

Marketing Scholarly Gems

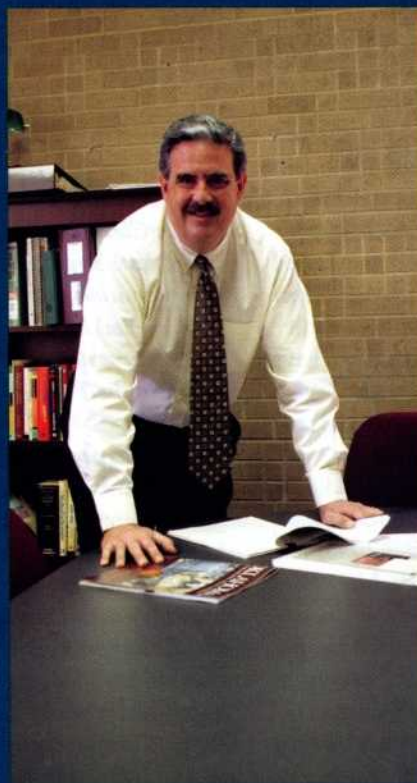
Dale Bennie slides a book across the table to a visitor, seeing his chance for an off-the-cuff opinion. "If I reprint this, would you buy it?" he asks.

The visitor slips a finger under the front cover of an old, worn copy of *Oklahoma Imprints, 1835-1907*, pops it open and peruses its yellowed pages before commenting: "Hm-m-m, maybe." The book, long out of print, is a goldmine of information, listing and giving a brief history of every publication printed in Oklahoma before statehood. "Okay, I'd buy it," she decides.

Not letting her off the hook yet, Bennie fires back: "How much would you pay for it?" Now that changes things. "How much would it cost?" the visitor asks. "If done right, about \$50," he answers. "I don't know," she hedges. "I don't usually spend that much on a book." And therein lies Bennie's dilemma.

As the new sales and marketing director for the University of Oklahoma Press, Bennie must judge the cost-effectiveness of any project. Will it sell? Will it sell enough? Will the Press break even on the project, or—oh, happy day—would it, could it, shall we say it, turn a profit? *continued*

Brought from the world of commercial publishing to revamp the sales and marketing philosophy of the prestigious University of Oklahoma Press, Dale Bennie explores non-traditional outlets, designs specialized catalogues and employs new promotional techniques to rapidly move these stacks of scholarly books.



Long a pre-eminent academic publisher, OU Press adopts an aggressive, customer-friendly sales plan to put its books in the hands of more readers — and even turn a profit.

BY JANE GLENN CANNON • PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR





As manager of distribution and operations for the OU Press, Rick Stinchcomb is dedicated to 100 percent customer satisfaction, guaranteeing a week's turnaround on all orders—while still targeting 24 hours—dealing directly with the customer, carefully packing and checking each order, offering full, unconditional refunds, combining old-fashioned service with the industry's ever-changing technology.

These are questions best left unuttered at that all-important project-planning stage between author and editor when a proposal lies like a bolt of uncut fabric between them. Then it is the merit of the work, like the quality of the cloth, that is discussed. Cost is not an overriding factor when significance is a goal. This is, after all, a publisher of scholarly works, not a producer of summer beach novels.

"There are those in academic publishing who don't even like to hear the word commercial," Bennie says, and he holds up two crossed fingers as if warding off a hex. "Yet that's where I come from. I come from the commercial world."

Like old-money rich who find it tasteless to talk about cost, academic publishers shy away from discussing profit. "We're nonprofit," they say, as if making money were anathema to them. But according to Bennie, the rules of academic publishing have changed a bit. University presses typically are subsidized by the institutions that sponsor them; yet, more and more, those institutions are saying, "We want you to continue publishing good books, but we need you to break even."

"It forces you to take a more commercial approach," Bennie says. Once a head marketer for a publishing group that boasted sales of \$400 million a year, Bennie has no problem thinking commercial. But as a newcomer to academic publishing, he says,

"I'm counting on John and Chuck to temper me," referring to Press Director John Drayton and Associate Director/Editor-in-Chief Charles Rankin.

Australian-born, classically educated, Drayton came to the OU Press from Brigham Young University Press in Provo, Utah, in 1981 as assistant director/editor-in-chief. When he arrived, annual sales were \$1 million; today they top \$4 million. "So we have grown a bit," he acknowledges.

Rankin, a veteran writer, publisher and historian, is so enthusiastic about his work that one colleague quipped: "He makes the rest of us look slow-witted." It was Rankin who devised one of the newest, most intriguing Press marketing ideas: a book club for OU alumni and friends to be launched this fall that will boost sales while offering benefits to the nearly 148,000 group of University supporters on the OU data base—and enabling the Press to contribute a percentage of the income to University programs. (Book Club details on page 10.)

Once Rankin pitched the idea, Bennie quickly did the math. "If you figure only a one percent response rate, and if each book club member were to buy four books within a 24-month period, that's \$148,000 in sales," he says.

Bennie muses about such prospects in a row of offices tucked inside a cavernous warehouse where approximately 900,000

copies of in-print books published by the OU Press lie wrapped and ready for distribution. The Press also stores and distributes books on a contract basis for Vanderbilt University Press, the University Press of Colorado and the University of the West Indies Press, boosting the number of on-site books to approximately one million.

Located seven miles north of OU's main campus, the towering 13,000-square-foot, redbrick warehouse is clearly visible from Interstate 35 to the west. Its looming presence hints at the reason for the daily bustle of activity next door in an equally cavernous, but less visible, distribution facility.

As manager of distribution and operations, Rick Stinchcomb is at home among the forklifts, conveyor belts, wooden pallets

change. I'm not afraid to try new things."

His "can-do" spirit complements Bennie's "time to try this" high-speed marketing style. Coming from the corporate realm can be an advantage for the Press, Bennie believes. "I've had a lot of experiences, and I'd like to draw on the knowledge I've gained from those experiences and put it to use here."

Bennie willingly walked away from the corporate rat race to enter academic publishing because he saw a chance to work for a greater good. "This is passion publishing," he says. "Who cares if only 500 people care about this subject; it's significant. That's how academic presses think. I want to be part of that. I want to be part of a team and build something

"We want you to continue publishing good books, but we need you to break even."

and a system of carefully numbered static shelving units he utilizes to move customer orders at a rapid pace.

"We turn all our orders within a week. We accomplish that 100 percent," Stinchcomb says. "What I like is when we do it faster. Most of the time, we get an order today and it's out the door tomorrow. I like a 24-hour turnaround whenever possible."

Stinchcomb oversees the shipping "on average" of about 250 orders daily. "Some days we ship 500 orders, sometimes only 100, but that is how it averages out," he says. Orders arrive by fax, e-mail, mail and telephone—and sometimes customers walk in from the street.

"We pack and check every order. We make our own labels. We talk directly to our customers, and we refund 100 percent of a customer's money on every return, no matter what the reason."

Such meticulous care of the customer sets the academic press apart from a more commercial enterprise. Stinchcomb takes pride in the quality of service and the significance of the offerings at the OU Press but admits he is not averse to making money.

"When we make a little income on what we do, we turn it back into our operation. It usually goes into new technology, which is the most expensive aspect of this end of the business. New technology results in better customer service, so it is a good deal both ways," Stinchcomb points out.

In the book distribution business since the early 1970s, Stinchcomb knows as well as anyone that book publishing is an ever-changing industry. "You have to change in this business if you want to survive," he says. "So I welcome

great."

Oops, here comes that dilemma again. If only 500 people are interested in a subject, then sales would be—how should we say it? "Small, of course," Bennie responds. But he's a man of solutions. With a quick smile and a twinkle in his eye, he offers a list of marketing strategies aimed at improving sales in some areas to counter the less-than-lucrative sales in other, more specialized areas.

"We're trying to balance our offerings. In addition to those very narrow subjects, give me some regional books of wider appeal. These regional books throw off dollars to support the other, more academically significant works," he says. "We've always done this. I just want you to do more."

Bennie suggests putting those books of regional interest into gift shops, truck stops, restaurants or other non-traditional sites suggested by the specific topic of each offering. Put a book on golf in every country club and pro shop across America; put a book on Oklahoma's rare birds inside every wild bird specialty store in the region; and

offer copies of a book on Oklahoma wildflowers for sale in tourist information centers, state park headquarters and lakeside gift shops.

"It's called special sales," Bennie explains. "It's an effective tool for widening distribution beyond such traditional channels as bookstores, libraries, museums and university classrooms."

While Bennie stewes over marketing strategy and Stinchcomb continues to plan for and ensure safe, swift passage of the product to any kind of market, another type of dilemma is tackled across



Beyond the glass front doors of the flat-topped, barracks-looking campus headquarters of the OU Press, Drayton, Rankin and three acquisition editors engage daily in negotiations for new offerings.

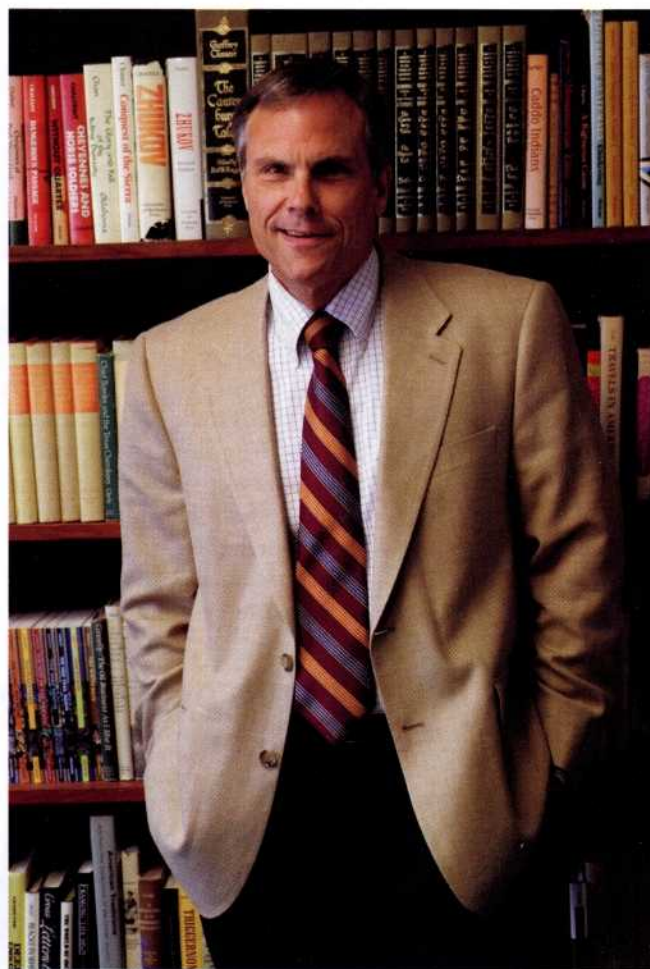
"The book business is really quite simple," Drayton insists. "On the one hand, it is about getting books in; on the other, it is about sending books out. Fall down at either end, and it doesn't work."

Drayton recruited Rankin in 1998 after they found themselves competing one too many times for the same book while working for competing publishing companies. "John said, 'Enough is enough,' and he offered me a job," Rankin recalls.

Their mission is mining for quality works. They are finders of books, seekers of knowledge. It is they who nurture fledging projects. But even they concede that there are significant changes in the industry, and that they cannot ignore the commercial side of book publishing.

"Certain trends in the industry, combined with our own desires, have pushed us into a more aggressive approach to marketing," Rankin says. "Beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s," he says, "a tremendous consolidation occurred among distributors. What Home Depot did to the corner hardware store, Barnes and Noble did to the small bookstore. As big chains, they tend to streamline and narrow down their selections to those they know will sell lots and lots of copies."

That rules out most scholarly books, the lifeblood of university presses. How to surmount this dilemma?



For Charles Rankin, academic publishing is a balancing act—maintaining the high standards of OU Press books while selling enough to make the Press a viable commercial enterprise.

“We are a regional press that is an outstanding source of scholarly literature.”

When the question “Can it sell?” comes up, Bennie says, “that’s when the sales and marketing department steps in. I’m no psychic, but it’s not rocket science, either. I’ve been in this business a long time. I think I can help.”

Bennie plans to capitalize on the Press customer list. In addition to the regular seasonal trade catalogues, he will use a series of smaller, specialty catalogues to present new titles of scholarly significance that otherwise might get overlooked.

“Our trade catalogue is directed toward selling books to bookstore buyers and other intermediaries. Books listed in it appear in an order reflecting less on their scholarly significance and more on helping bookstore buyers, librarians and wholesalers make quick decisions on what to order,” Bennie explains. Smaller specialty catalogues, by contrast, would emphasize the nature, type and significance of the newest Press titles.

One such catalogue would deal exclusively with OU Press paperback offerings under the Red River Books imprint. Another catalogue might highlight new series and the titles

available in the older, established series.

Bennie believes in the marketer “coming to the table early on” to maximize a book’s sales potential with careful advance planning. “It is critical to do aggressive marketing for fiscal reasons, to pave the way for the future so the Press can stay alive and still fulfill its scholarly mission.”

“We are a regional press that is an outstanding source of scholarly literature. This is what the OU Press does really well,” Rankin adds. “Through the years, the Press has consistently maintained its reputation as a pre-eminent publisher of books about the West and American Indians, while expanding to include offerings in classical studies, political science, environmental studies, language and literature and natural science.”

Founded in 1928, the OU Press was the first university press established in the Southwest and the fourth in the West. Seventy-five years later, it is a known quantity in academic publishing, known nationally and internationally, for its outstanding contributions to the field. “It is,” says President David Boren,



Director John Drayton's tenure has been marked by continued award-winning publications, increased sales—and putting together an able team to take the OU Press into the 21st century.

“the University’s window to the world.” Translate that to mean books galore: good, old-fashioned, solid books, hardbacks that weigh hefty in the hand, paperbacks light as cotton, clothed in candy-colored jackets and dressed in rich bindings. They are the substantive proof of a viable enterprise that, oddly enough, began with a chance encounter on a Tulsa elevator.

No one knows what was said on the ride shared by Joseph Brandt, then city editor of the *Tulsa Tribune*, and OU’s fifth president, William Bennett Bizzell, but Bizzell was so impressed with Brandt that he later recruited him to come to OU as head of its print shop. Bizzell challenged Brandt to do two things: start a magazine for OU alumni (which became *Sooner Magazine*) and establish a university press that would publish scholarly books not financially attractive to commercial publishers. Bizzell had in mind that a publishing program could be developed over the next 10 years.

Brandt had other ideas. Arriving in July of 1928, he started the Press in 1929 and published its first book in January of 1930. Brandt went on to publish 85 books in the next decade before leaving OU to head the Princeton University Press. Three years later, he returned to OU as its sixth president.

Assistant Director Savoie Lottinville took the reins of the

burgeoning Press upon Brandt’s resignation in 1938. Lottinville is largely credited with building the national and international reputation of the Press by finding and publishing scholarly works of long-range appeal. *Time* magazine wrote that over the 30-year period he served as director, Lottinville built the Press “into the nation’s standout example of a successful regional publisher.”

Brandt began the OU Press tradition of grouping books into series with “Civilization of the American Indian,” which now includes more than 250 titles. Lottinville added the “Western Frontier Library” and the “Centers of Civilization.” Succeeding directors, including Edward Shaw, George Bauer and Drayton expanded the series’ offerings, adding such collections as “Oklahoma Western Biographies,” “American Indian Literature and Critical Studies,” “Literature of the American West,” “International and Security Affairs,” “Campaigns and Commanders,” “Chicano and Chicana Visions of the Americas,” “American Indian Law and Policy” and the “Julian J. Rothbaum Distinguished Lecture Series.”

“There are two advantages to a series,” Drayton says. “One is that it has an editor independent of the Press. It gives us access to people we ordinarily wouldn’t meet. The second advantage is that a series is as easy to sell as one book.”

Today, the Press publishes between 90 and 100 titles a year. Half are new hardbacks or original paperbacks of previously unpublished manuscripts, and half are paperbacks of books previously available only in hardbound editions. Its authors are drawn from throughout the country and around the world, and its books are reviewed in major publications such as *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* and *The Wall Street Journal*. In the past 10 years alone, the OU Press and its writers have earned more than 100 honors and awards.

To ensure that it will continue with its mission of producing work of scholarly significance, the Press also has developed some new initiatives such as the Graduate Student 2000 Program in Humanities, which assists deserving graduate students as they prepare their dissertations and speeds them toward publication. The program provides qualifying students with editorial assistance during the writing phase of the dissertation and financial assistance up to \$2,000 upon Press approval of the project. In addition, the OU Press commits a minimum of \$1,000 toward publicity, advertising and promotion of the student’s work when published.

“This program gets us together sooner with the outstanding doctoral student working on a dissertation worthy of publication,” Rankin says. “We’ve found that the best students writing the best material on the thesis or dissertation level are often multi-book producers down the road.”

With new-writer incentives and a more aggressive marketing approach, Drayton hopes he is ensuring that the Press will continue to thrive. “If I have a legacy, I would like it to be that our transition into the publishing world of the 21st century was a real success.”

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