

The Beautiful Plan

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The Apple Tree Theory

By Steve O'Keefe

Good things happen when you give your fruit away.

Every good book is like a ripe piece of fruit. As a publicist, it is my job to hold this fruit up in front of the hungry masses and say, "Look at this gorgeous specimen! Observe the radiant color. Inhale the intoxicating aroma. Would you like a taste?" I hand out samples and hope the audience finds it pleasing enough to buy some. I am like the snake in the Garden of Eden, offering a little knowledge and hoping someone will bite, find the fruit delicious, and share it with someone they love.

Giving Away Excerpts

Publishers are frequently concerned that I want to give away the store. "If you give people the heart of the fruit for free," they ask, "why would they buy the whole apple?" I'm just beginning a promotion for a book that features a personality assessment. I haven't read the book yet, but I can already tell I want to give away the quiz. Personality tests make great giveaways — people love to find out what "type" they are. Many people will then want to learn how to alter their type. For that, they'll have to buy the book.

In fiction and films, we look for stories that grab you from the beginning and don't let you go. Journalists are schooled, "don't bury the lead." The same is true in marketing books. You've got to put your best food forward — don't hold back — and hope the audience responds well enough that you sell out the first printing. If you have the firm flesh of ripe fruit to

offer, don't give out samples of the mealy stuff.

I did a campaign for the *New York Times* bestselling book, *RealAge*, by Dr. Michael Roizen (HarperCollins), which was built around a health questionnaire. Naturally, I wanted to give away the test. But the author's team wanted people to take the test at the



RealAge web site, so they could establish a relationship with the reader and sell them not only the book but also other products. We compromised, and I was able to offer an abbreviated version of the test. People whose interests were piqued could go to the web site for the full-featured version.

I salivated at the possibility of installing that test at WebMD, the Mayo Clinic site, and iVillage's Health Center, but my client was afraid about loss of copyright and lost web traffic. In choosing between pulling a hundred thousand visitors to the RealAge site, or putting the quiz in front of *ten million* seekers at high-traffic web sites, the RealAge team

avored the former (even though I explained that giving the quiz to high-traffic sites would increase — not decrease — traffic to their site). The funny conclusion to this story is that first, the version of the test on their site didn't work and the site crashed repeatedly from the traffic, resulting in a hundred thousand disappointed prospects. Second, a year later they ended up putting the quiz on MyFamily.com in exchange for promotional presence.

Publishers have, in my mind, an exaggerated fear of damaging their copyrights. Fear-based marketing is never any good. Consumers can smell fear as well as dogs — even online. You should give your fruit away and hope for the best. If I could, I'd give whole books away, and worry about the loss of copyright not one bit.

Giving Away Books

Thankfully, one of my mentors, Seth Godin, provided adequate proof of concept for the Apple Tree Theory, and I have less trouble convincing publishers of its merit. He gave away the full text of *Unleashing the Idea Virus* in PDF format, with a notice abdicating copyright, thereby making the hardcover version a bestseller, and auctioning paperback rights for more money than even Seth could have imagined. Good things happen when you give your fruit away.

Many publishers are paranoid about the Napsterization of their intellectual property. But Seth relishes the idea of millions of people sharing his files, because he knows that hundreds of thousands will buy his books, magazines will put his bald head on

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(*Apple Tree*, continued from page 1.)

their covers, TV talk show hosts will stalk him, and readers will flock to his speaking engagements. Afraid of Napsterization? Bring it on, baby! It's one of the best things that could happen to a book.

Almost all writers understand that the farther their articles spread, the more money they will ultimately make — even if no one pays a cent for reprint rights. That's why it always surprises me to hear authors whining about copyright infringement — it's the sincerest form of flattery. Lately, Marcia Yudkin's online discussion group *I-Content* (adventive.com) has been buzzing with authors complaining about unauthorized duplication of their works.

I've found articles of mine all over the net where they shouldn't be; rather than suing, I should be sending thank you notes. The more sites that use my stuff, the more visible I become. Once, I found someone who duplicated the entire resources section of my web site — years in the making — and stripped off my masthead, copyright notice, and even my name from the content, parading it as his own. My response? So what.

I think it's unethical not to credit the creators of content, but it's not worth getting upset about. I believe this plagiarist did more good for me than himself. People know my stuff when they see it, and his duplication helps build interest in my ideas. He stole from my past which, frankly, has no market value, and helped me build a market for my future.

Steal This Book — Please

I was involved in publishing Bob Black's breakout title, *The Abolition of Work* (Loompanics). Black included an anti-copyright notice giving up all claims to the content. The book sold well for Loompanics and, indeed, other publishers printed editions and sold them too — without paying royalties to the author. The book made Bob Black's name ubiquitous among the international counterculture. His work spread over the planet in electronic and print formats because it wasn't slowed down by copyright.

Black can cash in on that brand recognition any time he chooses. I believe Loompanics sold more copies of the book *because* it lacked copyright protection than they would have with a conventional copyright.

While working for the same publisher, I would, from time to time, receive copies of unauthorized foreign language editions of our books. My response? Touché! These pirates were proving markets for us, building future clientele by exploiting dormant rights we had no intention of ever using. Their piracy helped make markets where we had none before. So before you call the attorneys and start spending huge sums to defend your copyrights, you might consider instead cashing in on a market opportunity to which someone has opened your eyes to.

No company in human history has benefited more from copyright infringement than Microsoft. The two-faced giant deliberately produces software designed for theft by leaving out simple protections that would make their intellectual property difficult to duplicate. Microsoft knows that the more people who use the software, the more copies they will sell. They pay lip service to copyright (as do I), and they support infrequent high-profile prosecutions to make honest people think twice before pirating, but their revenues and share price have benefited enormously from tacit cooperation with thieves. You could find worse models to pattern your publishing strategy after.

Copyright — An Opposing View

And now, for one last turn in my twisted view of copyright. "To publish" means to "make public," and in a deeper, moral sense, once you put an idea out there, you no longer own it. In the United States, you can't copyright an idea — only the *expression* of an idea, and even that legal nuance is presumptuous.

I have a friend who always complains about other authors stealing his ideas. I remind him that, legally,

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that's impossible. Ideas are not property and cannot be stolen. People are entitled to read his books, learn from them, then express his ideas in their own terms, and profit from that expression. He should quit grouching and start marketing, since these authors are showing him that there's a larger audience for his ideas than he has successfully tapped.

My advice has started to sink in. My friend changed his stance from not wanting to give away anything online for fear of copyright infringement, to giving away everything. As a result, he's building a bigger audience for his future works.

To me, copyright belongs to those who know how to market it. If you, as a publisher, are not doing a good enough job of reaching those who want what you have, you deserve to see those works taken over by people who know how to find the audience you can't. The digital age is just speeding-up the process and helping us recognize the importance of packaging and distribution. As publishers, you aren't creating these works — you're taking an author's vision, packaging it in different formats, and distributing it to markets. Which brings me back to the apple tree.

To me, a publishing house is like an apple tree. It produces these wonderful books — the fruit of the tree — enticing the audience with a lovely jacket to pick the fruit, taste it, take it home, share it, tell others where they found it. These books contain ideas — seeds which are spread far and wide by those who walk off with the apples. Writers eat these apples, and the ideas they consume combine with seeds of thought gathered from a multitude of sources. These ideas are digested, ultimately deposited as manuscripts at the base of the publishing tree, where they are absorbed by publishers, merged with pulp, encased in a colorful jacket, and offered to the public in yet another season. So it goes.

The lessons of the apple tree are that, as publishers, we need to work harder to find ways to give our fruits away, confident we will be rewarded with the raw materials we need — money and manuscripts — to produce another season of splendid fruit.