The wheels of distribution never run entirely smoothly, but the trade is especially sensitive to any disruption in the academic and Christmas sales periods. Danuta Kean looks at booksellers’ concerns.

Every year as the peak Christmas season approaches it seems that somewhere in the distribution chain something goes wrong. Whoever was named Distributor of the Year at the previous year’s Nibbies is bound to earn brickbats the following December when the transfer of publishers’ business from under performers to the winner causes a system overload, as TBS and LBS know to their cost. Only Macmillan appears to have escaped the curse of the winner.

This year it is not a distributor’s poor service that is undermining expectations of a bumper Christmas in the bookshops, but problems with a carrier. Securicor Omega has been overwhelmed by the transfer of business from Parcelforce, which has all but withdrawn from the book trade. Booksellers are complaining of split and late deliveries and long backlogs as the carrier struggles to keep up with demand.

"A manager of one of our shops found 65 boxes that had been sitting in a Securicor depot for two weeks," Chris Sugden, retail director at John Smith, reports.

He is not alone in his sense of frustration. Securicor’s service is, at present, the distribution issue cited most widely by booksellers. "Securicor does not have the capacity to meet the demands of the book trade at the moment," says Jon Woolcott, books manager for Sameday books.co.uk. "We had one book that should have been a huge bestseller; it arrived on the Monday instead of before the weekend. It was a reasonably time-sensitive title and we may have lost sales. The problem is particularly acute now because we are in such a heavy season for new titles."

Poor service from a carrier, especially one that handles so much of the trade's business, is potentially far more damaging than problems at a single distributor. Securicor services a wide sweep of businesses, including wholesalers.

This is one reason why some booksellers dislike consolidation - it leaves them feeling very exposed. Paradoxically, it can also create more work in the goods-in department, according to Colin Marshall of Leicester University Bookshop. "I hate it. If the person doing the unpacking gets an invoice with 10 books on it, then it doesn't take long to unpack and match up the books to the invoice. If it has 40 or more titles in the box it is very daunting, and I find that when people are unpacking they tend to put large consignments to the bottom of the pile, because they know it is going to take a long time to unpack. The difference in time between unpacking 20 and 80 titles is very significant. It may be saving money for publishers, but I can't see what else it is doing."

The virtue of consolidation

Not all booksellers share this negative view of consolidation, however. Even the emergence of Securicor as the dominant carrier has its supporters among the retailers.

Lynne O'Neill, manager of John Smith's Glasgow University bookshop, reports that the bookshop's goods inward supervisor, Billy Wood, believes that "having one carrier which is used by most publishers is a great improvement because you know when deliveries should arrive each day"
But, O'Neill adds: "It is true to say that they occasionally - and for no discernible reason- don't deliver at all."

Consolidation among publishers is one of the most significant changes that has taken place in distribution in the past 10 years. Where there was once a myriad of trade suppliers, there are now only a handful, dominated by the big six: Bookpoint, HarperCollins, LBS, TBS/GBS Macmillan Distribution (MDL) and Penguin.

Similar changes have taken place in the book trade's academic and professional world, now dominated by Pearson Education. "Consolidation has helped enormously," says Sridhz Gowda of the Countrybookstore.co.uk in Bakewell. "it means that we don't have to deal with so many small publishers. I would like to see more consolidation."

Gowda's view is supported by Nick Prior, marketing director at Hammicks, who adds a caveat "I would like to see publishers consider amalgamating their distribution systems more fully because what takes time and adds expense for us is dealing with five or more distributors who all have different returns systems."

Prior speaks for many in the trade when he voices frustration at the failure of publishers to create a unified returns system. "There has been some improvement, but it is quite an issue for us when deciding whether to take on an additional direct supplier," he adds. "It would help if everyone used the same returns procedure."

"The lack of standardisation in returns procedures is a real bugbear," says Ottakar's range director Simon Blacklock. "There are different procedures for dealing with all of them."

**Own goal?**

An improvement to the returns process had been top of the list of goals booksellers hoped to score with the Supply Chain Review. It would have had a direct impact on their business and would have led to substantial savings. The failure of publishers to implement a solution has been sorely felt by many, who now regard the Supply Chain Review as irrelevant to their working lives.

Samedaybooks' Jon Woolcott says that the review has yet to have an impact on his business. "There have been too many false starts." Woolcott is concerned that the withdrawal of HarperCollins from the returns pilot could scupper a project that would have led to substantial savings for all involved. "If we don't get the large players involved then it is never going to work."

Ottakar's Simon Blacklock is similarly pessimistic. "Returns was the main feature of the supply chain project that had relevance to us, but there has not been much progress at all, because, I suppose, they are trying to reconcile the wishes of several players. If we could get a returns process along the lines of that operated by Macmillan Distribution it would be great."

Blacklock adds: "Returns are a massive cost to the industry as a whole and the issue doesn't seem to be being addressed fully - or attempts to address it seem to have stalled."

**Higher standards**

MDL and HarperCollins are identified by booksellers as the best performing trade distributors in the business. Pearson Education, Taylor & Francis and Oxford University Press get bouquets from academic booksellers. Technicolour, which
distributes for BBC Worldwide, attracts the most brickbats, in part because it handles some of the biggest Christmas sellers, and any delays or mistakes in orders have a serious impact on trade.

But some booksellers, such as Tony Maher, m.d. of Maher the Bookseller and a former general manager of Dillons' Birmingham branch, feel that there has not been enough improvement in the service provided by distributors. Maher is especially concerned about speed of delivery: "Years ago at Dillons we used to hope for publishers to improve supply. But 10 years on there really has not been much improvement. If wholesalers can do it, then publishers should be able to do it."

Maher has been disappointed by HarperCollins' internal communications, claiming that extra discount arranged for special promotions has failed to materialise on invoices, which has created extra work for the bookseller's branches and head office. "This happened on our most recent promotion, so I went to see HarperCollins and they agreed to reinvoice us and credit every shop."

Maher the Bookseller relies on wholesalers for the bulk of its orders. This is partly because wholesalers mainly supply the independent sector, making Maher, with four branches, one of their bigger accounts and therefore in a strong position in discount negotiations. "Wholesalers will amend systems for us; publishers will not," Maher says.

MDL is praised for the efficiency of its service, particularly a returns procedure that does not need sales rep authorisation for books returned within 12 months and for technology that responds to the needs of retailers.

Chris Sugden at John Smith explains: "We are trying to decentralise by having EDI invoices sent to the delivery address and then sent on to head office by the shop. It incurs costs if the invoice is sent to the statement address first and then sent on by us to the delivery address. A small number of publishers don't have problems with this - Macmillan and Cambridge University Press - but most of them do."

Hammicks' Nick Prior says that while publishers have improved their distribution services considerably, only MDL comes close to matching the three main wholesalers, "which are the best by miles" in terms of speed and accuracy.

**Cool about hotlines**

A bone of contention for Prior is the use of hotlines, which he believes are an outdated inefficiency in the technological age. "I would get rid of them. We place all our orders electronically. Hotlines introduce a manual element into the system. It seems bonkers to me that, if you want orders quickly at your busiest time, you have to put a member of staff on the telephone."

But his views are not shared by other general booksellers. Most feel reassured by the voice on the end of the hotline at a time of year when their suspicion of technology is likely to be keenest.

For most booksellers the greatest irritants of the supply chain remain split or damaged orders and missing invoices. Opinions vary on how serious a problem this is. Although most booksellers feel the situation has improved, Ottakar's Simon Blacklock says it remains a problem with TBS. "It is hard to assess how much it is the fault of the distributor or the carrier. I imagine it's a bit of both."

"It appears to be on the increase with some of our shops, and usually relates to someone like Securicor not clearing out its depot in one go. It's a nuisance for
goods-in, because they are not able to process invoices or may not even have the invoice in the box. As you get closer to Christmas you just have to put books out because you need them."

Lynne O'Neill of John Smith's Glasgow University bookshop says: "The biggest bugbear is still deliveries arriving without invoices. We have to phone publishers to get a fax copy of the invoice before we can process and shelve the stock. Obviously this causes extra work at the publisher's end as well."

And now for the good news

But it is not all bad news. Technology has made a big difference to the speed with which booksellers can order books. Systems such as PubEasy and the fledgling WhitakerWeb are improving reliability, as well as retailers' ability to track titles and provide a good service to customers.

It has also made a difference to the accuracy of fulfilment. Booksellers are in universal agreement that one area in which there has been improvement is picking errors. The mechanisation of distributors' operations has made it easier to track copies and ensure that titles match orders. Mistakes do occasionally happen, though, as O'Neill points out. "This month instead of 30 copies of Mathematics for Engineers, we got 30 copies of The Little Puppy, a children's book, sent to us from MDL." She does not say whether the engineers preferred the substitute read.

The Wish List

- **Standardised returns processes**: one of the "big wins" from the supply chain review and, for booksellers, the biggest loss if those steering the review fail to get industry-wide agreement.

- **Real time stock availability**: booksellers all praise wholesalers for their rapid turnaround of orders and for their tracking technology. Booksellers want to see distributors reach the same standards, though they concede the cost to publishers of fulfilling this desire may keep it firmly on the wish list.

- **No out-of-prints on fast movers**: booksellers want publishers to improve responsiveness to fast moving titles, so that books do not go out of print at critical times.

- **Improved service from Securicor**: recent problems at the carrier have undermined bookseller's hopes of a trouble free autumn.

- **Packaging improvements**: booksellers complain that boxes are often "falling apart" by the time they reached the shops. Several also want to see distributors using recyclable containers, which would save money, as well as fulfil environmental targets.

- **Consistency of service**: Samedaybooks' Jon Woolcott sums up feeling in the trade, saying he wants to "get exactly the title we ordered, every time we order a book"