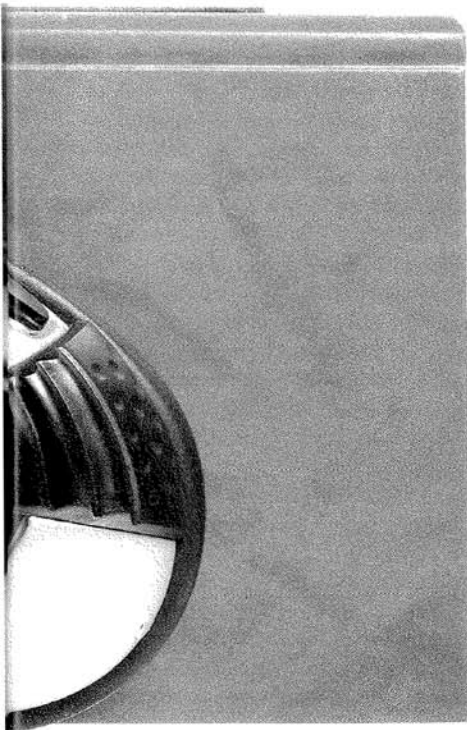


Find a Way to Offer Playaway

A New Kind
of Audio Book



When historians look back on library services in the early 21st century, one of the major trends they may discuss is the renaissance of the audio book.

At the end of the 20th century, print publishing sales were flat; however, the popularity of audio books has grown exponentially in the last 8 years. Easy to use, they fit well into a wide variety of busy lifestyles. An ever-increasing number of best sellers are being released in print and audio formats simultaneously. According to the National Endowment for the Arts study "Reading at Risk" [<http://www.nea.gov/news/news04/ReadingAtRisk.html>], audio book listening is one of the very few types of reading that is increasing general literacy. No longer are audio books just for people with vision or mobility problems: Audio books are for everyone, from the 50- to 65-year-old Boomer to the teenager listening to a book on her iPod to a 30-year-old trucker listening to John Grisham on a long haul.

Audio books are available at many public and school libraries, as well as for purchase at brick-and-mortar or online book stores. There are a variety of different formats available, including cassette; downloadable, streaming audio; CD; and Playaways [<http://store.playawaydigital.com>]. The last are self-contained audio books on an MP3-like player. The Library of Congress National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped also distributes audio books. To qualify for this by-mail service, you must have a physical or visual disability which prevents you from comfortably reading regular-size print.

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The “Un-Book” Readers

“Talking books” or audio books used to be a format reserved for the blind, elderly, or those with vision problems, but not any more. The new audio book user may be a Baby Boomer between the ages of 50 to 65; a young, busy, 30-something mom; a commuter; or a college student. The Baby Boomer listener works 40 hours per week and spends the majority of the day in front of a computer. However, many Baby Boomers suffer eye strain, likely wear glasses, and find the comfortability of reading in decline as they grow older. The new audio book customer may be active, with kids, aging parents, and numerous community responsibilities. Although not yet ready for the hip and groovy 1970s cassette machine from a Talking Book Center, they are ready to listen to an audio book.

Commuters and travelers have always been big users of audio books for passing the time on trains, planes, and automobiles. With the increase in audio book publishing, there are more great choices for listening than ever before — for example: *Audacity of Hope* by Barack Obama; *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen; or *Birthright* by Nora Roberts. Audio books allow readers to read more books, read on-the-go, and listen when their eyes are tired.

Other avid audio book users include high school and college students who enjoy listening as opposed to traditional visual reading. Research continues to prove that using audio books helps students with word comprehension, vocabulary expansion, fluency, and overall comprehension. Students with learning disabilities and English as a Second Language (ESL) benefit in particular when they listen to audio books while following along with the print version. Teachers and parents are finding ways to incorporate audio books into the classroom and at home. This means that students with disabilities can finally read the same books in the same format as their peers, despite visual, physical, or learning impairments. These are the new audio book customers.

Libraries Like Audio Books

Audio books comprise 10% of book industry sales, an amount expected to triple in the next 2–4 years. The Audio Publishers Association (APA) Sales Survey [<http://www.audio.org/PDFs/2007SalesSurveyrelease.pdf>] states that audio book sales have increased 14% overall, with sales to libraries up 7% in 2007. A *Library Journal* survey [<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6474479.html>] indicated that the cir-

ulation of adult audio books in libraries increased 13.5% in 2 years, with the circulation for children's audio books up 10.7%. Library budgets for audio books increased for adult audio books by 6.1% and for children's audio books by 4.8%, even while print book budgets remained stagnant or declined across the nation. About 40% of the audio book market comes from public libraries; with increasing sales, libraries can appreciate a 15%–20% discount off list prices.

Talking books go back as far as the 1930s, when the Library of Congress National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) started its program with audio books on a long-playing 33 RPM record. In the 1970s, NLS moved to cassettes, at least 10 years before books on

Commuters and travelers have always been big users of audio books.

cassette hit the commercial market. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, audio books on CDs joined books on cassette. In the early 21st century, “digital audio books” entered the market through Audible.com, OverDrive, NetLibrary, and others. The challenges with digital audio books were that the reader had to have a computer to download the large audio files and then transfer them to a hand-held player or burn a set of CDs. For many audio book listeners, this was a problem. Many talking book readers were hoping that NLS would move from cassette to CD before going digital. However, NLS has skipped the CD phase and begun working on the digital transition of Talking Books from cassette tapes to Flash memory format, downloadable from the internet. As demand for environmentally friendly products escalates across North America, the audio book will become more and more appealing to the “green” consumer. Delivering content via the internet is more environmentally friendly than book, cassettes, or CDs with the requisite excessive packaging that only a 7-year-old boy can unlock without breaking a sweat.

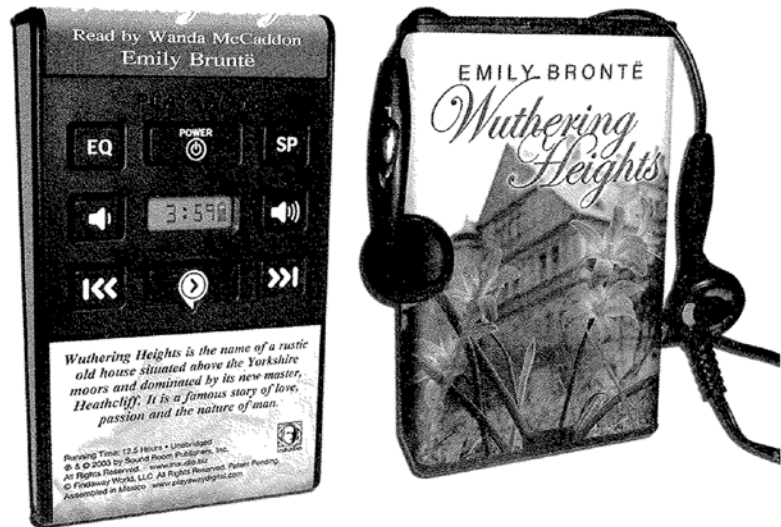
In 2005, a new company called Findaway World [<http://store.playawaydigital.com>] entered the audio book market, offering the best of all worlds — a digital audio book already loaded on a portable MP3 device. And the Playaway was born! Playaways range from 3 to 9 hours in length, cost

\$30–\$70 each, and are smaller than a deck of cards. You can access them using headphones, ear buds, or your iPod. Playaways were initially marketed to individual consumers through brick-and-mortar retail outlets, such as Borders, and eventually online as well.

Findaway quickly expanded sales into institutional markets, which may be where Playaways really shine. In a *Library Technology Reports* 2007 piece (vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 5–42) Thomas Peters notes, “Although Playaway is trying to sell both to individual consumers and to such institutions as libraries and library consortia, its business and technology model may be better suited in the long run for institutional sales and use. . . . Does an audiophile really want to have a shelf full of previously listened-to Playaway devices? For a library, however, where serial circulation of content across the population served is well established and comfortable, the Playaway model, with the audio book content preloaded on an eminently portable, easily used playback device, may be popular.”

Actually, this year, Findaway introduced a way for libraries to curtail their shelves filling with Playaway units. Adapting a Replay option the company introduced to the consumer market late in 2006, the Library Replay program lets libraries reload existing units with new titles. The company even offers a \$10 discount on replacement titles. Libraries have the option to get a 6-month Replay warranty for each reloaded player or keep their older titles under a 1-year warranty.

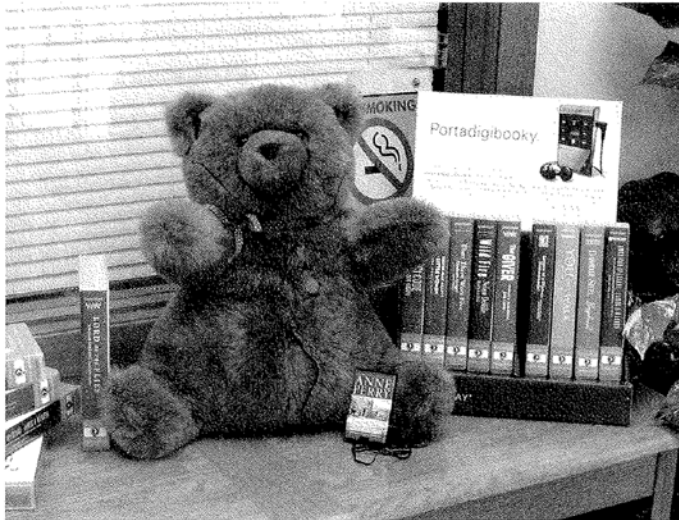
Playaways were first marketed to libraries in 2006. Blake Squires, innovator and chief development officer for Playaway, describes the need: “We have seen technology driving patrons and circulation in libraries across the country. As technologies continue to advance, we know that consumer habits vary and that there will always be a need to provide solutions across multiple formats to meet the diverse demand of patrons. With more than 11,000 libraries and schools circulating Playaway, listeners have proven the need for simplicity in their format choices.” In short, Playaways are ideal for library users who like the idea of listening to audio books on the go, but who do not relish the idea of downloading their audio books from the internet, transferring their audio books to some portable playback device, or burning their audio books to a set of CDs.



Playaway currently has more than 2,500 titles with an average of 100 new titles launched each month through arrangements with 70 major publishing partners; more than 1,000,000 units have been sold to date. More than 11,000 libraries and schools, including Cuyahoga County Public Library, the Michigan Library Consortium, and our neighbors the Schaumburg Township District Library, currently circulate Playaways. Playaway provides public libraries with the best “turnkey” solution for ready-to-circulate audio material currently available. The success of this device primarily has to do with its portability, ease of use, and popular titles. Playaways simply fit into the lifestyle of the new audio book customer. Playaways provide the convenience necessary to serve this new active audio book customer.

Testing the Playaway

In 2005, Playaway partnered with the Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center (MITBC), located with and administered by the Alliance Library in East Peoria, Ill., to facilitate a pilot project to see how these new devices worked for the print-impaired population. From December 2005 through March 2006, MITBC purchased 25 Playaways and circulated them to talking book readers through the mail — delivered to the patrons exactly as talking books on cassette were. A total of 140 circulations were completed during this period.



Playaways are so small, even a stuffed bear can use one.

Participants involved in the field test strongly recommended that libraries purchase these self-contained devices. They were a huge hit!

Features the talking book readers most enjoyed included the ability to jump forward and backward through the content, variable speed playback (without the Alvin and the Chipmunks effect), the ability to bookmark, and fast-forwarding and reversing through the audio content. The age of participants was 19 to 88 with a median age of 60 ... the middle of the Baby Boomer generation.

The MITBC project was so successful, an LSTA (Library Services and Technology Act) project from the Illinois State Library was developed to further field test Playaways in public, academic, special, and school libraries in central Illinois. Forty-three libraries participated in the project which started in the fall of 2006 and ended in June 2007. The primary purpose was to introduce library customers to a new audio book format which required no use of a computer. During the 6-month field test, Playaways were circulated more than 3,000 times; the most popular titles with customers were the best sellers and mysteries. The sound quality on the Playaway is significantly better than alternatives. The portability also proved appealing. One of the MITBC readers who tried the Playaway said, "You cannot snuggle

up with a large cassette player but a Playaway makes a great bedfellow."

High school students, a typically hard-to-reach population for libraries, were very excited about the Playaways. Many found the yellow cassette player unappealing and not cool. Using an MP3 player to listen to books made it impossible to tell if they were listening to the book by choice or because they had a physical or reading disability. A student at Roanoke-Benson High School found reading "impossible" until she discovered the Playaways in the library. She proudly shared her reading experiences with the librarian and was able to pass the Accelerated Reader test after listening. Melick Library at Eureka College had a lot of interest in the devices, especially among commuter students and college staff. The Dominy Memorial Library in Fairbury purchased a wireless transmitter to demonstrate how patrons could use a Playaway in

their vehicle without needing ear buds. The Playaway field tests made it clear to the library community in central Illinois that a simple, durable, best-seller audio book was viable and popular with a whole new group of listeners.

Eighteen months later and despite heavy usage, the Playaways are still in excellent condition with the average title circulating 35–55 times — and still working. For libraries, this enhanced durability is important, as we have lived with the fragile audio cassettes and CDs that do not withstand the rigors of public circulation well. The field test has also given listeners a taste for what is possible. So many libraries now face increased pressure from listeners to increase their audio collections; in tough economic times, this is a challenge.

With this in mind Alliance Library System and the MITBC challenged two area libraries to a circulation duel. Starting on Aug. 8, 2008, and ending a week later, Morton Public Library and Fondulac District Public Library competed to see which library could circulate the most Playaways. Library staff wore Playaways on lanyards to promote the program and chatted up the service at the reference and circulation desks. The winning library received three new audio books, total value \$180, and the other library received two audio books, total value \$120, thanks to Blake Squires and the folks at Findaway. Each library also received a \$50 gift certificate

from Barnes & Noble for its top seller, as well as a \$25 gift certificate to help offset display costs. The winner, circulating 69 titles in 6 days, was the staff at the Morton Public Library District. The Morton staff are truly excited about audio books and are now looking for ways to adapt the Playaway for use in the car, which new audio book customers sought.

What Lies Ahead

This challenge demonstrates an increasing awareness of audio book services and the need for more resources. While public libraries are encouraging Playaway usage among mainstream patrons, information on Talking Book Center and the traditional "yellow" machine were also displayed with impressive results. We take this as a very positive development.

As audio book formats change to keep up with advances in technology, so will the demographics of talking book users.

Playaways offer an alternative format for reading audio books, one focused on providing convenience, portability, and best-sellers. Users require no technical knowledge, because the Playaways come preloaded. This also effectively cuts through the Gordian knot of digital rights management.

This renaissance of the audio book into mainstream libraries will also benefit the Talking Book Centers, as more and more library customers look for an audio option to reading. Playaways will bridge the gap until the digital audio Flash drive and internet downloadable products are universally available from NLS. We think it is a very good model that Playaways are available to both the mainstream and the special needs library customer.

What have we learned? New audio book customers have very high expectations. They want an audio book that is easy-to-use, has excellent production values, carries best-sellers, and, above all, is portable. We encourage all libraries to have a closer look at this emerging technology: It is awesome ■

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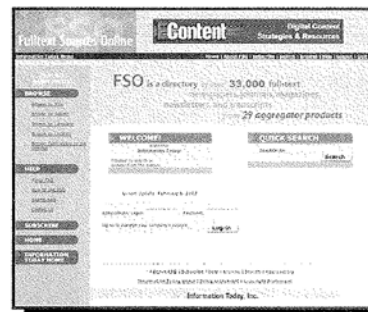
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