Anne Godden and Al Knight from the successful Melbourne publishing firm Hyland House provide a succinct run down of the publishing industry in Australia from the point of view of the publisher. They begin with a comparison of the operations of small and large publishing firms and end with a plea for writers to be more informed about the publishing process.

There is a significant difference in the finance available to large and small publishers. Large publishers in Australia are usually branch offices of multinational companies. As such they can depend on a basic turnover from the sale of books published by their associate companies. Also any loans they may require for their local publishing program will be backed by the parent company. However, they are subject to directions from the parent company with regard to their publishing program.

The smaller publishers are usually Australian owned and run by a small number of staff. They can make decisions quickly but are usually dependent, like any other small business, on the banks for finance. Like all publishers they have to go on making a profit or they cease to exist.

Large publishers usually control their own warehousing and distribution but the editorial department - the department the author deals with - does not always have any more control over the selling team than the small publisher has over the company he pays to sell his books.

All publishers are aware of public perceptions, including those on heritage and environmental issues. If they do not keep up with changing fashions they go out of business. More and more publishers are using recycled materials for at least some of their books but recycled paper is still a little more expensive. The situation is improving every year.

Academic publishing is no longer profitable because university departments are anthologising university texts to produce their own textbooks. The licence fee for photocopying does not compensate for loss of sales to students. Most university publishers will only publish an academic work which (they think) will also have a significant sale to the general reader.

Publishers will only publish heritage texts for the 'popular' market if they think they will be popular. It is a little difficult to be precise about the actual number of copies that must be sold to make a project worthwhile. A standard paperback of, say, 150 pages selling at $19.95 would probably be considered viable if 3000 were sold, while a pictorial book of the same length with some colour selling at $39.95 would need sales of 5000. A small publisher is usually content with less profit because his/her overheads are less.

Neither of these examples, I hasten to add, come into the best-seller class. A publisher needs to reprint a book before he/she starts to make money on it but most publishers are interested in a number of books with modest returns provided they can find a few best-sellers and don’t lose money on too many titles.

A surprisingly large number of publishers are interested in sponsored works and most local and institutional histories would not be published without someone’s support.

Usually the only problem is that the needs of the client and the commercial market may not coincide. The publisher usually complies with the wishes of the client who is paying most, if not all, of the bill and the client may be disappointed because the book does not sell commercially.

Any publisher with a large general list will commission most of the books they publish. Publishers have a very good idea of the books that will sell and will also suit their sales set-up and will obviously concentrate on these books. It is much easier to get the book that is wanted if publisher and author liaise from the book’s inception.

A commercial publisher must cover costs and overheads in order to survive, especially in a country with a relatively small population like Australia. Even the smallest publishers receive many manuscripts every year and can afford to be very selective. As an example, Hyland House publishes between 20 and 25 books a year and only about one of these would be from an author who is unknown to us. On the other hand we received over 400 unsolicited manuscripts in 1994 and will have more this year.

A publisher’s survival depends on how many copies that can be sold and at what price. Each book becomes a balancing act in costing and the publisher cannot afford to get too many sums wrong. This applies to all books, whether they are specialist texts, heritage books, academic books or commissioned books. A specialist text will always need a subsidy unless there is a big enough audience to absorb the print run.

All publishers would agree that their task would be much easier if authors were more informed about the publishing process. A first-time author usually needs a lot of help. In Australia there are various organisations like the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the Victorian Writers Centre which run workshops for writers of various kinds of books. We wish there were more of them.

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