



Glass Houses: Discs Still The Best Choice For Spoken-Word Programming

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Though the vast majority of the spoken-word market belongs to CDs (and has for some time), spoken-word is what has been keeping cassettes alive. Will spoken-word discs and cassettes be the last physical media standing? I've spent a lot of time talking to cassette duplicators in the past, but admittedly I've paid more attention to music than spoken-word in terms of the effect that downloading is having, particularly in the book market. Perhaps that's my own prejudice, since I love reading! Anyway, here's a look at the spoken-word market through the eyes of experts in the field. They say, just like the music, movie, and data markets, the spoken-word media market is undergoing change and starting to feel some effects of downloading, although it all looks positive.

Considering how fast technology and technology-based markets change, the latest data available from the [Audio Publishers Association \(APA\)](#) is a little old, but here's what their 2006 statistics released last fall indicate. Audio publishers experienced overall continued growth in 2005. Publishers are producing more unabridged titles all the time. For readers of this column, this is good news--more discs to replicate! At the end of 2005, the audio book market was worth \$871 million. That figure went up in 2006, but final figures aren't available yet, according to APA president Michele Cobb. New statistics should be available sometime in the fall of 2007.

According to an APA survey conducted by Lewis and Clark, spoken-word titles sold via download represented 9% of sales in 2005 compared to 6% of sales in 2004. Cassettes still represent 16% of the total market and, as you would expect, CDs claim the lion's share at 74%. Cobb says the APA expects all of the technologies to co-exist for a long time. "Downloading may overtake CDs in terms of the volume, but exactly when that's going to happen is hard to predict because we certainly have held on to the cassette for a long time," she says.

"Talk to ten companies and you'll get ten different opinions on market trends," says Mike Weiss, industry veteran and new owner of Rockville, Maryland-based service bureau [Video Labs](#). "In terms of profits, some companies may be doing great in their business even though the main portion of the business is audio cassettes. Some companies that may have the latest in technology may be having a rough year. Why? That relates to the type of market and the audience for your clients."

Essentially, the format that works for your 17-year-old daughter might not be the right format for your 60-year-old mom. And, as APA's Cobb says, "Downloadable is a new format that is helping us to expand and attract people to the audio book market, but they are not necessarily the same people that are listening to CDs."

Any sort of physical media is not going away, according to Weiss. "Not long ago, a potential customer wanted to put out messages to their high-net-worth clientele. The demographic was 65 years or older. They put it on audio cassettes and VHS. DVD and CD just are not 'their thing.'"

[Audible, Inc.](#) is the leading provider of spoken entertainment and information on the Internet. Audible provides digital audio editions of books, newspapers and magazines, original programming, and TV and radio subscriptions. Consumers purchase, and download audio content directly to their personal computers for listening in a variety of ways. The site says, "Most of our customers download audio to their PCs and Macs and then transfer the audio to MP3 players, personal digital assistants (PDAs), or to smart mobile devices (SMDs) for listening on the go. Others burn the content to audio CDs, while some customers simply listen at their computers or through a digital home entertainment network." Audible customers can also have their Audible content wirelessly delivered to their smart mobile devices every day, even while they are asleep, taking the computer out of the equation. The selection of audio in its stores ranges from more than 12,000 audio books and performances, to audio editions of national periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *The New Yorker*."

iTunes, too, is another provider of audio books. However, some of my sources say they've found it difficult to keep track of books on their iPods. That is beginning to change with services such as the Audiobook Builder helping organize audio book CDs into one or two files that an iPod can recognize as an audio book. Steve Nazarian, responsible for new business at market development at disc manufacturer [Spinergy Media](#) says, he is one of those people who doesn't see downloading books as a natural progression for audio books just yet. "The nature of spoken word is aimed at use in the car," says Nazarian. "MP3 players are harder to use in the car. It's much easier to use a CD. The way the books and CDs are catalogued and indexed (on some of the sites) is music-centric and is not particularly friendly to spoken word. I found putting the info from my computer to a CD cumbersome."

That aside, even if audio-book downloading is not ideal right now, it certainly will get easier. The question in my mind is really, is there any good reason to transport a bunch of CDs into your car to listen to an audio book? It almost makes less sense than carrying a bunch of music CDs (though I still do it) when there are much more compact ways for you and your music to travel.

Spoken-word programming, of course, goes beyond books. "I'm doing a job that is a pharmaceutical marketing training piece--a hybrid disc with a spoken word lecture that is shipped with a data portion, a PowerPoint," says Nazarian. "Its purpose is to train sales reps. Another disc we made is for those sales reps to hand out to the doctors. The pharmaceutical market is very strong. Reps themselves spend a lot of time in cars where they can easily listen to a CD. If anything, I've seen spoken word as a percentage of audio discs grow," he adds.

One other interesting point made to me by a few sources is...if you are going to spend \$30 on an audio book, you're not going to want to delete it from your iPod and be done with it. You want to have something to show for it, whether that means displaying it on your shelf (not likely) or passing it along (more likely), then at least you can feel the money is well spent.

All and all, the message of this column? 'Tis the season for travel, read a book on the plane! Better yet ... listen to one.

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