

Making Your Purchasing Dollars Count

by Roger Neugebauer

Every year, child care centers invest hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in purchasing educational materials, supplies, and equipment from early childhood catalogs. Most of these purchases are successful — both the buyer and the seller end up satisfied. However, successful catalog purchasing is not a slam dunk deal. To enjoy the full benefits of catalog purchasing, a center director should take pains to avoid the most common roadblocks to success as reported to *Child Care Information Exchange* by both buyers and sellers.

Failing to check out the reliability of the seller

When you buy a product from a catalog, you are buying the company as well. You are paying for the assurance that the product will be delivered on a timely basis, that it will arrive in good condition, and that it will perform as described or implied in the catalog. Many directors have come to regret purchasing from a new, unfamiliar catalog that offered great prices, only to discover that they paid for the savings

many times over with frustrations in shipping delays, defective goods, and drawn out disputes.

It's a great idea to develop a long term relationship with a company. A sales representative you've come to know over time can help enormously with ordering, sometimes including special offers for good customers. A local sales representative can really work wonders. They know what other people are doing and what materials are being used in different programs. If sales reps change

often or don't return phone calls quickly, that's probably an indication of what the quality of service will be like down the road.

Another important thing to consider is community involvement. Does the company you are dealing with support the early childhood community? Where you spend your money also sends messages. Your dollars are best spent with people who know what's going on in the early childhood world. This works for everybody.

Before placing an order with a new company, check with other directors to find out their experience with the company. Then call the company itself and find out how long they have been in business, to what extent they specialize and demonstrate expertise in the early childhood arena, and if they are willing to give names of other directors as references. Finally, you can check with the National School Supply and Equipment Association (800-395-5550), the vendor's trade association, to see if this company is a member in good standing.

Comparing prices without regard to shipping costs

When comparing prices among catalogs, the most useful amount to compare is the total delivered cost. Shipping prices and policies can vary more than the prices on the products, so be sure to factor these into your calculations. When calculating shipping charges on large orders, make sure to include both the freight charge (shipping cost to the local freight warehouse) and the local delivery charge (the cost of delivery from the warehouse to your address) when applicable.

Comparing prices without regard to product quality

“You get what you pay for” certainly applies in the world of early childhood catalogs. We have heard countless stories of directors who have saved 25% on a bargain item only to have it wear out 50% faster than the top-of-the-line version. Buying smart means considering quality in the purchasing decision. Too many centers take the toy mart mentality and buy the cheap trike that lasts a week rather than making the long term investment in quality products.

That is not to say that all bargains are bogus. Some companies are able to sell top flight products at reduced prices. These are bargains worth hunting for. Likewise, sometimes a lesser quality product may serve its purposes just fine. However, when price reductions are based on major product quality reductions, you may want to pass them by.

Failing to anticipate needs

Placing frequent, small orders is more expensive in the long run. Ordering once a month or once a quarter makes much more sense from a freight and administrative standpoint than ordering whenever you run out of something. That can end up costing you a bundle in the long run.

Ordering from an outdated catalog

Many of the dealers reported this as a common problem. Catalogs are updated annually, sometimes more often. With each update, prices and products may change. Before going to all the work of putting together an order, call the company to verify that you are using the current version.

What's their web site like?

Many busy directors prefer to shop on-line. They can connect to a company's web site, browse through the catalog, and place an order right on a form on the web site.

Advantages of on-line ordering:

- You can place your order at any time any day — no more waiting on hold for telephone sales reps or risking an order to the postal service.
- You can be sure that the items included on the web site and their prices are up to date.
- Product availability can be easily ascertained.
- If the company's order form is well designed, it is nearly impossible to turn in incomplete orders.

Disadvantages of on-line ordering:

- There is no room for human contact — no provision for discussions with sales reps about the products.
- Some companies may not design and manage their web sites well, resulting in unnecessary frustrations.

Failing to ask for a bulk discount

If you are placing a large order, or anticipate placing many orders in the coming year, you may be entitled to a bulk discount. Such discount rates are typically not published in catalogs — you've got to ask for them.

Turning in incomplete order forms

This point may seem to be a bit nit-picky. However, omitting a part number or product description can delay your order or result in you receiving the wrong item. Another common problem is an incomplete shipping address or it is unreadable. A simple solution to such

inadvertent errors is to have a second person at the center proofread order forms before they are turned in.

Sending in duplicate orders

Fax machines are wonderful devices, allowing for quick and easy communication. Yet a cautious director may be tempted to send via mail a copy of a faxed order form — just in case the fax didn't go through. When the mailed copy isn't clearly marked “Copy of Faxed Order,” it can easily happen that both orders will be filled, resulting in a lot of confusion and hassles.

Failing to verify availability

Early childhood catalog companies do not always maintain large inventories of

every item in their catalogs. If you have an item in your order that you urgently need, check at the time you place your order to be sure it is immediately available. All the great deals in the world don't matter if you can't get the materials. If you don't receive your order as planned, you can lose funding or find yourself unable to open classrooms or even schools.

If not, you need to decide whether you are willing to wait while it is placed on back order or if you want to order it somewhere else.

Failing to check your order when received

Keep a copy of every order you place. Then when it arrives, you should do a two-step verification. First, do an immediate check for damage to cartons, and then note any damage when you sign for a delivery. Within a few days do a more thorough check. Make sure that your order is complete and correct, and assess each item received for potential damage. Report any errors or damage immediately. Record and follow any return instructions you are given.

Failing to protect your good credit

When you are experiencing a cash flow crunch, it may be tempting to delay paying for a catalog order. It is always easier to put off distant creditors who are not in your face every day. This may work on the short term, but will come back to haunt you in the long term. If you fall far behind in paying for an order, you may lose your credit and be required to pay in advance on future orders. The wise thing to do if you are in a cash crunch is to call a vendor you owe money to before your payment is due and explain your situation.

Customer Satisfaction Basics

Early childhood catalog companies live or die on customer satisfaction. Every order taken is an opportunity to generate future orders. If a company fails to satisfy the customer with a current order, future orders will be lost. As a result, you should have high expectations for satisfaction every time you place an order. If a company cannot provide all of the following customer satisfaction basics, it's time to shift your loyalty:

- **Knowledgeable, courteous sales representatives.** When you are placing your order, the person you are dealing with should be thoroughly versed both in the items in the catalog as well as in early childhood education. They should do more than simply take your order — they should be able to answer your questions about what they sell and advise you about their uses and their age appropriateness — or they should be able to refer you to a specialist on staff who can assist you competently.
- **Clear, reasonable prices.** You should be able to trust that you are paying fair prices, and it shouldn't require a degree in higher math to tally your bill. A catalog should not be sprinkled with *loss leaders* with great prices that grab your attention that are surrounded by the bulk of the items with higher prices. Likewise, you shouldn't be insulted with bogus discounts — inflated “suggested retail prices” resulting in discounts that are not really discounts.
- **Speedy, accurate delivery.** Most companies promise delivery from a week to ten days of receipt of your order. But it serves no purpose for an order to be speedy if it arrives in poor shape or with missing items. You should expect that when your order arrives it is well packaged, clearly marked and documented, and complete.
- **Satisfaction guaranteed.** Things can and will go wrong. What is a company's service like after the sale? You should trust that you will be 100% satisfied with the results of every order. If an item arrives damaged, it should be replaced immediately — at no cost to you, with no hesitation. If an item you ordered does not live up to its description in the catalog, or if an item breaks or wears out too quickly, you should expect replacement without having to beg as well. For more complex — typically electronic — items, the selling company should make technical support available at no cost for a reasonable period of time.

Nearly all vendors would rather work out extended payment terms in advance than to have to hassle you for payment after the due date.

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Thank you to the following contributors:

ABC School Supply
Beckley Cardy Group
HATCH, Technology & Toys
Kaplan Early Learning Company
Lakeshore Learning Materials
Nasco

Buyer's Guide to Educational Materials

This directory is a partial listing of companies providing educational materials, products, and services. Companies were included free of charge. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by *Child Care Information Exchange*. Request free information about these companies by circling the number for each company on the Product Inquiry Card (between pages 56 and 57).

ABC School Supply

(800) 669-4222
Circle 60 on Product Inquiry Card

Accu-Cut Systems

1035 East Dodge Street
Fremont, NE 68025
(800) 288-1670
www.accucut.com
Circle 61 on Product Inquiry Card

The Accu-Cut Mark IV Roller Die Cutting System cuts five shapes at a time from as many as eight layers of paper. Dies cut face up so you can see what you're cutting and eliminate mistakes! Accu-Cut makes it easy to create manipulative-based educational materials and engage learners with hands-on projects.

Bear Blocks, Ltd.

(508) 337-8005
Circle 62 on Product Inquiry Card

Califone International

(818) 407-2400
Circle 63 on Product Inquiry Card

Care Play

(877) 716-2757
Circle 64 on Product Inquiry Card

Childswork/Childsplay

(800) 962-1141
Circle 65 on Product Inquiry Card

Creative Discoveries Curriculum Kits

(781) 596-1143
Circle 66 on Product Inquiry Card

Cut-Rate Preschool Supplies

(800) 387-4156
Circle 67 on Product Inquiry Card

Dover Publications

(516) 294-7000
www.doverpublications.com
Circle 68 on Product Inquiry Card

Dover Publications offers nearly 2,000 children's books, projects, and activities. These educational and entertaining books

are also inexpensive — most only \$1.00 to \$3.95! Choose from an extensive selection of books: science, drawing, music, foreign language, Native American cultures, children's classic literature, storybooks, coloring books, stickers, and much more!

Educational Insights, Inc.

www.educationalinsights.com
Circle 69 on Product Inquiry Card

Ellison Educational Equipment

Customer Service
25862 Commercentre Drive
Lake Forest, CA 92630
(800) 253-2238
www.ellison.com
Circle 70 on Product Inquiry Card

The Ellison letter and shape cutting system cuts through anything that scissors will cut in a fraction of the time. Choose from 14 different alphabets and over 1,700 decorative shapes. Create learning aids, bulletin boards, art & craft projects, and much, much more.

Environments

PO Box 1348
Beaufort Industrial Park
Beaufort, SC 29901
(800) EI.CHILD
www.eichild.com
Circle 71 on Product Inquiry Card

Banners to books, magnets to music, puppets to puzzles The Environments Catalogs — Pre3child 2002 and Early Childhood Equipment & Materials Guide 2003 — features thousands of products to support children's learning every day throughout the environment. All products are reviewed, tested, and measured in terms of appropriateness, safety, durability, and playability.

Gallopede International

(800) 536-2GET
Circle 72 on Product Inquiry Card

HATCH, Technology & Toys

(800) 624-79678
Circle 73 on Product Inquiry Card

Hunter Company

(800) 566-8686
Circle 74 on Product Inquiry Card

Idaho Book & School Supply

(208) 375-5252
Circle 75 on Product Inquiry Card

J & R Educational Supplies

(800) 737-2381
Circle 76 on Product Inquiry Card

Kane/Miller Book Publishers

(800) 968-1930
Circle 77 on Product Inquiry Card

Kaplan Early Learning Company

(800) 334-2014
Circle 78 on Product Inquiry Card

Kimbo Educational

(800) 631-2187
Circle 79 on Product Inquiry Card

Lakeshore Learning Materials

Erin Caldwell
2695 East Dominguez Street
Carson, CA 90810
(800) 421-5354
www.lakeshorelearning.com
Circle 80 on Product Inquiry Card

Lakeshore Learning Materials is the premier supplier of education products for the early childhood classroom. Our Lakeshore Early Childhood catalog features age-appropriate materials for infants, preschools, special education, kindergarten, and elementary schools with an emphasis on early learning and literacy.

Learning How

(800) 675-SMART
Circle 81 on Product Inquiry Card

Learning Resources

(800) 222-3909
Circle 82 on Product Inquiry Card

LeapFrog School House

(800) 883-7430
Circle 83 on Product Inquiry Card

McGraw-Hill Children's Publishing

(800) 417-3261

Circle 84 on Product Inquiry Card

Nasco

Scott Beyer

901 Jonesville Avenue
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538

(920) 563-2446

www.eNasco.com

Circle 85 on Product Inquiry Card

Specializing in early childhood and primary education for over 60 years. We provide exciting learning materials that "build imagination through education."

Program for Parents

Cindy Sickora

20 Church Street
Montclair, NJ 07042

(973) 744-4050

www.programsforparents.org

Circle 86 on Product Inquiry Card

Identifying Developmental Delays is a video training program to help child care providers recognize developmental "red flags." Each of the three videos in the program features child development experts and children in actual child care and clinical settings. Written materials show you how to record and share your findings with parents.

School Mate

(731) 935-2000

Circle 87 on Product Inquiry Card

Sun R.A.Y., LLC

(888) 220-7393

Circle 88 on Product Inquiry Card

World of Wonder

Jennifer Karnopp

PO Box 917

Intervale, NH 03845

(877) 969-5487

www.wowkits.com

Circle 89 on Product Inquiry Card

Early childhood curriculum kits flexible enough to fit all preschool and child care environments. Our complete units-in-a-box include puppets, puzzles, books, and other high quality, non-expendable manipulatives. Also included is an activity binder with over 50 different activities designed to help children develop pre-academic and important social/emotional skills.

Next issue: Buyer's Guide to Insurance

Contact Paul Axtell, National Account Manager,
at (206) 328-2196 to be listed.

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Chip Donohue, Ph.D.
Coordinator of Credential Programs for
Child Care Administrators
University of Wisconsin-
Milwaukee



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copy of our
2002
Faculty
Resource
Guide.

Contact Nancy Ryan
Faculty Resource Specialist
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ryanred@ChildCareExchange.com

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Circle 56 on Product Inquiry Card