May 1992, Tiger proclaimed 20 "hot" titles, including the Bible Library, Guinness Disc of World Records, *Mammals*, *U.S. History*, *Time Compact Almanac*, *Multimedia World Atlas*, *Mavis Teaches Typing*, *Great Cities of the World*, and *Chessmaster*.

Most buyers look at some of these free titles only once or twice, if at all. A database producer that wants to gain visibility may do enough bundling of one title to ensure the appearance of success, when in reality very few copies were actually knowingly purchased. Bundling works only for one-time sales, not subscriptions. Publishers cannot count on selling even a second edition for this type of purchase.

Advantages of best sellers lists

As the consumer market grows, such practices will become even more common. As CD-ROM buying begins to closely resemble book purchasing, it is to the producer's advantage to appear on a best sellers list. Prices are coming down, there are more nonreference CD-ROM titles, and more CDs are one-time purchases. Publishers know that book best sellers lists are regularly published in newspapers and magazines, consumers pay attention to them, and retail sales outlets and distribution agents (jobbers) use the lists for promotion. Public libraries get many demands for best sellers and try to have them in the library. We haven't quite reached that point with CD-ROM titles, but we may in the future.

For the third quarter of 1991, the Bureau of Electronic Publishing lists the following top ten CD-ROM best sellers: 1) Grolier's Electronic Encyclopedia, 2) MS Programmer's Library, 3) Microsoft Bookshelf, 4) PC-SIG Library (25,000 programs plus the full text of the Bible), 5) *Between Heaven and Hell II* (software, games, soft porn, and the Bible), 6) *Computer Library*, 7) McGraw-Hill Science and Technical Reference Set, 8) *CIA World Fact Book*, 9) *U.S. History on CD-ROM*, and 10) Compton's Multimedia Encyclopedia. All are one-time purchases, none are subscriptions.

There are other, more useful ways to approach "top products" lists than by following sales figures. One is by careful review of the best products in a given category as in *LJ*'s new CD-ROM Review column, which debuted in July, or best products for a certain audience; the other is by seeing which products get the most use or are in the most demand in many libraries. The first way is a subjective, conscious judgment by a single reviewer; the second is consensus acclamation by a large group of users.

The best products

Any time a comparative review or CD-ROM buying guide is published, it serves to differentiate poor from good products. A few reviews have attempted to provide a list of the best CD-ROM titles across all topics. In June 1991, *PC/Computing Magazine* [Magazines, *LJ*, July 1989, p. 116] selected the top 20 CD-ROM products it recommended for purchase. The decisions were based on five criteria: 1) general usefulness (excluding highly specialized topics); 2) speed and ease of use of indexing/retrieval software; 3) quality and presentation of information (including timeliness and visual presentation); 4) overall excellence and innovation (especially in sound, graphics, text, and animation); and 5) value. Said list author David Harvey of this last item, "information on CD should cost no more than the same information in printed form or from an online source. Publishers are beginning to recognize this."

PC/Computing's "Top 20 CD Hits" for 1991 are:

1. Microsoft Bookshelf for Windows (Best Multimedia CD-ROM)
2. 1990 Grolier's Electronic Encyclopedia (Best Encyclopedia)
3. The Library of the Future (a great books disc)
4. Oxford English Dictionary (Best Dictionary)
5. CMC Value Pack: Multi-Media Birds of America, Sherlock Holmes on Disc, Shakespeare on Disc (Best Value on CD-ROM)
6. PC-SIG Encyclopedia of Shareware



Carol Tenopir is Associate Professor at the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu

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7. Microsoft Programmer's Library
8. Magazine Rack Reference
9. Guinness Multimedia Disc of Records
10. Computer Select
11. McGraw-Hill Concise Encyclopedia and the Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms
12. Washington Post (Best Text-Based CD-ROM)
13. The Physicians' Desk Reference (PDR)
14. U.S. History on CD-ROM (Best Educational CD-ROM)
15. Facts on File, 1980-1990
16. Jane's All the World's Aircraft (Best Text and Graphics on CD-ROM)
17. Microsoft Small Business Consultant
18. Business Dateline Ondisc
19. PhoneDisc USA
20. Microsoft Stat Pack

Judging library popularity

There are two approaches to popularity lists in libraries. The first is to survey libraries to find out which products are owned by the most libraries; the second is to discover which products they own are most used or most popular with patrons. The latter is easier to obtain for online databases than for CD-ROMs because most libraries keep track of their online time but only some do for CDs. With connect-time pricing, the money spent on "buying" an online database also reflects the amount of use. In my discussion of "The Most Popular Databases" (*LJ*, April 1, 1991, p. 96ff.), I concentrated particularly on popular online databases based on amount of use.

Products owned in libraries

Until 1989, OCLC surveyed its member libraries annually to find out about microcomputer and CD use. The 1987, 1988, and 1989 surveys were published in *CD-ROM Professional* (formerly *Laserdisk Professional*). Each included a top ten CD-ROM list, based on which titles were owned by the most OCLC libraries. This approach may be close to the best sellers approach since it doesn't take into account which products were most popular with users, but presumably only the popular products renewed each year. The last of these surveys, done in 1989 and published in March 1990, presented the following library top ten list: InfoTrac, ERIC, PsycLIT, Books in Print Plus, Academic Index, Modern Language Association Bibliography, ABI/INFORM, Disclosure, Dissertation

Abstracts, and Social Science Index.

Optical Discs in Libraries: Use and Trends, a book by Ching-chih Chen (Learned Information, 1991), presents the results of surveys of American and European libraries conducted in 1987, 1988, and 1989. Although now dated, the information about most common titles is interesting because it compares American and European libraries and because the American libraries data are broken down by type of library.

In American academic libraries in 1988, the most popular titles, according to Chen, were ERIC, InfoTrac, PsycLIT, Books in Print Plus, ABI/INFORM, Compact Disclosure, Dissertation Abstracts, Business Periodicals Index, and GPO Monthly Catalog. Public libraries favored acquisition and catalog or cataloging titles more, except for their number one choice—InfoTrac. Among the other titles popular in public libraries were Books in Print Plus, BiblioFile, LaserCat, Le Pac, and Ulrich's Plus. Special libraries chose MEDLINE, Books in Print Plus, ERIC, InfoTrac, PsycLIT, Agricola, BiblioFile, and ABI/INFORM. European libraries favored MEDLINE, Books in Print Plus, BL/BN Pilot, ERIC, Bookbank, Ulrich's Plus, Science Citation Index, Myriade, VIB, and Grolier's Electronic Encyclopedia.

Which CDs do patrons prefer?

As libraries get more CD-ROM titles and as these original choices bear reexamining, it is useful to know which of these are most popular with patrons. This is usually judged by a combination of statistics on use and gut instinct of the reference librarians. Reference librarians know which products are always busy, which garner the most favorable comments from users, and which get a good reputation that leads to repeated use.

Last year, Ralf Neufang, a reference librarian at the University of Hawaii, and I surveyed research libraries about which CD-ROM databases were most used in their libraries [see *Automation News*, *LJ*, December 1991, p. 48]. We asked university librarians which CD-ROM databases were the most popular with patrons. Many don't keep usage statistics, so in these cases, rates of use were determined by the librarians' perceptions. This was not, therefore, a scientific study; it reflected, instead, which CDs were perceived by librarians as being

the most popular with patrons in their libraries.

More than half of these libraries offered reference access to 20 or more CD-ROM titles, with a third offering 30 or more CDs, so the pool from which to choose was large in most cases. Asked to list the ten most popular titles in their libraries, the approximately 100 librarians named a total of 60 different CD-ROM products.

The top 20 titles, named as most popular by the most libraries, are:

1. PsycLIT
2. ERIC
3. ABI/INFORM
4. MLA (Modern Language Association) International Bibliography
5. MEDLINE
6. Dissertation Abstracts International
7. CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature)
8. Social Science Citation Index
9. Agricola
10. SocioFile
11. PAIS
12. InfoTrac
13. COMPENDEX
14. Newspaper Abstracts
15. Compact Disclosure
16. GPO Monthly Catalog
17. Science Citation Index
18. Applied Science and Technology Index
19. Periodical Abstracts
20. Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature

Many of these ranked in 1991 as most popular with patrons were the same titles found in libraries in 1987-88 by the Chen and OCLC surveys. They are obviously quite different types of databases from the titles listed in best sellers lists; they are almost all bibliographic databases sold on a subscription basis. They are used for research purposes in a library setting, and their cost is high—over \$1000 per year in almost all cases. These are not consumer products for home use.

There is still a gap between which CD-ROMs are being bought and used in libraries and which are bought by the home user. CD-ROM best sellers lists—no matter how accurate or inaccurate they are—are not yet influencing libraries. CD-ROM is still a reference or research medium in libraries. Organizations like the Bureau of Electronic Publishing are working to broaden that perception in the near future.