



VENDOR VOICE

West Academic's Publishing Past & Present

For more than 100 years, the Minnesota-based company has provided casebooks, study aids, and other educational materials to help students master U.S. law.

Before West Academic began offering its American Casebook Series® in 1908, law school professors, according to CEO Chris Parton, had to compile and print their own source material volumes—an often time-consuming and expensive endeavor.

West's book series provided a uniform, reliable resource multiple law schools could—and did—use to educate students.

Over the years, West Academic, which also produces treatises, statutes, and other supplementary legal products, has undergone two significant ownership changes: a 1996 purchase by Thomson Reuters (previously Thomson Company), and a 2013 sale to a private equity firm, which positioned the company to operate as an independent entity.

However, West Academic's central goal (helping people learn about U.S. law) and

location (downtown St. Paul, Minnesota, which it relocated to in 2013 after several years in the suburbs) remain the same as when the company was founded in 1872.

We recently spoke with Parton about how West Academic is balancing its blend of print and digital information, the ways in which law librarians use its resources, and what he feels the future holds for legal education publishing.

How has the company changed over the years?

The most noticeable change is our evolution to digital. It's interesting because some elements of the business have not changed, such as the focus on faculty and law students. The core teaching materials have evolved over the years, as innovation in teaching has evolved. Until the last five to 10 years, the medium was just print, so

West Academic's Study Aids Subscription includes online access to more than 500 titles, including skills-based titles, treatises, study aids, and career guides.

one of the things that has changed for us is the way we deliver content. For the core casebooks, we discovered that even though the younger generation generally prefers digital media, law students, no matter their age, still want print books. We think it's because the intensity of reading cases is higher than the intensity of reading an article or novel—having case information in print, where you can highlight and take notes, is still the preferred way to consume that material.

However, there are some products that work better digitally; for example, in print, quizzing requires you to flip back and forth between the question and answer. In a digital environment, a question is asked, the student selects an answer, and whether it's right or wrong, an explanation is provided

as to why one answer is correct over the other. You can interact in the moment and click on a link that leads to an additional resource for a deeper understanding.

Who writes the content, and how is it acquired?

Each imprint publishes materials authored by renowned scholars and award-winning law teachers. Our acquisition editors have direct relationships with law faculty across the country, who they talk to and meet with about possible new titles. Sometimes when they start talking to law faculty, they hear, 'I have a colleague at another school who is doing some really innovative teaching—talk to her.' Often, we are contacted with an idea for a new approach to a popular subject or a

book focused on a new area of law or a new style of teaching.

Who are your customers?

Law school students are our biggest consumers. They purchase both texts adopted by their professor for class and study aids to better prepare for class and exams. Faculty not only adopt our casebooks for their classrooms as their primary text, but adopt or recommend other supplementary materials as well. Our other customers include practitioners, government agencies, courts, and law libraries.

We have deep connections to law schools. Obviously, we go to the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Annual Meeting & Conference; that's a great show for us. It's the one opportunity each year where we get to interact with law librarians face-to-face.

Although our focus is on law schools, we do sell a surprising amount of print and digital products to practitioners. They buy titles from both our Hornbook Series® and Nutshell Series®—which were developed to help students but can also be used as reference materials. You can think of a Hornbook as a one-volume treatise.

Additionally, graduate and undergraduate programs use our materials. We have several business law books that are written for undergraduate business law classes, and other titles that are used in political science and criminal justice programs.

Are your products sold internationally?

We offer casebooks for professors teaching a U.S.-style law course overseas, but we mostly sell Hornbooks and Nutshells internationally. They give a broad overview of American law in a way that is consumable. Those are the two lines sold most overseas. It's a small piece of our business; we really are focused on U.S. legal education.

How are your books generally sold in the U.S.? Do students tend to order them online?

Our products are available on our online store (store.westacademic.com).

We also offer free shipping and 14-day digital access to select casebooks immediately upon purchase so that students can access the content before their print book arrives. In addition, we sell through law school bookstores and online retailers, such as Amazon.

How do law librarians use your products?

If a law student comes in and says, 'Gee, I have a question regarding an area of law I don't know much about,' the law librarian will say, 'Start with this book or Nutshell.' Every area of law acts differently; family law is very fact-driven, other things are very case-driven. [Students would] probably be sent to a Nutshell first, and once they understand the concept, come back to the librarian for more specifics on how to solve the problem.

Law librarians look to us to provide both print and digital offerings for

their students. We have a dual relationship with law librarians who are also teachers; we interact with them as a person who adopts books students are required to purchase and use as text for class, and then as the law librarian who purchases our books for the library.

The library also frequently buys a copy of each book that's been adopted at a law school to keep on reserve, in addition to having a complete selection of study aids for students to access.

Are law librarians ever involved in developing new products?

Law librarians are often surveyed about our products and may be involved in beta testing for a new product while it's in development. For example, we asked a few law librarians to test our updated Study Aids Subscription last year and took their feedback into consideration when making improvements to the product. Our account managers work closely with law librarians to ensure we are producing products that will meet the needs of their students.

Have you seen any specific trends involving digital publishing?

We've seen a trend in other higher education markets toward schools using digital resources. That trend is growing in the law school market. Our digital collections provide online resources like faculty-authored quizzes and study aids in support of this growing trend. We offer a schoolwide subscription that includes unlimited online access to skills-based titles, treatises, study aids, and audio lectures. Now students can study offline, too, when they download the free West Academic Library app. The mobile app works in sync with their online subscription, so all their notes and highlighting will be viewable on both their computer and mobile device.

We also offer a schoolwide assessment option where students are provided with more than 4,000 customizable, multiple-choice self-assessment questions, designed to enrich the learning experience and evaluate student understanding of core concepts

as they are learning them in class. It is the most comprehensive product for formative assessment, and it helps students succeed during their time in law school.

Do you think printed legal education materials will ever be completely replaced by digital versions?

We've watched a lot of other print industries be changed by digital content. The nature of the way you consume this content and the way lawyers work makes me think print is going to be around for a long time. There are a lot of opportunities to use digital resources to enhance print and do things print doesn't do well, such as quizzing. But we're a publisher; we still love books. If you walk by our editorial department, there are people with books out—they have computers, too, but they cross-reference things with books.

Technology has certainly helped us advance books over the years. When the company started, they were using lead typesetting to print books. Print is wonderful—but you have to think in the context of all platforms that are available, and make sure you have the right mix of things so people who are trying to learn the law have information delivered to them in a way that's as consumable as possible. ■

POPULAR SERIES

Some of West Academic's top sellers include:

American Casebook Series®: Established in 1908, this series was the first commercially available law school casebook.

University Casebook Series®: Published under the Foundation Press Imprint, this series has embodied a tradition of excellence since the 1930s.

Nutshell Series®: Featuring concise summaries of more than 150 topics, the Nutshell Series provides understandable, dependable introductions to a field of law or legal topic.

Hornbook Series®: Offering detailed explanations and insights into a law's historical development, the series also provides background on contemporary issues relating to the law.

WEST ACADEMIC BASICS

Headquarters: St. Paul, Minnesota

History: Originally founded as part of West Publishing

Employees: 80

Number of titles in its catalog: 1,600

Oldest product: American Casebook Series®

Newest offering: West Academic's Reference Collection offers convenient online access to Hornbooks and Nutshells for law firms, government agencies, courts, law libraries, and corporations, and was developed based on an attendee's suggestion at the AALL Annual Meeting & Conference.

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