

Book Business

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In *Book Business: Publishing Past Present and Future* Jason Epstein writes:

The best advertising for any book is word of mouth. For this the global village green offers limitless scope. . . . With books no longer imprisoned for life within fixed bindings the opportunities are endless for the creation of new, useful, and profitable products by Internet publishers.

Among the many tyrannies to be overcome by the World Wide Web will be the turnover requirements of retail booksellers. . . .

“The obstacles imposed between readers and writers by traditional publishing practices . . . will wither away. The global village green will not be paradise. It will be undisciplined, polymorphous, and polyglot . . . The critical faculty that selects meaning from chaos is part of our instinctual equipment . . . Human beings have a genius for finding their way.

... publishers’ tasks can be reduced to an essential handful: editorial support, publicity, design, digitizing, and financing. For these functions, size confers no advantage and at a certain magnitude becomes a nuisance.

Epstein’s book is must reading for anyone involved in the business of book publishing, even with some of its now-out-dated statements (copyright 2001). But, if you want to appreciate where mainstream publishing has been and how an experienced mind evaluates the future of it, then spend a few hours listening to what this author has to say. Developing a strategic and polymorphic approach to writing and building an author’s fan base using all up-to-date methods are crucial to success in publishing.

What I think we’re seeing at this point is size (of a publishing house) conferring no advantage and even becoming a nuisance. A nuisance because most creativity undertaken by committee is fraught with complications. In fact, compared to the ease with which a blog, a website, or a print-on-demand book can be created today, it’s somewhat amazing there have been so many books that survived the production process over the last few hundred years.

Let’s look at the life cycle of an “Average Book” (circa 1900–2004, I’m not going to pretend to

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know anything about the 19th century). For our example, this will be a book you read once and like enough to give away but not enough to hold on to.

Step One:

Against all odds, the pressing obligations and superficial interests of life . . . the demands of lovers and guilt-trips of spouses and parents . . . the business of earning a living and sitting one's arse in a chair for a prolonged period of time ("shutting the door" as Stephen King advises) . . . against the intimidation of the classics, the skepticism of the less hard-working, the threat of addiction and a million other things that distract people from their goals (or give them excuses, depending on your level of sympathy with this process) A MANUSCRIPT IS WRITTEN!

Step Two:

Now, after three revisions and four go get 'ums by friends and family, research begins for an appropriate agent or publisher. Packages go out, packages come back. Go out. Come back. Go out. Come back. Go out. Come back. A few holidays pass and work begins in earnest on Book Two.

Step Three:

Saints be praised, Book One has been accepted for publication.

Step Four:

We'll skip the editorial meetings, sales meetings, proofs going back and forth and go right to the fun part—printing. The book is printed and arrives on Author's doorstep. Champagne is opened. Mother is proud. Children (if there was time to bear them) are impressed. Life is good. Is it time to give notice at the place of employment yet?

Step Five:

The publisher receives faxed, phoned, or electronic orders for the book. Tons of orders come in. Tons of books are printed. The book costs \$20. retail. The publisher sells the book for \$10. It costs \$3. to produce, plus \$1 for marketing, plus \$1 to finance all the books that the publisher currently publishes that don't sell at all and are financed by the more successful books (or that sell really well at such a discount they don't make any money, so their "success" is financed by less-popular but better margined titles). So, let's say there is \$5 left over to make the publisher money. And, the author hopes to get a bit of that.

Step Six:

The books ship out in smart-looking trucks to their retail destinations. Mother looks for it on the

shelf in Miami Beach and the Author's college roommate asks for it in San Diego. Meanwhile, new copies start showing up on Amazon for \$4.

Step Seven:

The author does a few book signings, appears on the radio, and waits for the first sales report. The bookstores leave the books on the shelf, spine out, next to the other 20,000 or so new titles published every year.

Step Eight:

The economy is going south, the bookstore has a slow month and now has an invoice for the books ordered for the holidays due to the wholesalers. It doesn't want to pay said bill, so it has bookstore staff comb the shelves (or pull up on the computer) all books that have been "sitting around" for, how could they?, three months. Our dear author's book is in that category, so all copies at the chain get pulled from the shelf and back they go to the wholesaler, then the distributor, then the publisher.

Step Nine:

They are returned. They are resold. They are returned. They sit. The copyright date gets older. The bookstores will not order copyright dates older than two years. The publisher turns to the "next new thing." The Author's mother complains that none of her friends in Arizona can find the book in bookstores. The Author furiously finishes Book Two.

Step Ten:

Time passes. Book one may break even, or be a loss. It might even, yes it's true I've seen it happen, be a bestseller but make no profit for author, publisher or store owner.

This, dear reader, is why the face of publishing is eager to change, Insisting on change and ready for all the new opportunities technology can bring its way.

Stephen King, in *On Writing* states "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot." He's right, of course, who am I to argue with Stephen King? But to be a successful publisher . . . well, that's a bit trickier!

There is HOPE, however. We live in a time of great opportunity and wonderful technology that can level the playing field in dramatic, cost-effective ways. It IS possible to successfully self-publishing without breaking the bank. I've put together a 15-page report "My Book Is Published, Now What?" available from my website, www.janicephelps.com. Learn the steps you can take to sell yourself and your book.

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