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J.C. Penney is turning last page on its Big Book

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The [J.C. Penney](#) Co. Big Book is dead – a victim of shoppers' growing reliance on the Internet.

Plano-based Penney confirmed that its fall/winter 2009 catalog is its last semiannual, telephone-book-size volume.

The Internet has made the 1,000-page shopping venue obsolete, and printing and transportation costs have been rising annually. The move also improves Penney's environmental footprint, reducing its catalog paper use by 30 percent next year.

Smaller, more frequent mailings of specialty catalogs targeting customers' shopping habits make more sense today, said Mike Boylson, Penney's chief marketing officer.

"It became a very ineffective way to communicate to our customers," he said. "It forced us to bring product in too early and locked in pricing. It was an outdated way of shopping and the last big book in America."

Penney has catalogs supporting its large home-goods business, including its private label Cooks kitchen catalog and Rooms Babies Love. Along with several women's and men's apparel catalogs, the company determined that shoppers increasingly use catalogs as "look books" and inspiration for their store and online purchases.

In the last two years, Penney consolidated its buying and marketing teams, which previously operated separately for stores, catalog and Internet sales.

"We had two buyers of everything, like Noah's Ark," he said. "The biggest, more important store items weren't even in the catalog."

Big Book sales have been on a decline since 2000 as more shoppers turn to jcp.com. Penney's online sales hit \$1 billion a year in 2006.

"It has an aging customer. Younger customers don't shop the Big Book," Boylson said.

Once 1,500 pages, Penney's Big Book dropped to well below 900 pages a few years ago. Since 2003, Penney has been shrinking its catalog operation, closing fulfillment centers and telemarketing

operations. By 2004, about 40 percent of Penney's catalog shoppers were placing orders on jcp.com, instead of calling an 800 number.

Sales peaked in 1999 at about \$4 billion. Penney stopped breaking out its catalog and Internet sales a few years ago. Penney's Big Book circulation topped out at 14 million. It printed 9 million copies of the final volume.

Catalog history

Penney got into the catalog business in 1963 after it bought a [Milwaukee](#) company.

The retailer promoted the catalog with a message similar to the words that it and other retailers use today about their online stores.

On the cover of that fall and winter issue, Penney said, "It's so new ... this new and bigger array of Penney selections ... the new convenient way to shop at Penneys ... the newest of all Penney 'stores' – this catalog."

It showed two sides of a golden seal. The front said, "Serving the American family/1902" and on the back, "A nationwide institution. Growing with the nation."

In 1993, Penney's profit surged on expanding catalog sales as it aggressively pursued Sears' catalog customers by getting its Sears Discover cardholder list and accepting the card as payment.

In January of that year, Sears Roebuck & Co. discontinued its 106-year-old catalog, known to generations as the original "big book." Sears' catalog went to 14 million households, but it had been losing money for years.

Christmas wish lists

The arrival of a big book from Sears, Penney, [Montgomery Ward](#) or Spiegel were big events, especially the fall and winter books because they were studied long and hard to come up with Christmas wish lists.

Former [Rolling Stone](#) writer Jancee Dunn, whose father and grandfather were J.C. Penney store managers, looks at the Penney catalog from a hilarious perspective in her latest autobiographical book, *Why is My Mother Getting a Tattoo?* The catalog also was integral in her 2006 book, *But Enough About Me*.

The catalogs were yearbooks of American life.

In her retrospectives on family life in the 1970s and '80s, Dunn recalled pieces sold through the catalog, such as "the Vidal Sassoon Hard Bonnet Hair Dryer, the Standard Toilet Lid Cover in Dusty Rose or Bronze Gold, the Cozy Recliner in Fashion Colors."

By the numbers: Cataloging sales

\$4 billion: Penney's peak catalog sales year in 1999

14 million: The Big Book's highest circulation total

9 million: Number of copies printed of final Big Book volume

40%: Percentage of catalog shoppers using the Internet by 2004 to place orders

30%: Reduction in Penney's catalog paper use by eliminating the Big Book