

# FINGER FLICKING GOOD

Info for the end-user

BY JON PACKMAN

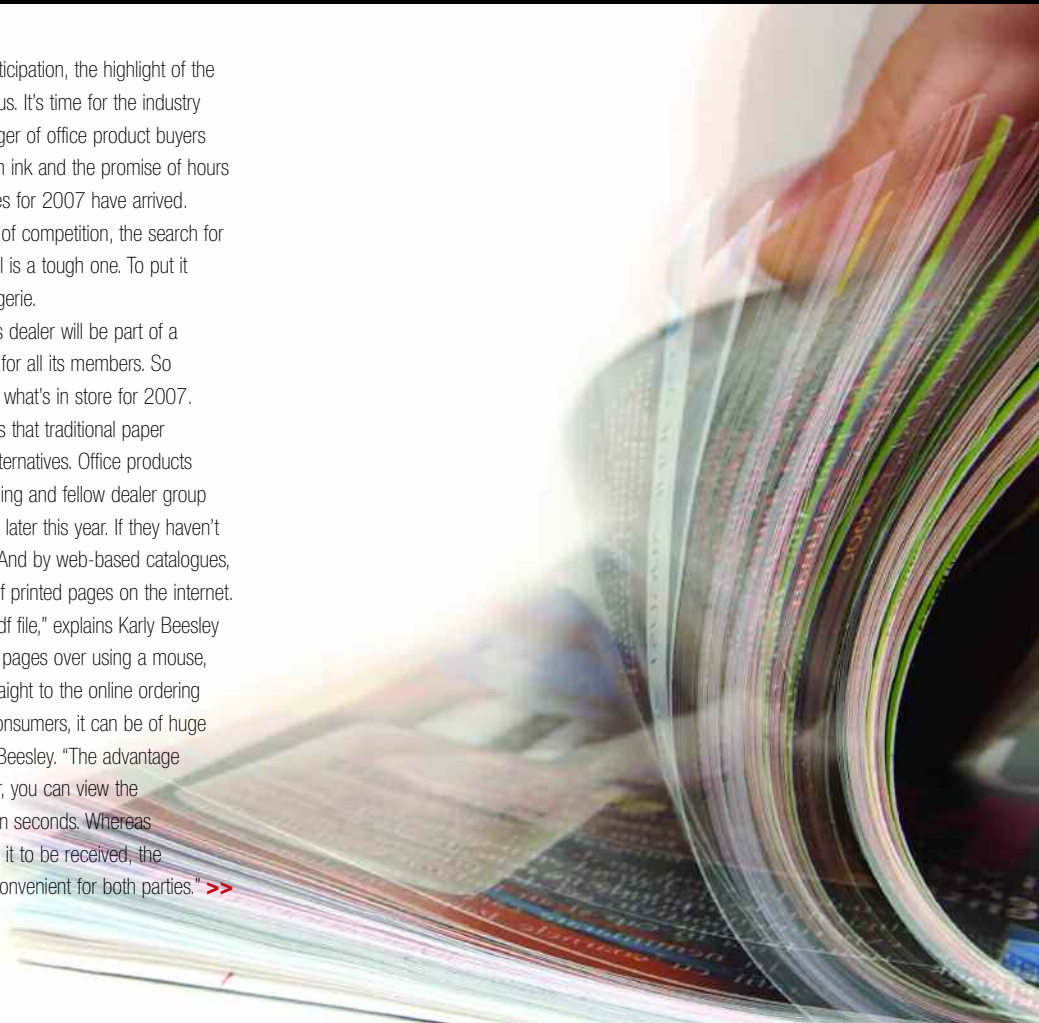
After another year of edge-of-the-seat anticipation, the highlight of the publishing calendar is once again upon us. It's time for the industry to unleash its wares and satiate the hunger of office product buyers across the country. With a heady aroma of fresh ink and the promise of hours of finger-licking, page-turning fun, the catalogues for 2007 have arrived.

Fiercely debated and always a battleground of competition, the search for the ultimate user-friendly and effective sales tool is a tough one. To put it bluntly, stationery doesn't have the power of lingerie.

It's more than likely that your office products dealer will be part of a larger 'dealer group' that publishes a catalogue for all its members. So we've talked to four of these groups to find out what's in store for 2007.

One of the biggest developments this year is that traditional paper catalogues are now complemented by digital alternatives. Office products dealer group Superstat's is already up and running and fellow dealer group Office Friendly is set to launch its online version later this year. If they haven't by now, expect the other groups to follow suit. And by web-based catalogues, we're not talking about simply viewing photos of printed pages on the internet.

"Our new digital catalogue is more than a pdf file," explains Karly Beesley from Superstat. "It functions so you can flip the pages over using a mouse, then by clicking a product code it takes you straight to the online ordering page." While the concept may not be new to consumers, it can be of huge benefit to the buying and selling process, says Beesley. "The advantage is that when you're on the phone to a customer, you can view the products online together and turn to any page in seconds. Whereas if you have to post a catalogue out and wait for it to be received, the process is so much more drawn out and less convenient for both parties." >>



Another big development for 2007, and off the back of a huge shift in public attitude, is the growing influence of the environment. All catalogues now have a big focus on eco-friendly goods – more products, all of whose planet-saving abilities jump out the page to entice the responsible reader. “The feedback from dealers was that customers are increasingly asking about the green credentials of what they’re buying,” says Office Friendly’s Debbie Lee. “In addition to that, we’re also seeing a lot of ‘pink’ products aimed at raising money for cancer charities, for example. People are a lot more aware of these issues now and what they purchase is also determined by their social conscience.”

Dealer group Nemo has also followed this trend towards sustainable practice. “The new catalogue has really enhanced the exposure of environmentally friendly products,” says Wallis. “And we’ve added the Fairtrade mark where relevant.” He adds that this year Nemo commissioned a specialist agency to conduct customer research, “rather than just asking leading questions that delivered the changes we wanted to hear”. Once completed, the findings were presented to the group’s members. “When we told them of the proposed changes for 2007, there were lots of nodding heads – which demonstrates you must always challenge what you’ve done previously.”

One of the key requirements for any customer buying from a catalogue is that it’s user-friendly. It’s also one of the most difficult things to achieve when you’ve got thousands of products spread over hundreds of pages. According to Lee, the feedback from dealers and customers alike has been that they want to be able to navigate the catalogue more easily. “Whereas the wholesalers want to use manufacturers’ names and jargon, those who actually use the catalogues prefer to see products listed according to generic terms,” she says. “So this year we’ve changed the index to reflect this and omitted

any references to manufacturers. It’s made it a lot more user-friendly.”

Nemo has improved its index as well, to “allow even greater flexibility in searching for products,” says Wallis. “And at the beginning of each section we have a guide to ‘choosing the right product’ that’s been further enhanced from last year’s catalogue. Plus there are now additional product links on pages – for example, printers showing the cartridges they require.”

Similarly, dealer group Integra has introduced compatibility charts for its electronic office supplies (EOS). “This reflects our focus on making it easier for consumers,” says Aidan McDonough, marketing director. “The number of EOS lines continues to grow both in volume and importance for dealers – it’s imperative we make it easy for the customer to find what they want quickly and efficiently.” You can expect every catalogue to have put on a few electronic pounds for 2007 as dealers embrace the burgeoning EOS market and buyers realise they really can get everything from a single source.

As well as getting lost, another common problem the customer faces when trawling through page after page of office products is, quite frankly, sheer boredom. It’s hard to get excited about 15cm rulers, no matter how great the selection. But putting some fun into the process isn’t impossible, explains Superstat’s Beesley. “We wanted to try and add a bit of comedy to the catalogue this year,” she says. “So here and there you’ll find a few little comments that will hopefully bring a smile to the reader. For example, we’ve included the fact that our plastic desk bins are great for Darth Vader impressions if you stick them on your head.”

All the catalogues should come out this month. No doubt there’s more than enough in them to make a low budget Star Wars spoof and kit your office out at the same time. ■

