Collegiate bookstore personnel looking to stock their shelves with the hottest items in the world of technology converged at the Radisson Penn Harris Hotel and Convention Center for D&H Distributing’s 13th Annual Back to School Technology Show.

The show took place June 16-18 in Camp Hill, Pa., not far from D&H’s headquarters in Harrisburg, and brought together more than 300 attendees and approximately 80 vendors — both totals up from last year — for this invaluable interactive event.

Vendors represented a wide variety of categories geared toward the campus bookstore market, including mobile and desktop PCs, housewares, digital media products, high-performance components and more. D&H also featured its own booths that focused on several of its divisions — Home & Outdoor, Gaming and Licensing.

Larry Staub, D&H Education Division manager, explained that this annual event is a win-win for bookstore employees and vendors who get to interact face-to-face about the range of products they offer to the college market.

“We definitely want the customers to get the advantage of seeing the products,” he noted. “A lot of times, you hear about products, see them online; they actually get to see, touch and feel here. You get to interact with the vendors, give vendors their feedback on the importance of giving them support, supporting the education channel and helping them support the student.

“It is absolutely a great show for the vendors. It’s one thing to sit in an office and say, ‘This is how we’re going after the education channel. This is what we think we need to do to go after the education channel. This is what we think the education wants.’ It’s a whole other story to stand in front of that buyer. That interaction is invaluable for the vendors.”

“Hot” Items

Several “hot” items in the area of electronics were on display at this year’s show, and Staub pointed out that these new products are getting more and more affordable.

“Even if you take a category like laser printers, you think hundreds and hundreds of dollars,” he said. “We’re featuring a laser printer that comes with a free toner — so you even have a free backup toner — that retails for $149 from Konica Minolta Printing. That would have been unheard of even two, three years ago. That would be a $300-400 machine three or four years ago.”

Two of the more popular items that students are, or will be, purchasing in bookstores during fall rush are notebooks and netbooks, and D&H offered exclusive pieces from Hewlett-Packard (HP), Acer and Lenovo at the show.

“They actually are notebooks — they are SKUs that we bought enough to get exclusive builds from them, or what they would call derivative SKUs, so that the bookstores don’t have to compete directly with retailers,” Staub said. “You can’t open up a Best Buy flyer and find that same exact part number.

“It also helps stores protect their margin. Obviously, it’s all about making sure they stay profitable, competitive and able to sell some big volumes.”

With notebooks being such a big category, several accessory companies — including bag and sleeve vendors — displayed their products on the show floor.

“You have everything from plain sleeves to fashion stuff, when you get into Built NY or Tucano,” he said. “Even though it is represented — we have seven or eight bag vendors here — in this channel, it’s almost necessary because there’s just such breadth of product, between sleeves and bags, shoulder bags or backpacks.”

Additional Accessories

Among the hottest items in the accessory category right now are accessories for the Apple iPod and iPhone, especially when it comes to cases.

“There are a lot of players there,” Staub noted. “Those same exact players are ready to refresh their iPhone accessories for the new iPhone 4. Some of the major players in those categories are Speck Products, XtremeMac, Case Logic, Built NY, Targus, Belkin Components, ISIS and iFrogz.

Other accessories on display at the show included mice, key-
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boards, computer speakers and iPod speaker docks. Staub pointed out a number of the top vendors present at the show. “Every year, Logitech refreshes its mice and keyboards, and they do a really nice job with gaming accessories and computer speakers, as well as iPod speaker docks and notebook locks.

“IPod speaker docks are still a hot category. The No. 1 player in the world is iHome; another one is iluv. Altec Lansing is a nice player there as well, and so is Memorex.”

Kensington also provided mice and keyboards, but the top accessory it carries is the notebook lock, so that students can lock their notebook down to the desk, or if they’re in a library and they have to walk away and get a book they can lock it. Notebook locks are a big category for back to school.”

A number of data storage drive vendors — flash drives and hard drives — were represented at the show, including such companies as SanDisk, Kingston, Lexar, PNY and Centon for flash drives, and Western Digital and Iomega for external hard drives.

Headphones are another essential accessory, and one that was highlighted at the show, manufactured by Monster Cable Products, is the Beats by Dr. Dre line of headphones, which Staub calls “an extremely hot item. It’s as high as $299 for the earphones, but you see them on all the athletes. If you watch the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the players are warming up, they have their Beats on. It’s become a very hot item, just because it’s kind of like an iPod. They also have Beats Solo, which is a little bit smaller piece that retails at $199.”

MORE NEW PRODUCTS

A couple of D&H exclusive items are being offered to bookstores as well. “We did an exclusive deal with Canon USA, which will give us a price point on an all-in-one inkjet printer,” he said. “It has the cable included, and stores should be able to retail it at $49.99. You get an out-of-the-box experience for $50. We have several thousand printers in stock to carry us through the next couple of months.”

Another new item looking to make a dent in the college market is the FLO TV from Qualcomm, a digital hand-held device that was demonstrated at the show. FLO TV uses MediaFLO technology to transmit video and data to portable devices, such as mobile phones and personal televisions, used for mobile television. Broadcast data transmitted via MediaFLO includes live, real-time audio and video streams, as well as scheduled video and audio clips and shows.

“It’s a little portable device that allows you to pick up TV remotely,” Staub explained. “They want to go after the college market; they feel it’s the right demographic. I think it’s the right demographic as well, so we’ll see how that goes.”

HOME & OUTDOOR

The Home & Outdoor display at the front of the convention center featured a myriad of small appliances, personal-care items, housewares, health-and-wellness items, floor-care products, educational toys and seasonal products.

The product assortment included vacuums, alarm clock radios, compact grills, coffee makers, blenders, sandwich makers, fans, crock pots, night lights, shavers, hair straighteners and emergency radios.

Staub explained that D&H put together a list of core items featured in the various categories to help schools make buying decisions so they do not stock the wrong items.

“In dorm supplies, we are handing out a list of core items we picked from each category, such as small dorm appliances like hotpots, microwaves and MicroFridges,” he said. “They are core items that we stock heavier than some of the more peripheral items, and we just did it in every category, including lighting, vacuums and fans.

“We know that Home & Outdoor is a newer category, especially for the small or medium schools, so we know to help them buy the right items; it’s basically like a core assortment for them. We’re kind of helping them make the buying decisions so they don’t stock the wrong things. That core assortment is around 15 items at the lowest level; you could really be in the category with about 15 items in the store.”

NOTEBOOKS AND NETBOOKS

Netbooks and notebooks are the fastest-growing category in the college bookstore channel right now, according to Staub.

“Obviously, it’s become an essential tool for any student; it’s pretty much a requirement to get through school at this point,” he said. “But it’s much more than that to them; it’s how to stay connected. It’s everything from social networking to music to videos; they’re watching TV on it.”

The lightweight and durability aspects of netbooks, even if students own a notebook, encourages them to buy netbooks when they arrive on campus because they don’t have to worry about damaging them when carrying them around.

“You get a two-, two-and-a-half-pound net—

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book that you carry around campus with you, and it does the basics for you,” Staub explained. “It allows you to get to the social networking sites and surf the Web. It allows you to take your notes in class and check your e-mail. It’s a nice portable piece for them.”

Price points for netbooks start at $299, and most of them are in the $299–399 range with $299 being the really hot price point, he said.

Notebooks are $499, with a price range of $499–799 for a basic notebook. “If you have course-curriculum specifics that you need, we do sell a lot of $899–1,299 notebooks as well,” Staub added. “That’s usually more for graduate students or a third- or fourth-year student who finally gets into that engineering class, and finds out he/she needs 4GB of RAM and a 500GB hard drive.”

Netbooks and notebooks were well represented at the show, with HP, Lenovo, Acer, Toshiba, Samsung, Asus and MSI Computer Corp. all selling both categories “just because they’re so hot; you can’t really ignore one of those,” he noted.

NEW VENDORS
Several new vendors made their debut at this year’s Back to School Show. Staub immediately focused on Sanyo when discussing notable vendors making their first appearance here.

“They do anything from small appliances to iPod speaker docks to cameras and video cameras and voice recorders,” he said. “It’s really a nice new addition; it brings us another vendor that represents a lot of different categories, with very aggressive price points as well.”

Diamond Multimedia was another first-time attendee. “They have a bunch of networking accessories,” Staub pointed out. “They also have a lot of USB accessories for notebooks, again focusing on the notebook category.”

Intel appeared at the show for the first time, focusing on solid-state drives (SSDs) — which contain microchips and no moving parts — for data storage and introducing its new eReader that will be initially geared toward the learning disabled.

“It actually has a scanner built into the bottom,” Staub explained. “Not only can you download books to it, it will read them back to you; you can adjust the speed. But if you have this piece of paper, and you weren’t able to see it or you’re dyslexic, you lay the paper over it — it has a built-in scanner — scans it in and will read you the paper.”

“It’s a really cool piece. They even see going beyond the learning disabled to perhaps going to the K-12 market with it, let’s say if a kid is having trouble with reading comprehension. There are all kinds of places they can go with it, but they’re starting right now with the learning-disabled market.”

SPECIAL PRICING
D&H has negotiated with vendors to have them offer back-to-school specials for bookstore staff members because “it gets them interaction with vendors who they don’t get to see throughout the year. Not every vendor has a field sales staff that is calling on college bookstores, so the only time they get to see some of these vendors, talk about their products and talk about their programs and how they support the education channel, are at these shows.

The increased technology assortment in bookstores will only increase student foot traffic, Staub said. “It’s something that absolutely brings them into the store. Unlike when a store just had books and sweatshirts, and you went in twice a semester — to buy your books and get your T-shirts and sweatshirts for the semester, and then back in to sell the books — as stores get into these other categories, it’s a destination store. The kids are in and out on a regular basis.”

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