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Textbooks by the Book

by Kathleen McGinn Spring

Textbooks instruct, but they must also dazzle, represent the ethnicity of the students who tote them, please school boards and legislators—and offend no one. The textbook business is tough, rivaling drug discovery in the amount of time and money that must be spent just to gain a shot at the market.

“A publisher can spend two or three years and millions of dollars preparing a textbook series, and then a state can decide to go with another publisher,” says Marcel Chouteau, president of Princeton-area Brunswick Publishing Resources (www.brunspub.com). He explains that states hold “beauty contests” at which several rival publishers present complete textbook packages. “It’s a big box,” he says. Elements include not only the books the children will use, but also teacher’s manuals, and five or six hefty customized ancillary items, including enrichment materials, tests, and guides. The decision makers then choose just one publisher’s product.

Chouteau and Brunswick’s co-founder, Fiona Shapiro, worked for McGraw-Hill, one of the biggest players in the textbook publishing business, until that company closed its in-house textbook development department in 2006, laying off some 40 employees. “People were talking about freelancing, about continuing to do the same work,” says Chouteau. “Many of them had 20 years experience in developing textbooks. We decided to see if we could pull some of them together and start a company.”

Why did McGraw-Hill decide to close the division down?

Chouteau answers the question with a question: “Why did they buy it in the first place?”



By the Book: *Marcel Chouteau and Fiona Shapiro have turned a McGraw-Hill downsizing into a new business opportunity.*

In 2001 McGraw-Hill purchased Princeton Junction-based Visual Education Corporation, or VisEd, as it was more commonly called. The company had been founded by Dick Lidz and Bill West in 1969. The principals retired, says Chouteau, and McGraw-Hill ran the company from its Princeton Junction offices for a few years, and then moved it over to its own offices in neighboring Hightstown.

Chouteau says that he guesses McGraw-Hill made the purchase simply because it was flush at the time. Doing textbook development in-house is

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not necessarily cost effective. "Between projects people just sit around," says Chouteau. "Even at VisEd, there were lots of times when everybody was just sitting around."

The project-based nature of the work makes it a natural for outsourcing, and capturing some of that work is Brunswick's mission. The company, a network of about a dozen former VisEd/McGraw-Hill employees, is making progress toward that goal as a subcontractor. It turns out that a good amount of textbook development work is double, or even triple, outsourced. The giant publishing houses often give the work to large contractors, including New York City-based GGS Book Services (www.ggs-books.com). The contractor then calls in smaller companies like Brunswick, which has worked with GGS on projects for Harcourt, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, Glencoe, Scott Foresman, Sadlier-Oxford, and National Geographic. Brunswick, in turn, taps into its own network of people who have expertise in project management, production, outlining, researching, writing, editing, fact-checking, or state customization.

Textbook publishing was always big business, and it has been given a huge boost in the years since President George W. Bush proclaimed his No Child Left Behind policy. "You can say bad things about No Child Left Behind, and you can say good things," says Chouteau, "but it has been great for the textbook publishing business." States, strongly encouraged to develop measures of success for a range of academic skills, need textbooks that teach to their own particular tests of these skills.

"The act required states to set academic standards," says Chouteau. "They then want their own books, which meet their standards, and they want those standards spelled out in the books." So, instead of turning out a one-size-fits-all text for, say, fifth grade science, publishers develop a book specifically designed for California's fifth grade science curriculum or for New York's fifth grade science curriculum.

Beyond preparing students for their states' standardized tests, these texts customize learning to include a particular state's resources and attractions. "For Maryland," Chouteau gives as an example, "there's a section on the National Aquarium, with content that teaches to the standards."

Customization is big, but so is conformity. No matter whether it is rich or poor, red or blue, no state will risk offending any of its constituents. In science texts for grade schoolers, for example, there is no mention of either evolution or of creationism. "You can't say either 'evolve' or 'create' about a species," says Chouteau. "You can't say 'the bird's beak evolved to catch worms.' You have to dance around it. No state wants to deal with it. The editors know what they can and can't say. We've all gotten very good at it."

Political correctness extends beyond words to pictures. "The children in the pictures have to mirror the ethnic make-up of the state," Chouteau says. "They have to be counted and tracked." But sometimes the pictures don't quite tell all. "You have to go the extra mile to include minorities," he says. Caucasians generally don't mind being under represented, but no state wants to take a chance on under representing one of its minority groups. (Presumably a strategy for dealing with Caucasians when they are no longer a majority has not yet been worked out.)

Textbooks are meant for children, but developing them is a dead serious adult preoccupation. All of the major textbook publishers have representatives charged with finding out exactly what boards of education and state legislators around the country want to see in their textbooks. There is a constant back and forth as textbook proposals are prepared, and editors have to be prepared to make last minute changes.

They also must be skilled in writing about the same subject in many different ways. "South Carolina may teach magnetism in the third grade, and Tennessee may teach it in the fourth grade," Chouteau gives as an example. "They have to rewrite it for each grade.

Everything is different—the length of the sentence, the words you use, the type size.”

Chouteau and Shapiro are textbook development professionals. Their specialty involves bringing together all of the elements that go into a textbook. They coordinate the writers and the editors, the designers and the proofreaders, the photographers and the people who choose stock photos. They are responsible for seeking approvals at each stage, overseeing revisions, and going back for final approvals.

Chouteau, a graduate of New York University, lives with his wife, Lisa, a television producer for the PBS series *Caucus: New Jersey*, and their five-year-old son, Henry, in New Hope, PA. His father, Azby Chouteau, co-founded the Institute of Children’s Literature (www.writingforchildren.com), the correspondence school that teaches people to write children’s books.

Shapiro, a native of Ireland and a graduate of Rutgers University, lives in South Brunswick, NJ, with her husband and son.

Textbooks are evolving—or being created—in a way that Chouteau and Shapiro’s grammar school selves would hardly recognize. “It’s not chapter, review, chapter, review anymore,” says Chouteau. “There are all kinds of splashy activities. They look like magazines.”

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