

The Beautiful Plan

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Branding Without Vomiting

By Steve O'Keefe

Pop quiz: Who is Stephen King's current publisher?

No fair booting-up Amazon or browsing your bookcase. Be honest—do you know the name of the current publisher of perhaps the highest grossing author in a generation?

If you don't know, you're not alone. I had to look up the answer. At last year's PubWest conference, I asked this same question from the podium and only two people raised their hands. Two people out of 200. When only one percent of a galley of industry professionals can identify the publisher of the best-selling author of our time, I would suggest publishers have a branding problem. Let's talk about that.



What is a brand? I've heard it described as a promise to the consumer, but I think that's putting it too strongly. A brand is more probability than promise—a consumer calculus that is built-up, torn down, or left unchanged by each encounter with the brand. A brand is a memory web of experiences—good, bad, and neutral—creating a set of expectations on the part of book buyers. Each new title you release falls into that web, whether you like it or not. Your brand will, in part, determine the prejudices with which your next title is received.

There are many layers of branding for book publishers. First is the author brand. An author emerges and is usually greeted by the public with an open

mind. The author brand is established, and readers reasonably expect that if they liked the first book, they'll like the next one. The author will have to buck the odds in future encounters with readers who did not like the first book.

Publishers who are good at sensing the marketplace will try to hold onto authors who show promise, help them develop their talent, and build the brand of the author. Stephen King's brand is so strong that anything he writes is likely to reach the *New York Times* bestseller list on the strength of his name alone. Author brands build slowly and die slowly. Serial disappointment is required to kill a brand. Most authors and publishers can avoid that decline, though ultimately the fate of the brand is in the hands of readers and, to some extent, authors.



The second level of branding is the title. *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* started off as a book, but now it's a brand for publisher HarperCollins—a stronger brand, even, than the author. Can you name him?

Mars and Venus have shape-shifted into dozens of books, audio tapes, CD-ROMs, DVDs, and live appearances, and have been translated into a multitude of languages. The brand of the title can be a curse for authors. What if you're sick of *Mars and Venus* and want to write concrete poetry? Stephen King was able to use his name to get initial acceptance for a

brand departure—a book about the craft of writing. His publisher took a risk with that title, but the risk has been rewarded because the book has found favor with readers. The author brand could have been damaged, but instead it was strengthened and expanded.



The third level of publisher branding is the imprint.

When I write "Vintage," what comes to mind? If you thought, "quality contemporary fiction in trade paperback editions," then Vintage has done a good job of establishing a brand identity. Any title released in the Vintage package will be greeted by readers with expectations that the writing is probably good and current, that the production quality will be acceptable, and that the price will be reasonable. Vintage would have to consistently disappoint readers to alter that probability matrix into one that says, "publishes mediocre authors in books filled with typos that are overpriced for the content and package." Sell-through is an important measure for strong brands; if it's not going up, you could be in trouble.



The ultimate level of branding is the brand of the publisher. Chronicle Books has one of the strongest publisher brands.

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Branding

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To me, the word “Chronicle” conjures images of impeccably-produced books, colorful and clever, filled with great artwork and photography, packaged with the highest production standards, and priced accordingly: expensive, but worth it. You can’t create a brand like that overnight. Your brand may start from your mission statement, but it is refined through a learning process based on literally millions of interactions between your brand and consumers.



Many publishers show an extreme dislike for modern branding techniques.

I admit to feeling nausea myself when encountering *Dummies* on every shelf at the bookstore, and *Chicken Soup* turns my stomach. Branding can be overdone, with the result that every title in a series is tainted and may be rejected by readers without consideration of the merits of each book. Branding is excessive when titles that don’t match the brand are forced into it—when books for stupid people are offered in categories favored by intelligent readers. If I saw *Brain Surgery For Dummies* on my doctor’s bookshelf, I would seek a second opinion.

Yet we operate in an industry where the vast majority of publisher names mean *absolutely nothing* to consumers. As publishers, we make enormous contributions to each book: an editorial process, a design motif, production standards, marketing style, and fulfillment practices. These are elements of our brands. Readers should know that there is a river running through our catalogs, and that river is our brand.

This issue of *The Beautiful Plan* has some suggestions for better branding. I welcome your comments on this important but divisive issue in book marketing today.

STEVE O'KEEFE

Correspondence



STEVE,

Two years ago we held the first Erma Bombeck Writers’ Workshop. Most attendees were local or at least within driving distance. We were told by a consultant, at that time, that you should never promote a writers’ workshop more than seven weeks in advance because writers don’t plan that far ahead.

This year, we used the type of techniques you talk about in your book. We did very little print advertising. We sold out the workshop more than two months ahead of time and have writers coming from 28 states and Canada.

We also run a writing contest each year. The contest had been run locally for four years before we got involved. Last year, we used online PR techniques and increased the number of entries from 350 to 500. We had entries from 25 states and several countries. This year we expanded our online campaign. The results: more than 1,000 entries from 49 states and 18 countries.

Our budget for both these programs is very small so we had to find ways to save money. Online PR was our best bet and it paid off.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: Tim Bete contributed a excellent piece called “Eight Ways to Promote Your Writing Online” to the article archive at our site. Since Tim isn’t a service provider in this area, the article is very fair and objective. You might mention the article in newsletters going to authors, who will find the advice helpful.



STEVE,

It’s been a long time since anything concerning publishing has blown me away, but your newsletter has. Over the past 20+ years, writing about publishing has gotten more and more dry to the point that it seems more like instructions for canning peaches mixed in with a sales pitch for Amway than something artistic. God forbid we should be doing something aesthetic, or—gasp—enjoying it... Your newsletter is a breath of fresh air in a stale, and sometimes stinky, industry.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: Since the collapse of COSMEP, *Laughing Bear Newsletter* has been my favorite periodical for publishers. Tom Person was right on top of the Internet revolution, and his columns on how publishers can best use the web deserve a Pulitzer. His newsletter is less expensive than mine, so if you like a little cynicism mixed with love of books, you might find Tom’s brand more affordable.

