



Selling the Ivory Tower

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Even the most wonderful book – beautifully written, richly illustrated, presenting exciting new material, daring analyses and paradigm-shattering conclusions – will sit in splendid isolation gathering dust on some obscure warehouse shelf if the world is not told that it exists. All the best efforts of author, editor, designer, typesetter, and all the other people involved in bringing out a book are pointless without marketing. And conversely, of course, even the most sophisticated marketing will not shift many copies of a book that is ill-written, badly conceived and shoddily produced. But while most authors will find their relationship with their editor to be of great importance, and many will take a lively interest in the physical appearance of their books, marketing is often overlooked by authors who feel that their work should fly or fail on its own intrinsic merits. Not so. Marketing is yet another vital step in the long chain from an initial idea in the author's mind to the answering spark it can create in a reader's mind.

Serious marketing – that is, the marketing of serious books – is less about persuading customers with florid language and tempting discounts to buy something they may or may not really want, but more about keeping the academic world, the high-end libraries, and the specialized bookshops well-informed about exactly what is on offer. The job is to reach this audience with the right information in the right format at the right time. What could be simpler? Well, actually, there are quite a number of “challenges” involved.

Standing out from the crowd
With the huge number of new titles published each year and the even more staggering number of titles in publishers' back lists, it is no surprise that even the most specialized bookshop or library can only carry a tiny proportion of what is available. Just take a look around the book displays at the annual Association for Asian Studies conference in the United States, and then consider that this rich display only represents books from perhaps 70 or 80 of the largest publishers, and only their most recent offerings. There are at least three, four, five times as many smaller and regional publishers producing academic books on Asia. And for new each title shown at AAS, there are at least ten more older ones that the publisher could not find space for. With so many books on offer, it looks like Asian Studies is the new black.

So the first challenge of good marketing is to produce a description of the book

that will make it stand out from the crowd, and make clear exactly what the book is about and who it is aimed at. Very often, this will start with a description provided by the author which the marketing department can edit, add to, or rewrite. It is surprising how little interest many authors take in this process, even though it is the foundation upon which all other sales and marketing work will be based. The description needs to be comprehensive enough that libraries can tell whether the subject falls within their remit, yet concise enough for bookshop owners who take an average of maybe ten seconds (yes, really) to decide whether to stock a book. It also needs to appeal to end-users by setting out how the work adds to what has already been published in the field, and by stating who outside the community of professors and lecturers should consider buying the book – undergraduate or graduate students, informed and inquisitive non-experts, practitioners in the field, such as NGOs, collectors, expatriates, etc.

Small budgets and large chains

Having produced, with the help of the author, the perfect book description, and having distributed this as widely as possible, the next challenge for the sales and marketing team is that even when a shop or library would like to buy the book, they may not be able to do so. Libraries almost everywhere have suffered for years from dwindling budgets, and book budgets have been particularly hard-hit as funds have had to be allocated to new media such as CDs and online subscriptions, and as libraries have been understandably slow to make the painful decision to discontinue subscriptions to journals they have been taking for decades. A recent survey of libraries in the United Kingdom showed that just 9% of the total budget went on book purchases (the rest going towards other media, salaries, maintenance, IT, etc.). Library suppliers – who collate information on new books from hundreds of publishers to present libraries with lists of what is new in their particular fields – are feeling the squeeze quite badly, in what they see as a flat and oversupplied market.

Likewise, bookshops can be hard work. The growth of bookshop chains with their centralized buying and focus on high turn-over means that most large bookshops will prefer to stock not two copies each of the 50 most important titles, but 50 copies each of the two most popular ones. Independent bookshops, on the other hand, often specialize in a particular field and favour depth of range over the latest fad, but they are few and far between, and are under great competitive pressure from the chains which can command impressive dis-



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counts from publishers. Independents are also squeezed by internet bookshops which can list millions of titles while carrying tiny stocks, preferring instead to purchase only when they have a customer order. Although the browsing experience may leave quite a lot to be desired, internet shops are extremely successful at gaining market share. Amazon, for instance, increased its global sales by no less than 44% last year. An additional pressure on chain and independent bookshops alike is the fairly new Amazon Marketplace where anyone can sell books second-hand – great for those with groaning shelves, but less great for publishers' turnover and authors' royalty payments.

In recognition of the difficulties of selling through bookshops, and the increasing pressure on library budgets, many publishers have stepped up efforts to contact end-users directly. The traditional methods of sending out catalogues and other direct mail pieces, advertising in journals and newsletters (such as this one), showing books at academic conferences, and providing review and reading copies of new books have been complemented with new information channels provided by IT. All publishers worth their salt now maintain websites with detailed book information, many have regular e-mail newsletters where they flag up newly published titles and special deals, and

quite a few also use academic newsgroups such as the H-family to announce new publications and to mention relevant books on discussion strands.

Efficiency and effectiveness

This all leads to the final challenge of marketing work: gauging how to divide time and budgets between these various activities. Some cost a great deal of money, such as printing and mailing catalogues, others cost a great deal of time, such as maintaining an up-to-date website. Some are aimed mainly at known customers, such as direct mail,

others are aimed more at potential new customers, such as advertisements. But since very few orders read “Hello, I found out about this book on your website/in your catalogue/through your journal ad/from a review”, it is rarely possible to tell which of the many marketing activities resulted in an order, and thus what their relative merits are. In fact, most of the time there is no way even to tell who an order originally came from, because customer orders are often channeled through bookshops, while bookshop orders in their turn may arrive through wholesalers. So while there is a gut feeling in academic publishing that marketing directly to end-users is becoming increasingly important, it can be frustratingly difficult to locate these end-users, and equally difficult to know what medium is best used to reach them. In the end, most marketing departments end up doing as much as possible in as many areas as possible, but always with the sneaking suspicion that perhaps we never do quite enough of anything.

An author actively interested in promoting a new book can make a great difference to its success. Marketing professionals will know the potential trade customers fairly intimately, will be well aware of the annual conferences where the book should be shown, and will have a good general knowledge of the section of the academic community to which a particular title will appeal. But no-one can have as much detailed knowledge as the author about the exact people who will make decisions on whether to use a book on courses and who should therefore be offered a reading copy, or about the one-off conferences and events which will gather academics working on the exact topics that the book deals and where it should therefore be displayed. And no-one is likely to meet more potential readers than the author simply in the course of a normal working day. ■

Tips for authors

- Give your book a chance to be found in searches of library holdings and internet bookshops by ensuring that the most important key-words are part of the title or subtitle
- Help your publisher's marketing team by providing a comprehensive but concise description of the book's contents, its unique points, and its main markets
- Tell all your colleagues and contacts when the book is published, through notices, newsgroups and at meetings – word of mouth is an extremely powerful promotion tool
- Add your own comments about the book in the author section of internet bookshops such as Amazon
- Ask your publisher for fliers describing the book and how it can be ordered, and whip one out at the slightest provocation
- Use your contacts. Get journals you have peer-reviewed articles for to review your book. Get colleagues to consider your book for inclusion on recommended-reading lists. Get your campus bookshop to stock the book. Get your publisher to promote the book at the conferences you attend.
- Be creative, and be a nuisance!