1001 Reviews

How do you sell any books you may have authored or published? That question sure is a crucial *Midnight Engineering* topic these days. And I dearly do wish I knew the "best" answer to that one. But I don't.

Instead, let's review several of the resources and first principles of book production and marketing. Focusing on what is or is not working out for me. And aimed at creating specialized technical titles in fast-changing fields.

Book publishing options

Before you can sell your book, you have to somehow create all the volumes to be sold. The method you select very much determines how much and what kind of personal attention the promotion and marketing will demand.

As I see it, there are six major possibilities…

(1) Traditional book publishers – Back in the "good old days", you simply mailed your manuscript to a publisher. Who, besides taking all the risks and all of the production hassles, did all of your marketing for you. All you did was sit back and watch your obscenely large royalty checks pour in. Uh huh. Sure.

Sadly, there are some rather ugly ongoing changes that make traditional book publishing a highly uncertain crap shoot. At least for many nonfiction authors much of the time. Mergers and acquisitions have sharply reduced the number of major publishers. Many older sources for tech books are today only the tiniest shadow of their former selves. The little that is left tends to have a "blockbuster" or "all titles must profit" mentality. Odds of acceptance are sharply down. And dim-witted *publisher's committees* are notorious for sitting on your title for fourteen months and then rejecting it because it is "not timely".

Books from major publishers do not stay popular very long these days. Why? Because bottom-line oriented chain bookstores want best sellers and typically flush a title after a mere 22 weeks on the shelf. Worse, because of utterly appalling IRS *Thor decision* rules which *severely* penalize any backlists. These days, most traditional publishers are literally *paid to shred books*.

Unless you end up extremely lucky or have a personal champion inside a traditional publisher, the promotion and marketing of your title is likely to be negligible.

Finally, royalty rates are sharply down for most authors. The traditional publishers are unconscionably slow paying. And there's all sorts of new accounting ploys that delay or eliminate entirely any payments at all. Wait till you meet the *reserve against returns* scam. For most books by most beginning authors, their publisher's advance will be the *only* income they will ever see.

(2) Book packagers – These are a curious innovation for the new age nineties. A *book packager* usually acts as a publisher's agent. To reduce the risk factors of traditional publishing, the packager contacts authors, filters for text suitability, processes manuscripts, does all the layout and production art, and delivers turnkey "ready-to-print" and "guaranteed to sell" products to the publisher.

As an author, it is real easy to have strongly negative feelings about book packagers. They are certainly one more finger in the pie, and yet one more barricade between you as writer and your readers.

On the other hand, the book packagers are often small, intense, and quick on their feet. At least a few of them do genuinely care about their authors. And their key decision makers are often technically competent and are personally involved in the technology they are hawking.

One good example of a workable book packager is Jeff Duntemann's *Coriolis Group*. If you do have a reasonably competent and timely technical subject which might be of interest to a fairly large number of readers, then Jeff would definitely like to hear about it. Especially if PC-oriented programming languages are involved.

The book packagers do *not* usually promote or market directly to the end user. Although they may run their own specialty bookstore as a cash cow sideline. So, the primary promotion and the marketing would still get done through the megafirm buying the packager's product.

(3) Traditional self-published – With any self-publishing, you take all of the risks by yourself. Doing everything from writing through your layout, production, promotion, and marketing. You get to make all your own mistakes, rather than paying other people to make the mistakes for you.

The risks here are *very* high.

There are several obvious advantages to self-publishing. "Getting your manuscript accepted" has no meaning, since this is now a certainty. You do get to say *exactly* what you want *exactly* how you want it said. You have *total* control over the form and appearance of your book. Turnaround time from concept to product can be very low.

If all goes *exceptionally* well, you can take a 70 percent author's royalty, rather than a 7 percent one. Which, with lots of luck, *may* mean that you only have to sell *one-tenth* as many copies for the same bottom line.

In traditional self-publishing, you create your PostScript

or camera-ready art and send it to a book printer. Who, in turn, sends cases of finished books back to you.

You do *not* attempt this with a jiffy printer or local print shop. *Never.* Instead, you go to a firm that specializes in printing the exact type of book in the exact quantities you are after. I have used *Book Masters* here and have had no problems with them. Others have had severe hassles with this outfit. One premium publisher of smaller quantities of both hard and softbound books is *Thompson Shore*. An ultra low price (and marginal quality) firm that specializes in fast turnaround bound galleys for review is *Crane*. One example of an outfit that is big into custom software and operating manuals is *Omni Press*.

There are monumental front end setup expenses involved with traditional self-publishing. Buying 1000 copies will cost you pretty near the same as 5000. Not the same per copy, but your same final *total* bill. Thus your *minimum* feasible press run for this route is usually 5000 volumes. The books must be paid for up front regardless of whether they end up being actually sold to paying customers.

(4) Book-on-demand self-published – When you select *Book-on-demand* publishing, you get yourself a PostScript II duplex laser printer having a supporting hard disk, a binding system, and a trimmer. Then you produce 100% of each book by yourself. In house. A few books at a time on an *as ordered* basis. Outside of equipment amortization, there are *zero* front end or setup charges. The turnaround time from manuscript to final product can be measured in hours. Changes and corrections are easily made at any time. There are no returns, remainders, or shopworn copies. Your backlist goes on forever, because there is no taxable inventory. Each title can be easily customized, up to and including the reader's name on the cover in gold. You have total and absolute control.

On the other hand, you do have to pick up new tools and personal book production skills. And this whole new BOD concept is still highly experimental. Time and effort are required to produce each volume. We are only just barely to the point where any BOD product can pass the "on the shelf" *Turing Test*. Wherein you cannot tell the quality difference between it and a traditionally produced book. But things are getting *much* better *much* faster. I definitely see the day when the most titles will be BOD published.

All the long term economics here are overwhelmingly favorable.

(5) Service bureau BOD published – A *demand printing service bureau* is a new variation on BOD publishing. You send or modem them your PostScript or Acrobat files, and they do the actual demand publishing for you. Producing smaller quantities of superb quality books in days or even hours. In a typical setup, a machine such as the *Xerox Docutech* is used for the printing, combined with old-line bindery machines and services.

The costs could be much higher than doing everything internally by yourself. But they can be ridiculously cheaper than old-line presses for quantities in the 50 to 500 range. Front end setup expenses are fairly low, and you basically pay by the book. As with in-house BOD, changes can be made at any time at near zero cost.

One outstanding example of a BOD service bureau is

David Seid's *Access LaserPress* down in Phoenix. Whom I heartily recommend.

(6) On-line published – In on-line publishing, there is no book as such. You instead make all your book's contents available electronically via modem. While this sounds like a great concept, it has not worked in the past, definitely is not working now, and is unlikely to in the future.

Why? Firstoff, any "real" book involves a touchy-feely interaction and a pride of ownership. Books are infinitely more pleasant than staring at video screens. And far easier to use. Anywhere.

Second, and like it or not, the current paradigm is that people buy books but they steal software. The value of a downloaded product *always* gets horrendously undervalued by the end user. Third, unless you have other sources of value added, you could easily lose control of your product when it can be electronically duplicated by third parties.

Ventures as diverse as *Prodigy* and the *Home Shopping Network* have gotten their collective onagers in a sling by grossly overestimating the potential sales of downloaded electronic information and modem-purchased services.

My own *GEnie* PSRT is an illustrative example here. To date, we've had over 50,000 downloads of our library files. Not bad. In several places within each download are hard sells for various *Synergetics* products. Would you care to guess the *weekly* gross sales volume this generates as email orders? *Around $6.52!*

For on-line publishing to take off, you definitely must provide a low cost, attractive, and simple bound hard copy option to the end user. You also have to provide personal value added elsewhere in for forms of kits, companion newsletters, consulting services, helplines, or whatever. Or some form of neighborhood walk-in CD-ROM "jukebox" that instantly prints hard copies of *anything* on demand..

So, how do you sell books?

Again, darned if I know. But here are several of the first principles that seem to be working for me…

(1) Think non-traditional – Mall chain bookstores are by, of, and for the megacorporations. The vast majority of the American public never goes anywhere near one. While it would be nice to get your books into these places (except, of course, for that "tear the cover off" return for most of your volumes), it certainly is not necessary. And certainly should not be the prime focus of your promotions.

Obvious alternatives are the stores which sell something else, but carry a few books in support of their products or goals. Or your own personal bookstore. Or specialty direct mail houses that tightly target a specific interest.

Stand-alone books have a lot of competition these days. Especially from the video onslaught and people who refuse to ever read anything.

You'll fare lots better if your book is a small part of a larger package. Possibly one that includes software, kit materials, templates, maps, layouts, voice helplines, BBS support, selected reprints, user groups, newsletters, videos, ongoing media coverage, whatever.

(2) Iffen the right one don't git ya, the left one will – One book won't hack it. You will need a minimum of five

titles. Dozens would be better. You never know which one will hit. And only one of the bunch will really take off. But that one should carry the load and then some.

(3) Get others to believe in your product – Naturally, you should offer all your own books via VISA/MC through your own direct mail bookstore and telephone services. Easily and cheaply done from a desk in a spare room. It is also very important to carry products from your competitors to create a "one stop shopping" image.

The next trick is to set up a nationwide chain of your own personal bookstores. You can do this by getting others who are now *already* cataloging and selling other items by direct mail or over-the-counter to also stock and advertise your product. They will do this if they can profit from you. *But only if they all genuinely believe.* Working one-on-one with real people is super-important here.

Of course, it is far cheaper and more cost effective to add a book to an existing catalog page than it is to promote the book on a stand-alone basis.

Other important "get them to believe" folks are the book reviewers, editors, industry insiders, and trade conference speakers. Aggressively seek them out.

Always carry a bunch of your books wherever you go. I have sold lots of them at such places as casual bed and breakfast visits or drop-ins at computer user groups.

Cold calls on bookstores don't work out all that well. At least not for me. Instead, you (heh heh heh) get a *friend* or *neighbor* of the bookstore owner to do the dirty deed for you. Again, because they will believe in the book and the bookstore owner purportedly respects their views.

But your best "get them to believe" book marketing ploy of all, of course, is *word of mouth* recommendations from great heaping bunches of satisfied customers.

(4) ISBN numbers are a must – If your publication does not have an ISBN or *International Standard Book Number*, a library or a bookstore simply will not purchase it. Ever. Surprisingly, ISBN's have nothing to do with the federal government. They are instead offered and maintained by *Bowker*, the folks that publish *Books in Print*, *Forthcoming Books*, and similar titles.

Getting your own ISBN numbers reserved is not that big a deal. You send Bowker $150 and they send you a hundred numbers back in a month. Faster service costs extra. That's a buck and a half per book.

There are also separate ISSN numbers for periodicals and newsletters.

(5) Work with book distributors – Chain bookstores and libraries normally do *not* buy directly from publishers or individuals. Instead, they work through a *book distributor*. A third party that offers the convenience of a single source shopping, fast delivery, and low shipping charges.

The real biggie here is *Ingram*. But it is fairly hard for an individual or a small publisher to score with Ingram. They mostly work only with the big boys. Try anyhow.

Instead, there is *Baker and Taylor*. A second distributor that aggressively seeks out the small press titles. Yet is well known and highly regarded. There are hundreds of other distributors, but I have found several of the smaller ones to range from disappointing to totally useless.

BOOK MARKETING RESOURCES

Access LaserPress
3502 West Earll Drive
Phoenix, AZ 85019
(602) 272-2525

Baker & Taylor
652 E Main Street
Bridgewater, NJ 08807
(908) 218-3803

Book Masters
613 E Industrial Drive
Chelsea, MI 48118
(313) 475-9145

RR Bowker
1180 Americas Avenue
New York, NY 10036
(212) 916-1600

Coriolis Group
7721 E Gray Road #204
Scottsdale, AZ 85260
(602) 483-0192

Crane Typesetting
PO Box 487
Barnstable, MA 02630
(617) 362-3441

Electronic Publishing
401 Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19108
(215) 338-5300

Gale Research
835 Penobscot Bldg
Detroit, MI 48226
(313) 961-2242

GEnie PSRT
401 N. Washington St.
Rockville, MD 20850
(800) 638-9636

Ingram
1125 Heil Quaker Blvd.
La Vergne, TN 37086
(615) 793-3886

OmniPress
454 W Johnson Street
Madison, WI 53703
(800) 828-0305

Oxbridge
150 Fifth Avenue #202
New York, NY 10011
(212) 741-0231

Dan Poynter
PO Box 4232-186
Santa Barbara, CA 93140
(800) PARAPUB

Printer's Devil
PO Box 66
Harrison, ID 83833
(208) 689-3738

Printing Impressions
401 North Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19108
(215) 238-5300

Publishing Executive
401 N Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19108
(215) 238-5300

Standard Rate & Data
3004 Glenview Road
Wilmett, IL 60091
(800) 323-4588

Synergetics
Box 809
Thatcher, AZ 85552
(602) 428-4073

Target Marketing
401 N. Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19108
(215) 238-5300

Thompson Shore
7300 West Joy Road
Dexter, MI 48130
(313) 426-3939

Upper & lower case
2 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza
New York, NY 10017
(212) 371-0699

Writer's Market
1507 Dana Avenue
Cincinnati, OH 45207
(513) 531-2222

By the way, the normal cost breakdown is that the store gets 40% and the distributor gets 15% of the list. If you can bypass a distributor, you can offer the store 50%, a better deal for both parties.

(6) Use Advetorials – An *advetorial* is a story about your book, a mention in a column, a chapter excerpt, a resouce directory entry, or something like this. It gives your end reader valued and useful stand-alone info while leaving a strong urge for them to whip out their VISA card.

Magazines pay *you* for editorial material. And the reader almost always values editorial content far above ad hype.

Much more on this back in *Midnight Engineering #7* and in my *Blatant Opportunist* hard copy reprints. Also found as file ADVETORL.PDF on *www.tinaja.com*

(7) Think before spending – Many obvious promotion methods simply do not work. Or will be cost effective only with careful testing and tight targeting. And lots of luck.

For instance, large display ads in major magazines are an

almost totally useless way to promote single book titles. On the other hand, long-run classifieds and other smaller and carefully thought out ads can sometimes work out.

As to radio, 800 numbers, 900 numbers, bingo responses, card decks, co-op mailings, foreign sales, newspaper ads, autograph parties, exhibit booths, random lists, and blind direct mail advertising: None of these have ever worked out properly for me. Most have been total disasters.

If you try any of these, the three big rules are to (1) test, (2) test, and (3) test. Start small. Stay tightly targeted. But do keep your sample sizes large enough to give you realistic results. But your final rollout will *never* come remotely near your test response predictions.

I once bought this "sure fire" mailing list of the Apple LaserWriter owners, offering them my sole-source product that they desperately needed. Couldn't miss. Shooting fish in a barrel. Their list ran a *thirty* percent nixie rate (one percent is normal) and a net response of *zero*. These days, I use the following paradigm: *All list brokers are crooks.* It is apparently genetic. Somewhere along chromosome #11.

Definitely a characteristic of the breed.

(8) Your best customers are your best customers – Any random mailing list is extremely lucky if it can pull a one percent response. But on plain old postcards mailed to my previous buyers, I've hit as high as a 38 percent sales rate. Your internal data base consists largely of prequalified and highly motivated known buyers. Use it wisely.

It also pays to let your customers know how to reach you. Do be certain your book has your phone number and address *bound into it*. Offer updates, a voice helpline, an electronic BBS, support products, user group, consulting, whatever. The point is to make it easy for any pass-along readers and book borrowers to find you.

All of which seems fine and dandy. But my single most important key secret to selling lots of books is to…

(9) Use the 1001 reviews – A well-placed book review in a relevant magazine by a caring reviewer can immediately generate between 5 and 50 book sales. Or possibly great heaping bunches more. Long term, it greatly adds to the general awareness of your product. I feel that properly placed reviews are severely underused.

For a broad interest book, I think it is a good idea to reserve a full 1001 of your first 5000 volumes and use them specifically to comp reviewers. Now, just giving piles of books away is definitely *not* a good idea. It will lower the perceived value of your product. And many of these will simply disappear, ending up on fallow ground.

Instead, you should personally and carefully *qualify* each reviewer. Do this by using one-on-one phone calls to the reviewer or their editor. Do they have a specific interest in this subject? Would they like to receive a complimentary copy? The reasons for the call: To make sure they write relevant reviews that actually have high odds of appearing in print. To raise their expectations and get them to believe in the product. To get them to think they are somebody special. To make your book stand out from the others.

In the case of my newly revised *Incredible Secret Money Machine II*, I am in fact now sending out 1001 qualified reviews. And it seems to be working. Hundreds of these have already appeared. Overwhelmingly favorable.

Some of the markets I've addressed with ISMM review placement: Electronics magazines. Computer magazines. Self-help publications. Inventor's organizations. The "get rich quick" market. Professional reviewers. Radio talk and review shows, especially PBS. Arizona author/publisher. Alternate lifestyle mags. Small business ops. Flea market merchandisers. Specialized direct mail bookstores. Craft stuff. Back-to-the-country downhome mags. Those larger newspapers. Home energy. Entrepreneur and opportunity pubs. The small press gang. Niche newsletters. Computer clubs. And, of course, the other writers, consultants, and editors that I have worked with in the past.

Getting a strong review into the *Wall Street Journal* or *Playboy* or *New York Review of Books* or whatever can be tricky. My own approach is to carefully note who actually writes related reviews. Then target the specific *individuals*, not the magazine itself.

For more info

The classic starting point for the lists of publishers and potential review sources is *Writer's Market*. Available at any larger book store or library. But there are vastly better directories, guides, and trade journals available. Start with the reference shelf at your local library.

The three biggies here are *Bowker*, *Oxbridge*, and *Gale Research*. Bowker has its *Books in Print*, *Literary Market Place*, and *Ulricht's Periodicals Guide*, among dozens of others. Besides being your only source for ISBN and ISSN numbers. Oxbridge has *Who's Printing What*, the *Standard Periodical's Directory*, and the new *National Directory of Magazines*. Gale is into the *Encyclopedia of Associations* and similar directories.

The best info on mailing list generators and brokers is *Standard Rate and Data*. There are also scads of free trade journals. Several random samples that I have found useful are *Electronic Publishing*, *Publishing Executive*, *Upper & lower case*, *Target Marketing, and Printing Impressions*.

One low cost alternate source of tightly targeted lists of publications, reviewers, clubs, newspapers, and such is *Dan Poynter*. Who also has his free self-publishing and self-marketing newsletter. Another superb labor-of-love pub is Joe Singer's *Printer's Devil*.

Of my very own products, the *Incredible Secret Money Machine II* has plenty more info on self publishing and self-marketing. My *Book-on-demand resource kit* offers the latest and best on this topic. ❖

Microcomputer pioneer and guru Don Lancaster is the author of 33 books and countless articles. Don maintains a US technical helpline you'll find at (520) 428-4073, besides offering all his own books, reprints and various services.

Don has a free new catalog crammed full of his latest insider secrets waiting for you. Your best calling times are 8-5 weekdays, Mountain Standard Time.

Don is also the webmaster of www.tinaja.com where a special area has been set aside for Midnight Engineering readers. You will also find selected reprints of Don's other columns, that Synergetics Consultant's Network along with extensive annotated web site links here.

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