Publishers are turning to unconventional processes and materials to make their book covers stand out. They cost more to produce, but the best covers can increase sales dramatically.

By JEFF ANGUS

he numbers tell the story. There are 145,000 book titles vying for attention on bookseller's shelves. That's up a mere 3% over last year, according to market researcher R. R.

Bowker, with little prospect for growth in this stalled economy.

Book publishers have limited options to capture the attention of buyers. One tactic is increasingly popular: a striking cover.

Vivid colors, metallic foil and inks, ultraviolet-cured compounds, 3D holograms, lenticular motion graphics—all are techniques finding favor with book designers and marketers.

Intended to grab the eye or titillate the touch, these design techniques stand out, attracting readers to the detriment of lesserstyled competing titles.

"Publishers are more inclined to raise the bar [today], and in a tasteful way, not just to do it," says Kelly Hartman, marketing manager for Phoenix Color Corp., a book component printer and manufacturer in Hagerstown, Md. Analysts agree. "In view of this sea of book titles being published, you must have a cover that helps sell the book," says Andrew Grabois, senior director for publisher relations with R.R. Bowker, in New Providence, N.J. "Better yet, an eyecatching cover."

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COURT HORIZ

Grabois says interest in stunning cover designs and materials goes beyond retail stores, even impacting on-line sales. "On the Web you need an image, preferably a highresolution one," he says. "Increasingly, that means not just the cover, but cover four, too."

It also influences cross-media branding. "That [cover] image is part of the branding of that title, from the cover to the Web page, to the belt buckle," says John R. DePaul, president of the publishing components division at The Lehigh Press Inc., in Pennsauken, N.J. "So design needs to work in several media and sizes, as well as dazzle the beholder."

III BOLD COVERS FOR A BAD ECONOMY

It's not that these eye-popping materials, methods, and technologies are new, improved, or lower in cost.

Virtually all of the products and processes publishers are now using to make new book covers stand out have been available for years.

What has changed: the U.S. economy. Publishers are now willing to invest in higher-cost covers to gain a competitive edge.

With consumers and schools pinching pennies, and more titles than ever competing for their dollar, a flamboyant cover can make all the difference.



ΕS

"Lenticular has moved beyond the trinkets and trash market," says Tim Traub, lenticular business unit manager with Outlook Group Corp.

Traub says the surface backing for lenticular lenses used on book covers is only 14 mil thick. That's down from the 18 mil thickness common for label and packaging applications.

The thinner material makes it possible to increase lens density on book covers to 100 per inch, compared to 75 per inch for

"Publishers were very cost-conscious about cover printing," says Jeffrey Burg, marketing manager at Visual Systems Inc., a Milwaukee producer of book components and ancillary products. "Now they're willing to spend significant dollars in covers."

One of the most striking and talkedabout new cover design technologies is not the most widely used. But a new manufacturing process is getting the attention of publishers, and could thrust it into the mainstream.

The hot topic of discussion: lenticular graphics, the modern cousin of the little plastic cards and rings buried in *Cracker Jack* boxes decades ago. Those primitive toys displayed a multi-frame animated graphic when the card or ring was flipped to and fro. The result was captivating for kids.

Now lenticular technology promises to highjack the attention of ambling shelfbrowsers with unexpected flutters of animation and movement on book covers.

Two of lenticular's biggest boosters are Outlook Group Corp., a packaging and label manufacturer in Neenah, Wis., and materials inventor National Graphics Inc., in Brookfield.

III PAPERBACK WRITER

Outlook Group recently produced and applied four unique animated lenticular covers for *The Beatles 40th Anniversary Tribute*, a digest-sized picture book published by American Media Mini Mags Inc., in Boca Raton, Fla. Each Beatles tribute has a different lenticular cover. At first glance, all appear to feature a group shot of the Fab Four. packaging. That makes for sharper, more graduated images that come close to what the human eye considers reality, Traub says.

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Outlook Group and supplier National Graphics have tag-teamed commercializing lenticular materials since 1994. That's when, Traub says, Outlook became the first to offset print lenticular images.

One recent advancement to lenticular printing technology is improving image quality, cutting production cycles, and driving wider adoption of the technology.

It's called "onserting," and it enables printers to output directly on the back of the plastic lens. That's a sharp break with the past, where images were printed on paper, and later affixed to the plastic lens—a time consuming, imprecise process.

"All our materials are printed with a sheet-fed offset, using National to do the

pre-press interlacing," Traub says. "National takes the customer-supplied art files, and translates them into something we can print."

This workflow continues with the sheetfed product being put on the moving web stream. It emerges as a fan-folded label. One of the major advantages of onserting is better alignment.

"It's very difficult to align it perfectly, and the tolerance is close to 1/200th of an inch," Traub says. This requires a level of precision that exceeds what automatic registration controls can handle.

For this, Outlook's staff goes with manual craftwork to align on the Komori Lithrone 644 six-color press they use. Doing so makes the process a little slower than traditional print jobs, up to 4,500 sheets per hour versus up to 10,000 per hour. But precision results are the payoff.

III THE POWER OF TOUCH

While few dispute lenticular's ability to dazzle, some competitors aren't convinced the technology is ready for prime time. The process's higher material costs, heavier weight, and longer cycle time are some of the arguments competitors make.

"Check in again in two years," says Eric Roberts, director of graphics technology for The Lehigh Press Inc. Roberts wonders why publishers would choose lenticular graphics when there are other faster, less costly, simpler processes for corralling shoppers' attention.

"The biggest trend right now is tactility," Roberts says. "Covers that appeal to the sense of touch excite readers, whether it's textures or embossing, or processes like UV curing that give the visual illusion of embossing without actually embossing."

Roberts is especially enthusiastic about a UV-cured book cover Lehigh recently created for Pearson Education Inc., Upper Saddle River, N.J., publishing under the Prentice Hall imprint. The educational title, *Biology: Exploring Life*, features a dramatic photograph of a reptile's eye.

The image appears almost threedimensional, and the creature's scales have a spectacular raised look and feel.

UV treatment doesn't require new equipment, which keeps costs down,

Roberts says. The technological part of the solution is a liquid, with a workflow that's faster than embossing, foil, lamination, and decoration. It also leaves the cover's flip side perfectly flat, and available for printing.

"Embossing has been a perennial winner for eye-catching covers," Roberts says. "But you have to choose between height or detail, because it's very hard to get both in the same die."

Lehigh uses three new Bobst stampers, and two Geitz stampers, to lay down foil and embossing effects. The company works on a variety of embossing and foil projects for publishers chasing vivid cover effects.

Even though embossing and foil



GOOD VIBRATIONS: Phoenix Color's new Vibramotion effect dazzles, yet is price competitive with foil stamping and embossing.

represent a significant revenue stream for Lehigh, Roberts believes cost advantages will ultimately move UV to the forefront. New effects, such as suspending glitter and color into the process, will further accelerate UV's desirability as a splashy cover treatment, he says.

"The upshot of UV compared to embossing is, you don't undermine the real estate on the other side with debossing," Roberts says.

Other printers agree. Milwaukee-based Visual Systems Inc. is also producing UVenhanced covers. The company just acquired a new Heidelberg press with an integrated UV option. Company officials declined to name the specific model they were using, but Heidelberg's Speedmaster CD 74 is a recent model that integrates a UV option.

III DOING MORE WITH COLOR

Both Lehigh Press and Visual Systems are also producing six-color high-fidelity (hi-fi) effects. In fact, the six-color process is the most cost-effective way to juice up a book's cover, says Burg of Visual Systems.

"Publishers went gung-ho with embossing or foils," Burg says. "While they still want the high-end presentation, they don't want to spend the extra 50% to 100%. Six-color is closer to the 25% to 50% [premium] they're looking for."

Lush, six-color covers have time-tomarket advantages over other eye-catching methods. The added oomph takes the same amount of time as four color, even though the manufacturing process is dramatically different, Burg says.

Six-color requires RGB color specification for input, because it has a larger range of colors than CMYK can deliver. Two more color channels are then added.

For example, Lehigh Press adds orange and green. The resulting CMYKOG pigment scheme delivers a more dynamic range. Other colors can also be used.

A leading school publisher is using Lehigh's CMYKOG six-color process for many of their book covers. (The publisher confirmed the design value of going with Lehigh's CMYKOG process in an interview, but later requested anonymity, citing competitive concerns.)

"Six [colors] makes a huge difference," the publisher's senior director for design says. "It has opened up the color range, and delivered a lot more punch."

The publisher finds the six-color process especially effective in boosting oranges, greens, and purples. But ink color ranges aren't the only thing that's been expanded for cover effects. Cover materials are undergoing revolutionary changes as well.

III A MATERIAL EDGE

That according to executives at ICG/Holliston. A dominant provider of cloth covers, ICG/Holliston has been aggressively expanding the color palette of choices

available to publishers, says Joann Scherf, vice-president of marketing for ICG/Holliston, in Kingsport, Tenn.

"The covers for [Scholastic's] *Harry Potter* titles used some of our more bright and vivid colors, green and purple, but we have a multitude of colors, and we keep expanding our selection," she says.

But color is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the power of cloth to attract buyer's attention, she says. "We have a multitude of different looks and textures, and we continually offer more choices," Scherf says. "People think of cloth as having a cloth texture, but we can do [simulated] cowhide or goat, for example, and we're doing a metallic crinkle, too."

Pre-binder Bound to Stay Bound Books Inc. is using a range of ICG/Holliston's materials to sharpen the company's competitive edge. The company reprints highly durable versions of 18,000 works, selling them directly to libraries and educational buyers.

The market is fiercely competitive. Bold covers can make the difference. "Historically we used dark buckrams or pastels," says Bob Crane, printing supervisor at Bound to Stay Bound Books, in Jacksonville, IL. "We found buckram wears best, but it wasn't very attractive by itself."

To spiff things up, Crane is largely converting to all-white buckram. He's reproducing the publisher's original jacket art on the white background, making it stand out.

Switching to a new ICG/Holliston cotton-polyester blend has helped Bound to Stay Bound Books take advantage of more and different inks. It wears just as well, plus the company can apply a top-coat, and then use offset to print on it.

Compare that to traditional burlap-like cloth covers, where ink contracts during drying. That causes pin-sized gaps in the color, where warp and weft leave depressions in the cover material—a problem that doesn't vex the new ICG/Holliston blend.

III MARGIN-BOOSTING POWER

Animation, texture, dynamic color, and other visual effects command attention. They can also send a message about the value of the

content between the covers.

"The cover expresses the book's value," says Christian Webel, marketing manager for General Binding Corp. (GBC), in Addison, Ill. "That's true for coffee table books, gardening titles, home-improvement books, children's books."

A film and coatings provider, GBC is as distant from the consumer and institutional book buyer on the supply chain as a vendor can get. Yet GBC and Webel are passionately following customer research and trends.

"Many buyers perceive low-reflective, matte finishes as having a higher value," Webel says. "When people are buying a book for gift giving, they look for high perceived value. Matte delivers that perception."

Historically, matte finishes were susceptible to scuffing, especially during shipment. That torpedoes the book's perceived quality, because a scuffed matte cover makes a book appear old and worn.

GBC is attacking this problem with a new scuff-resistant film, dubbed *Scuff-Resistant Matte OPP* which, Webel says, wears better. "It has a very, very flat matte finish, and doesn't scuff," she says.

The new product costs about 50% more per roll. Overall manufacturing costs are equivalent, though, because the new film can be run faster, and there's less spoilage during manufacturing and shipping.

Webel also suggests vibrant glossy and sheer satin firms for eye-catching covers, as well.

III ARTISTIC EXPLOSION

Publishers can use some or all of these technologies to gain a leading edge, but imitators follow, and fads fade. Cover effects that make books jump off shelves this year might not electrify sales next year.

"That's why we spend a lot of design time on cover ideas and research," says the senior director for design at a leading school publisher. "We're constantly trolling and sniffing for new techniques and combinations. There is almost nothing in printing or materials we won't consider."

This publisher, who declined to be named in this article due to competitive concerns, also rolls multiple head-spinning approaches together. For example, the publisher combined embossing with glitter and foil-stamped end-sheets for one of its most popular series.

"We pulled out all the stops with that program," she says. "The front cover had holographic foil, on which we put a sixcolor photo image, and then had a main image which was embossed."

Retailers say jazzy designs and materials have a decided impact on sales, but publishers can go too far.

"The value of an eye-catching cover in capturing additional sales all depends how well the design is executed," says Tracy Taylor, general manager of The Elliott Bay Book Company, a popular bookstore in Seattle, Wash. "It always helps with children's books. And it works with sci-fi and fantasy paperbacks."

But the 150,000-title giant, Seattle's leading bookseller, won't display an eyecatching cover advantageously unless they're also convinced the content merits it.

That said, covers with complex add-ons that get ruined when shelved spine-out will be displayed face-out. But that can be a risky tactic for publishers looking for an edge.

"We may not order a book that causes us that much trouble," Taylor says. She points to a particularly irritating example. A design book featured an inflatable pillow on the cover, which staff was expected to blow up.

Then there was what Taylor calls "the worst eye-catching scheme ever": a trade paperback that came in a cereal box. Customers tore the box open to preview the book inside. The design stunt caused the product to flop in the marketplace.

Other things besides retailers' convenience are worth considering before a cover project kicks off.

"From a production point-of-view, it becomes critical to integrate consideration of the different effects into the development process earlier than ever before," says DePaul of The Lehigh Press. To make effective use of effects, a designer can't design the cover first and ask questions later, DePaul says. Graphics and effects must be rolled into the concept from day one. "It makes the project a collaborative

effort between the publisher's design team and the component printer," he says.

III FUTURE TRENDS

But competition for readers' eyeballs will only intensify as the number of new titles expands, and printing technologies advance. This means materials and printing providers will keep pushing the envelope, looking for new techniques to wow shoppers. One such effort is Phoenix Color's new *Vibramotion* process, which the company just launched.

"It's a brand new special effect that's show-stopping," says marketing manager Hartman. "The image changes aren't as drastic as lenticular. Vibramotion controls light with flashes and spins. At different angles the image looks different. It's mesmerizing when you use a rainbow holo foil on the stamper."

The Vibramotion effect is created through a proprietary process, not materials, and is price competitive with foil stamping and embossing, Hartman says.

"If the customer chooses one of [the] standard patterns, such as starburst or concentric diamond, there are no additional die charges. The cost is in the ballpark [with] foil stamping and embossing."

Visual Systems is looking at new inks and coatings. Pearlescent inks from Germany recently caught the company's eye.

"The metallic effects traditionally done in foil are now available as ink," says marketing manager Burg. "They're more expensive than fourcolor ink, but significantly less than foil stamping."

Lehigh's Roberts sees innovating new techniques as a core mission. His company has six people who share R&D responsibilities as a multi-disciplinary team.

And with lenticular processes adding lenses and shrinking material depth, increasingly life-like 3D animated graphics will become more affordable and commonplace, says Outlook Group's Traub.

Indeed, Outlook Group's manufacturing partner, National Graphics, is aiming for 7 mil, 200 lens/inch material. Outlook Group tested the new material, and is now using it for pressure sensitive labels and tip ons.

It's not perfected for all manner of projects, but is ideal for certain requirements, Traub says. "Currently the material has some limitations in effects and final size that we can produce," he says.

Now that the battle for cover attention is in full swing, the front is expanding. R.R. Bowker's Grabois says the next competitive struggle for attention will take place on back covers.

"Increasingly, competition is making publishers provide back covers for on-line and catalog marketing, and with that, the need to grab attention there will grow quickly," Grabois says.