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From Shelf to Screen: Marketing in the Digital Age

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From Shelf to Screen:

Marketing in the Digital Age

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This document provides a detailed description of different online promotion techniques for small book publishers trying to break into the modern market.

Although many feared that the rise of the digital age would signal the end of

publishing as we know it, in reality the switch has expanded the playing field in all book

sales, especially for smaller publishers, into the global market. Unfortunately, it has not

been an easy transition for everyone, and you may be struggling to take advantage of the

benefits that come with the digital world. Remain calm: although the venue has changed,

the same basic principles apply to marketing digitally that have been used to marketing

books in the traditional manner (which I will refer to as the physical market) previously.

While before smaller publishers often could not match the larger ones due to funding,

digital alternatives are often much easier and less expensive, making it just as useful for a

company with few workers as for one with a devoted marketing team.

The More Things Stay the Same

Though some might argue that the digital market should stick to digital products

like eBooks, the sales show differently. The simple fact of the eBook market is that it is not

really so different from what the market for the printed book has become in the last few

years. In most essential ways, eBooks and printed books offer the same product to the

consumer: it contains a story, information, or images that help the consumer in some way,

either through entertainment, steps in an activity, or inspiration. The only real change is

the venue. While perusing the shelves at the local bookstore still has its charm, many

printed titles are now sold online, rather than in person: according to Thomas Woll,

publishing consultant and author of *Publishing for Profit*, 42% of all books sold in 2013

were through e-commerce with bookstore chains trailing in second at 15%. If printed

books and eBooks are already sold in the same location, then the challenges of selling

eBooks and printed books are really the same problem with much the same solution: using digital methods to market books.

Just because one aspect of the business has changed, doesn't mean they all have. No matter the form, any book should share one quality if a publisher wants to make money off of it: it has to be good. If the product doesn't seem worth the time, effort, and money a buyer spends to obtain it, chances are the buyers won't spend. This means that even though there are many ways to cut costs in modern publishing, the editorial staff should not be one of them. One of the largest concerns of making the publishing process simpler is that books will move through too fast and suffer because of it. Any product that you publish should always be the best that you can make it, not only as a matter of personal pride, but also of consumer reputation. Books are not as isolated in stores as one may think; word of mouth still holds a great deal of weight with buyers, whether it's spoken or typed words. Don't expect a bad book to do well, regardless of what market you put it in. A low-quality book will not receive high ratings or favorable reviews from those who read it, which greatly reduces the chance of others seeing the reviews and choosing to read it for themselves.

Other factors remain the same as well. Although a digital catalog will not have a physical form to wrap a cover around, the information and images provided are still important to the sale of the book. The online listings still include a visual representation and description of the story being sold, and it can still be used as a method to attract readers to the product. This information is generally identical from the cover to the book listing to the online listing.

Other digital strategies are also very similar to traditional marketing. For example, Amazon has already modeled one such technique quite successfully in their "Look Inside"

feature, introduced in 2003. This allows the potential buyer to flip through, as it were, to view certain sets of pages within the book. In a physical bookstore, an interested person might sit down with a book and browse through it to see if it catches their interest. Woll explains that the average customer looks at the cover and contents for about 20 seconds or less before accepting or rejecting a book. If the publisher gets to decide what pages the would-be customer opens up to, they can make sure he or she gets the most tantalizing pages possible—and then cut them short, leaving the reader wanting more and forcing them to buy the book.

You might expect the downside to digital sales in this case to be that the customer cannot immediately continue reading the book as they wait for the package to reach their home. However, this is where entirely digital products like the eBook can really come into play. The two biggest benefits of the eBook are cost and speed. Because so many of the costs have been eliminated with the price of printing, storing, and distributing, most eBooks are marked down significantly from the price of a printed copy. Price changes differ from publisher to publisher, but a digital book will nearly always be cheaper than its printed counterpart. The other big benefit is speed; the eBook can be downloaded to a phone or tablet instantly. These two factors make the digital book a wonderful opportunity for publishers in the online market because it means it can be included in the purchase of a print book at very little extra cost, allowing the reader instant access as well as a highly mobile means of carrying the book.

The More Things Change

These techniques help make the purchase, but how do you get customers to your product in the first place? When taking the click into the online market, it is important to

remember that this part of online sales has changed considerably since the days of the secluded corner store bookshops. The world may not actually have gotten bigger, but it has certainly widened its gaze. Where before a bookseller might only have reached a few locals in town, he or she now has the potential to sell to anyone in almost any part of the world. This is wonderful for publishers—particularly smaller ones that might have difficulty reaching new customers—but only if they make the proper steps to take advantage of their resources.

The problem with online marketing is that the very factor that makes it useful for publishers—the sheer breadth—can also bury them under the weight of so much content. This is the biggest challenge for online marketers: how to make sure that your audience finds your product and commits to it. The key is to create an Internet presence and generate content that keeps your customers' attention focused on your activity, so that when a new book is released, they will already be invested in it and more likely to purchase it.

Begin with the basics. If you already have a well designed website—great. If not, it's time to start looking into it. Maybe it didn't matter in the past, but if you want people to buy your books online, there will need to be a venue for them to do this on. It doesn't need to be a particularly fancy site—in fact, the busier a website is, the more likely it will be confusing to a visitor—but it should look nice enough to reassure the visitor that it is in fact a real, professional publishing company. It should be straightforward and easy to navigate; try out some usability testing if need be. The website is one of the main online locations that potential customers will visit, so make a good impression. If it is too difficult to use, customers will take their business elsewhere.

The website should feature any recent or upcoming books and anything new happening in the company. Given the primary function of the publisher, the books serve as a means of advertising; users will immediately see the new material, and interesting covers should serve to pique their curiosity. The information on the company allows users to feel more involved. Many readers feel deep attachment to their books; it follows that feeling more involved in the process would make or strengthen a connection with the people who put it into production.

This is where social media comes into play. Sites like Facebook and Twitter provide instant contact with the world outside the publisher. They are also free to access, which means that they are just as easy for a small publisher to set up as a big one. After creating a new page through the instructions on whatever site or sites you choose, post an announcement on each site, as well as the dedicated publisher site to let your loyal customers know they have another way to keep track of the books they love. The handles can also be added to any printed material for those who generally buy in print.

Then the publisher should make sure to post content fairly often and keep track of how many people "follow" the page. Content can be anything from text, addressed in the second person "you" modeled throughout this section, pictures of staff members working on a new cover, a picture of the new cover, a video of an author interview, or an invitation to an event like a book signing. If the page doesn't seem to be getting enough attention after a week or so, you can host a competition or random giveaway. Offer something, say a free copy of a signed book or a coupon for the site, and give a range of time for users to "like" the post with a stipulation that they must also have followed the page in order to win. Then when the time is out, select someone according to the rules described in the post and

follow through. Make sure to use the opportunity to create new posts for the social media pages and an announcement of some kind—it can be small—on the publisher site. The point is to make quality posts frequently enough that users will see it in their newsfeeds and keep the publisher fresh in their minds.

A dedicated page can also be useful on a more specific basis for interested authors. It's a great way to generate interest, and a Facebook page or a blog can be a great way to communicate with fans. You can shoot ideas, hint on activity, and share relevant content. For authors who already have some sort of fanbase, this means keeping them updated with what you've been doing since the last book they read. If your first book has only recently been picked up, it's a chance to let the world know it's coming and why they should be interested. Potential posts include any article written about the author or their books, a video of the author (a quick and easy way to create the effect of an author tour without spending the money), and any updates on a current book or honor. A generally unknown book or author can use their page to increase their following through events like an ebook giveaway for a limited time frame. Provided the book is actually high quality, this can generate publicity for the title and even earn public feedback.

For customers who base their purchases purely on subject and author, which Woll says is the majority of them, it is often helpful to learn what other people have to say on prospective titles. The online market opens up the possibility to generate large numbers of reviews on books, like a newspaper critique in years past. As the adage goes, any review is a good review, and if the Internet is good for anything, it's letting people voice their opinions. Sites like Goodreads and Amazon create a specific venue for readers to talk about books and recommend more at no extra cost. Not only do such reviews provide good

fodder for book covers and social media, but they also act as a modern day form of word-of-mouth recommendations. It is the digital method for customers to "tell their friends" when they've found an interesting read. Any method that allows a publisher to get more positive reviews should be encouraged, as long as all parties are treated respectfully; remember, they are potential customers.

Facebook and Goodreads can also be viable locations to try out online advertising, if the publisher is willing to invest a bit. Goodreads is fairly reasonable and even walks the user through the process of setup. Facebook is more expensive, but can provide more useful statistics and consumer activity. Amazon also provides certain services to bump up certain products, but they are often significantly more expensive and not as active in their promotion. Penny Sansevieri, CEO and founder of Author Marketing Experts, Inc., says that when selling through Amazon, publishers should use the most specific and unusual category placement as possible while remaining accurate. A narrower category means less other books, giving that specific book a higher ranking than it might in another category. A higher placement, particularly if it manages to get in the top ten books, looks more favorable to consumers and may increase their chances of purchasing it.

Conclusion

While some digital products might still be in a transitional stage, it is clear that the transition to the digital market has already taken place. Online markets can offer many advances in publicity and general usefulness, especially for small publishers, but it can be a difficult switch and varies in success. Each publisher should play to its own strengths, capitalizing on new markets only when it helps their business and not just to follow what is thought to be the next big thing. This is particularly true in the case of the eBook; although

the digital market continues to advance, the digital book advances hesitatingly, adding convenience but also introducing new issues such as digital theft and wasted energy.

Though some publishers may do very well with the transition, some may still need more time or may never need to try. Digital media creates a great environment for anyone looking to test the waters without investing too much. Most forms of online publicity are completely free or at least not any more expensive than the creation of the book. This means that smaller publishers are just as capable of using various forms of public relations and sampling to promote their titles. With a little more effort on social media pages and author websites, these publishers can increase traffic to their online stores and, with the proper balance of publicity and marketing strategies, can increase overall sales of book digital and printed books. It is important to remember that the book market evolves as the world around it evolves. Michael Bhaskar, British researcher and publisher, describes it perfectly in *The Content Machine:* "These are publishing challenges, not challenges to publishing." A change in the structure of the business can be alarming, but it is also an opportunity to adapt and grow. Take advantage of new methods and technological advances, and you may increase your own success drastically.