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Business

THE GOODS

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Keeping Dostoyevsky Safe From The Surf

ASK book publishers to list their idols, and you'll most likely find the names of Alfred A. Knopf or the Random House founder Bennett Cerf. But Charles Melcher, president of Melcher Media in Manhattan, would rather pattern his career after that of a man without literary credentials: Ruben Rausing, the Swedish founder of the packaging company Tetra Pak.

Mr. Melcher's admiration stems from Tetra Pak's patenting of several paperboard cartons that changed the way that milk and orange juice are sold. Mr. Melcher has similarly grand plans for his own invention, a package for words rather than beverages: the waterproof DuraBook.

"I want to roll out a licensing program, so that any publisher or company that wants to publish a DuraBook would be able to do so," said Mr. Melcher, who founded his publishing company in 1994. Last August, he received United States patent No. 6,773,034 for the process of making waterproof books. He envisions banking "a few pennies" for each one sold.

Who would buy a waterproof book? When Mr. Melcher first thought up the DuraBook eight years ago, his model customer was a middle-aged woman who liked to unwind with a hot bath. "I thought: Why can't she take a good book into the bath with her?" The answer, he said, was that she was afraid she would inadvertently drop her paperback, warping it beyond recognition.

Mr. Melcher and his production designer, Andrea Hirsh, began searching for waterproof paper, eventually settling on a synthetic variant that consists of polypropylene and inorganic fillers, rather than wood fibers. Such synthetic paper was developed in the late 1960's and is known for its resiliency; it is commonly used in frozen-food trays, for example.

The trick was figuring out how to print on the heavier paper so that the ink wouldn't smear if the paper became wet. Melcher Media eventually found an Asian supplier that had per-



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fecting a finishing technique for synthetic paper. "They figured out a way to roll it and press it, and treat the surface," Mr. Melcher said. "So it has what we call good ink holdout — if you put a dot of ink on it, it won't spread."

It was also necessary to experiment with types of binding glue, which combines with thread to attach a DuraBook's pages to its spine. During the testing phase, in which books were kept submerged for days, most glues couldn't endure. "We would find that certain glues would dissolve, and others would give off a white, milky substance," Mr. Melcher said. He eventually found a glue that did neither.

The first book in the DuraBook format, a racy fiction collection called Aqua Erotica, was published in 2000, while the patent was pending. Several titles have followed; Mr. Melcher estimated that, in all, around 750,000 copies of DuraBooks have been sold. As advertised, the ink doesn't run, though pages can clump together if they are dried inade-

**A publisher
has high hopes
for waterproof
books.**

quately; for this user, giving a wet book a hard wring, plus two minutes under a blow dryer, more or less solved the issue.

The tougher problem for Melcher Media has been the added expense of publishing DuraBooks; Mr. Melcher said the process adds 30 percent to a book's production costs, largely because the printing presses must run more slowly and the sheets require longer drying times.

He expects economies of scale to kick in soon. The nascent licensing program, he said, "is what's going to enable me to buy in volume and change the economic model." He added that his ultimate aim is to mimic the success of Tetra Pak.

That's quite an ambitious goal. Tetra Pak, based in Lausanne, Switzerland, had net sales of \$9.14 billion last year, and the Rausing family has a multibillion-dollar fortune. If licensing fees produce a few pennies a book, Mr. Melcher must hope that reading in the bathtub becomes as common as drinking orange juice in the morning. □