

# The Beautiful Plan

~ Publishing Strategies from Patron Saint Productions ~

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## A Trip to the Bookstore

By Steve O'Keefe

Storme and I went to the bookstore one Sunday night in January. We usually shop at the Bookstar in the French Quarter, but the lighting there is cold and there's no café. When we want to treat ourselves — about once a month — we drive to the Barnes & Noble on Veteran's Boulevard. The ingress and egress is a lot less satisfying than walking the Quarter, but the destination is superb: lots of books, good lighting, fat leather chairs, clean restrooms, and Starbucks Coffee at the end of the expedition. This Sunday, we stopped at Borders first. It's three miles from the B&N.

We don't like Borders very much. They have less inventory, poorly groomed. As any bookstore manager will tell you, customers re-shelve by a rather random process; the staff needs to keep roaming the aisles, alphabetizing, removing food and beverage containers, and such things. Borders doesn't have enough staff roaming the aisles, and therefore fewer opportunities to direct patrons to their target destinations or to make recommendations on titles. And Borders' prices are higher than Barnes & Noble's on best-sellers.

We went to Borders first because I wanted to cruise the magazine rack. I'd hit at least ten stands leading up to Christmas, looking for a copy of *ForeWord Magazine* — a publication out of Traverse City, Michigan, devoted to books. Not even Tower Records' formidable zine rack — which carries *Publishers Weekly* — had it. I couldn't find the writing zines at Borders and made the mistake of asking for help. You shouldn't ask for help in

New Orleans unless you're prepared for a long story that lacks an answer.

I know enough not to ask for an obscure title such as *ForeWord*, so I asked the clerk where I could find *Granta*. It's discouraging that someone working in a bookstore does not know what *Granta* is, but of greater concern was that he didn't know where *Granta* was. Eventually, we uncovered the writers section of the magazine rack — right below monster trucks — how could I have missed it? No *ForeWord Magazine*.

I headed for the reference books while Storme went looking for Dr. Phil's latest installment. She told me in advance she wouldn't be buying at Borders, because B&N would have it at 30% off and she wanted to go there next. Two big bookstores in one night. Lord don't take me now.

### BORDERS®

I was after a Latin dictionary.

I have a New Year's resolution to learn Latin. Borders offered one shelf of guides — about four feet of Latin — roughly 50 titles. I reached for *Latin For Dummies* and stopped myself. I don't like being dressed down by an ugly spine. I pulled out *Teach Yourself Latin* because I had taught myself HTML and it was a good experience. But the book had too much instruction and not enough reference. I went for a Latin/English dictionary, but it was too cryptic and dense, printed on poor quality mass market stock. Next I tried the very friendly *Veni, Vidi, Vici*, a Harper-Collins title, but it was too casual and

so *veni, vidi, nolo emptor*, which I think translates to "I came, I saw, but I did not buy."

I left the store with Jon R. Stone's *Latin for the Illiterati*, a Routledge title. The cover is a lovely shade of Virgin Mary blue with a matte finish that is soothing to the palm and gloss highlights that dazzle the eye. More functional than a straight dictionary, it has common phrases — not just words — and is fairly easy going from Latin to English and back.

The typeface used throughout *Latin for the Illiterati* is an appropriate if utilitarian Times Roman, set in about nine-point. I have reading glasses, though, and the generous leading and ample white space made it easy to keep my place in line. The book is printed on natural stock — not white or newsprint. In fact, I believe the paper is Classic Crest Classic Natural White — the same stock you are holding now — or a near cousin. There's no colophon, so I can't verify these specs. The book has a Routledge logo on the back cover, but not on the title page — an oversight. A publisher should be proud enough of his or her logo to display it on the title page.

I like Routledge because they publish jazz books. I'm happy to see them get some of my book budget. To be honest, I bought the book because I thought it best suited my purpose and because I liked the packaging. I could have waited to buy it at Barnes & Noble — as my wife did after reading a chapter of Dr. Phil (the book was, indeed, discounted 30% at B&N and not at all at Borders), but I consummated my purchase immediately

See "Bookstore," Page 2.

## Bookstore

(Continued from Page 1)

because I doubted B&N would discount “small press” backlist, and I value my time. I didn’t want to return to Borders if I found nothing better at B&N. It’s only after I got the book home that I discovered that *Latin for the Illiterati* translates roughly to “Latin for Dummies.”

# BARNES & NOBLE

### Could I have made this purchase at Amazon.com?

Unable to feel the stock or weight of a book, unable to quickly browse its contents, I probably would have ended-up with a different book. I don’t like to browse at Amazon. I either know exactly what I want when I go there, or I’m using it as a Poor Man’s *Books in Print*.

A search for “learn latin” at Amazon returned 10 titles, including none of the books mentioned here (but several on dancing). A search for “Latin English” found 1127 matches — too many to wade through, and including only one of the books mentioned here in the top 25 matches. It was only through an affinity link on *Veni, Vidi, Vici* that I found *Latin for the Illiterati* and similar titles.

If I bought the book at Amazon, I would have saved roughly \$3.20 when discount, sales tax, and shipping charges are factored in. But then I would have had to wait a week to possess it. And I never would have chosen that book at Amazon in the first place. I probably would have bought *Veni, Vidi, Vici* and been somewhat disappointed — a common feeling resulting from my Amazon purchases. Which is why Storme and I go to *real* bookstores about once a week. And we seldom leave empty-handed.

*vive et literatus*

STEVE O'KEEFE

## Associate and Affiliate Stores

### As part of building the new Patron Saint Productions

web site, we wanted to provide an online bookstore with proceeds going to a charitable cause. An Associate store was set-up with Amazon.com and an Affiliate store with Barnes & Noble.com, with referral fees going directly to Covenant House (see related article). But before you fire-up your web browser and start shopping for the cause, a little truth-in-merchandising is in order.

In 1998, we set-up an Amazon.com Associate store for the @d:tech Convention web site. The store was a pretty good effort, containing recommendations on books related to online advertising, with all referral fees going into the @d:tech Scholarship Fund. The fund gave away a \$10,000 scholarship each year to a graduate student in marketing communications. In the first year of operation, the @d:tech store generated a whopping \$6.75 in referral fees. That’s pathetic.

Reading the fine print of the legal agreements for these stores, you realize it would take a small miracle to generate the minimum referral fee necessary to get a check (\$25 at B&N; \$100 at Amazon). People accessing Amazon.com through an associate link must purchase the item within 24 hours to generate a referral fee. At B&N, they must conclude the purchase before leaving the site. So if the consumer adds the item to his or her shopping cart or wish list and purchases it at a later date, no referral fee is earned.

There are many other features of both company’s contracts that make it very difficult to generate substantial referral fees. Both contracts contain enough boilerplate that the liability you expose yourself to by entering into these agreements will most likely outweigh any potential gain.

amazon.com.

Our hope in setting up these stores was to generate a little revenue for a worthy cause while demonstrating to publishers that, in most cases, the book-buying decision is not made at online superstores, but only finalized there. People decide what they are going to buy based on publicity and advertising: word of mouth, endorsements, recommendations, reviews, radio and TV appearances — in short, through repetition of the marketing message. This is an important point when it comes to allocating your marketing budget.

Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.com would like you to believe that all the sales racked up through their online stores are a result of buying decisions made at those stores, and you should therefore spend more of your marketing budget trying to influence shoppers at their sites. If the truth is that most buying decisions are made elsewhere, and only the transaction is processed at Amazon or B&N, then increasing your marketing at those sites should have a negligible impact on sales.

We hoped that our online bookstore would provide a little statistical evidence to guide you. But the accounting practices of these programs make it hard to know how many purchases were directly affected by Patron Saint Productions. Inquiring minds would like to know what percentage of sales at these sites come from books stored in shopping carts and wish lists and purchased at a later date. Knowing that number would allow us to use a multiplier to determine the impact of third-party recommendations on sales. While having this data wouldn’t increase the referral fees for our charity partner, it would increase our understanding of the online bookbuying process.

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