

CHAPTER SEVEN

UNPACKING AND CHECKING

Who Unpacks?

Wherever the books come from, someone must be deputed to unpack and check them. Publishers are only human; unless, that is, they employ computers which are less than human. This means that there will be mistakes at the despatching end: there always are. For this reason there is no substitute for careful and painstaking checking of the contents of each parcel, either against an invoice enclosed with that parcel, or, if the invoice is coming separately by post, against a contents list. So choose someone who is reliable, methodical and patient to unpack the books, check them, and look for errors.

There are three main categories of error:

- (a) Omission: a title missing or too few copies of one enclosed.
- (b) Inclusion: a title not ordered or requested, or too many copies of an ordered title.
- (c) Confusion: the wrong, though usually similar, title to the one ordered; or the right title and wrong author; or the wrong part of a book of a multi-volume title.

All errors should be notified to the supplier, whether publisher, bookseller or wholesaler, immediately you detect them. If the parcel is undamaged, that is all you need to do; if it is damaged or broken, then a copy of the notification should be sent to the shipper or deliverer. And if the parcel is badly split open and damaged,

then the original complaint should go to the shipper, copy to the publisher.

Checking the Price

Once it has been ascertained that the right books are in the parcel and in good condition, the next point to check is if they are priced. If the habit of the publisher in a particular country of publication is to print the price on the blurb, then the unpacker should check that it is there. The chances are that in one case out of twenty it won't be; and a price, taken from the invoice or contents note, must then be pencilled in. If, on the other hand, the book has been produced in a country where prices are not normally printed on the book, then every book will have to be priced in pencil on the first blank page inside the cover. The same is true if local prices are different from those printed on the books. It is difficult to over-emphasise the need for constant attention to ensure that all books on show are correctly priced. Visitors to book exhibitions always want to know how much a book costs. No one during the running of the show is likely to be able to spare the time to wade through the original supplying invoices to check the price of a book.

In the unlikely event of there being no contents note, and the invoice coming under separate cover has not arrived, you should phone the publisher or supplier for missing prices, or seek the help of the nearest library with up-to-date bibliographical material. Failure to do this over even one book is almost guaranteeing that someone will enquire the price of that book at the busiest moment of the whole exhibition!

The invoices themselves should either be sorted alphabetically by publisher or be numbered, entered into a day-book, giving date, publisher's name and amount of total. The second of these alternatives makes tracing a particular invoice a longer business, but avoids having dozens of small files, each devoted to one publisher.

Sorting the Books

It is important not only to unpack books methodically, but to know what to do with them once they are unpacked. Piles of unattended books are a great temptation. Even if no one "borrows" one, it is certain that they will be moved, shuffled, disordered. Many people cannot resist touching, handling, leafing through books; and such people rarely replace them where they were. (If any readers doubt this, let them place a pile of books on their living-room table when guests are coming. By the time the guests leave, the order in the pile - if indeed there is still any sort of pile at all - will have been completely changed!)

All things being equal, it is best not to unpack books until the exhibition stands are set up and ready to take them. Unpacking and checking then takes place almost simultaneously with setting out. Often, however, it is necessary to unpack in advance; and doing so does have the advantage of providing time to get errors and omissions put right. In the latter case, there must be a secure room or secure cupboards set aside. "Secure" here means lockable (see Chapter 8).

Very large exhibitions displaying thousands of titles will need small teams of people to unpack and arrange the books. Smaller shows, perhaps up to 500 titles, can often be handled by one or two people. Either way someone ought to have done a good deal of pre-planning to decide where different sorts of books are going to be located in the exhibition room. Often there is too little space for them to be laid out prior to determining their final arrangement. So, using the order lists, the arranger(s) should allocate space for each subject or publisher or category; and move each parcel to its appropriate space as soon as its contents are known.

When setting out the books, the following procedure may be helpful. First put the books in piles on the subject tables or stands allocated to them. Next, spread them out so as to find out how much space they need. If there are

too many books to fill the space set aside for one section, and too few for another, you may be able to put the two sections side by side. Finally, arrange the books carefully in each section so that: (a) those on similar topics are close together (e.g. by putting books on Africa in one part of a Geography section and books on Asia in another); and (b) the section as a whole looks attractive. Do remember to check the exhibition regularly so as to replace books correctly when visitors put them down carelessly.

Where do the Books go Afterwards?

At this stage of the lead-up to the exhibition a clear decision needs to be taken (or ascertained if it is someone else's decision) as to what will happen to the books at the end of the show. Are they going on to another venue? Are they going back to the publisher? Are they being sold as second-hand books to benefit the organisation's funds? In every one of these cases, packing materials will be required. So not only must books be carefully checked on being unpacked, but if possible the very packing materials in which the books arrive should be retained. Space must therefore be found to store the packing materials safely during the run of the exhibition itself. It is no use saving nice boxes if over-efficient cleaners whisk them away when nobody is around to stop them.

All this requires fairly rigorous advance planning. If a space or cupboard has been set aside for empty cartons and packages, then they won't get lost or damaged. If a room has been allocated in advance for stock arriving early, then the chances are that that stock will remain intact in every sense. For it must never be forgotten that, except in the case of a tiny exhibition, it is not likely that all the books will arrive together; or that they will arrive neatly at the balanced rate of so many packages a day. Inevitably some packages will arrive days or even weeks before the specified delivery date; and some on the very day the exhibition opens. The more steps that have been taken to deal with such situations, the less organisational headaches there will be at the last moment.