

The Beautiful Plan

~ Publishing Strategies from Patron Saint Productions ~

Issue #9 ~ First Quarter 2004

Oh, Canada!

Workin' in a Winter Wonderland

by Steve O'Keefe

I went to Toronto in July to give a half-day seminar about online publicity for the Organization of Book Publishers of Ontario. The morning seminar was followed by 10 one-on-one consulting sessions over the next day and a half. The third consultation was with Tim Inkster, publisher of The Porcupine's Quill, a literary press. He smiled, shook my hand, and said something like this:

"Do you know why I'm here? Because they handed me this check for ten thousand dollars when I walked in the door. I don't know what qualifies you to tell me about my business, and I don't care. It doesn't matter what you say. It's a little game we play. Even though it's Canadian money, it means a lot to me. That's the only reason I'm here."

Then he showed me the check, smiled, and sat down. Welcome to Canada, where the rules of publishing are a little different than in The States.



A Meeting of Minds

I told Mr. Inkster I was here for exactly the same reason. The Government of Canada had given me a check that morning for three thousand dollars—American—and now I had to sit

through 10 one-hour sessions and dispense advice to publishers whose names



I first learned in the airport waiting for my connecting flight.

Everything I knew about these publishers came from the grant applications that arrived the day before I left New Orleans. I did not have their catalogs. I had not seen their books. Each publisher had to prepare a written proposal explaining how they would use the ten grand. I had made notes on the grant applications to guide me through the consultations. I set aside my notes and chatted-up Mr. Inkster. We got along famously.

The Porcupine's Quill is typical of the mostly small, literary publishers who had won the BookMark grants and a free consultation with yours truly. That is, the press is stubbornly individualistic, quirky, publishing works that please the managers or staff—it's hard to pin job titles on most of these folks because their publishing houses often lack formal organization as corporations or nonprofits—rather than publishing books that please the market.

The typical Canadian small press is proudly atypical. The publishers I consulted with ranged from a mom and pop textbook publisher to a loose fiction collective publishing avant garde poetry.

The Road to Toronto

Fortunately, my path to this consulting marathon with our neighbors to the north was smoothed by a couple tours of duty at the Book Publishers Association of Alberta's annual conference in Banff. One question that came up frequently in Banff was how Canadian publishers could sell more books into the great American market.

My answer always began, "First of all, stop considering yourselves 'Canadian' publishers and start thinking of yourselves as publishers of quality fiction or nonfiction seeking a worldwide audience for your books." In my best consultant's brogue, I intoned that American publishers by and large do not consider themselves "American." They see themselves as publishers, period, in search of readers and buyers wherever they might reside.

That sounds good, but it's not quite on the mark. Canadian publishers have been educating this consultant ever since, and I had learned a thing or two before I got behind closed doors at the

(Continued on Page 2.)



(Continued from Page 1.)

offices of the Ontario Arts Council in Toronto.

Canadian publishers are subsidized. They have to portray themselves as “Canadian” publishers in order to qualify for support from the granting authorities. Their books must contain Canadian content—written by Canadian authors, printed on Canadian paper by Canadian presses. They are compelled to hoist the Maple Leaf to keep the sugar flowing. And, it appears to me, they must also look needy, almost helpless without the assistance of all-powerful Ottawa. To follow my advice, they would have to become schizophrenic, displaying their patriotic but impoverished side to the state, and their business side to The States. Most of the publishers with whom I consulted do not have a business side.

No Business, As Usual

One publisher I consulted with promised to spend half of their 10 grand—Canadian—to hire their first part-time publicist. Their grant application included a title list of more than 150 books.

“Do you mean to tell me you have one hundred and fifty books in print and you’ve never had a publicist,” I said, looking above my reading glasses with my best consultant’s glare.

“Oh no,” my charge replied. “We have over three hundred books in print.”

“How does anyone know your books exist,” I asked in disbelief.

“There’s a complete list on our Web site,” she replied.

This publishing house had survived for over a quarter of a century without sending galleys to reviewers, without sending bound books to the media, without tours, without follow-up phone calls, with almost no distribution, without sales reps. Oh, Canada!

It gets worse. Books were announced in this publisher’s catalog that would not appear in print for years. The company was suffocating in manuscripts, all in various stages of preparation, with no apparent publication schedule.

Many Canadian publishers find marketing distasteful, and they are pessimistic about the prospects for “Canadian” books to find readers outside their borders. Indeed, few see any hope for

“Do you know why I’m here? Because they handed me this check for ten thousand dollars when I walked in the door.”

sales outside their province; some see nothing beyond the city limits. This mostly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Documentation and Education

At the same time, the Canadian funding authorities require a degree of planning and reporting uncommon in America. In the U.S., almost all self-publishers ignore their prospects for profit, fail to budget, and can function only as long as there is room on the credit card. Subsidized publishers in Canada are required to prepare annual budgets along with detailed sales reports. It’s part of the game they play. The result of these requirements is that the Canadian government prepares statistics on the publishing industry that are far better than any numbers you’ll find in the U.S.

A couple years ago I tried in vain to find out how big the market is for CD-ROMs produced by U.S. publishing houses. I tried Simba, BISG, Huenefeld—no one had the splits breaking out this information. Ditto the percentage of publishing revenues derived from the sale of foreign language rights. All of the studies in the U.S. are voluntary and most companies do not welcome close scrutiny of their financials. But Canadian publishers are compelled to provide this data. The Canadian Publishers’ Council Web site provides a cornucopia of sales data that can help guide any publisher willing to do the currency conversion (<http://www.pubcouncil.ca>).

The Canadians also value education more than their colleagues in the States. Why? Because the government pays for it. Learning to become a better publisher is subsidized in Canada; houses are re-

(Continued on Page 3.)

Canadian Publishing Research Sites

Department of Canadian Heritage

Survey of Book Publishing and Exclusive Agents

http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/ac-ca/progs/padie-bpidp/pubs/2000_2001/index_e.htm

This document is a statistical analysis of book publishing in Canada. It contains a wealth of information about the revenues and expenses of Canadian publishers. Very useful for budgeting and comparing operations to averages based on a large pool of information.

Statistics Canada

<http://www.statcan.ca/english/search/>

This site contains a wealth of statistical information about the book publishing industry in Canada gleaned from hundreds of sources. Your best bet is to use the search feature at this site for “book publishing” because the documents are scattered throughout different categories such as “culture” and “trade.”

Simon Fraser University Library

Canadian Publishers’ Records

<http://www.lib.sfu.ca/researchtools/databases/dbofdb.htm>

DatabaseAbbreviation=cprd

“Describes over 1,400 archival collections beginning before 1995 that relate to the history of secular English-language book publishing in Canada. It includes records of publishing companies, authors, editors, and organizations.” This database is open to the public and is useful for researching the activities of Canadian publishers and authors.

(Continued from Page 2.)

imbursed for a portion of educational expenses. That's why you'll see so many Canadians at U.S. publishing conferences such as PubWest, and so few Americans at Banff. And that's also why you'll find me teaching in Canada—because they believe in compensating consultants, unlike America, where we are expected to write and teach for free, in exchange for the exposure we get. (See Gary Michael Smith's article on this topic in this issue.) Which is why so many American seminars sound like sales pitches. That routine doesn't fly Air Canada.

Bond Bond

Despite his opening salvo, Mr. Inkster from *The Porcupine's Quill* had come prepared for our consultation. He'd had read an interview with me at BookZone that he found amusing. In that piece, I waxed eloquent about the tactile pleasures of Crane's Crest cotton bond. It turns out that *The Porcupine's Quill* uses a signature laid cotton bond that is manufactured exclusively for the press. We bonded.

Mr. Inkster thanked me for showing some sensitivity to the unique character of Canadian publishing in my morning presentation by invoking the names of Canadian authors (Douglas Coupland, Bill Atkinson), Canadian publishers (Lone Pine), and Canadian media outlets (*The Globe and Mail*). One part of the grant application required applicants to speculate on the results gener-



ated by their 10 thousand dollar bequests. In my morning presentation, I railed against the growing demand for sales forecasts from publicists. Our job is to expose books to the target market. We can't be sure the cash register will ring and we can't say how many times it will ring, although we know for certain

that bell will not sound unless someone knows the book exists.

LONE PINE PUBLISHING

So I urged my Canadian brethren to document the *process*—not the *results*—and to send that documentation to Ottawa as proof of performance, in hopes that the tap would remain open through another funding cycle. Mr. Inkster thought this strategy “brilliant.” He had learned something he could use to keep the grants coming, and that was more than he expected to get out of his morning with me.

Go To Canada!

The balance of trade was not equal. What I gleaned from Mr. Inkster and the other Canadian publishers was worth

“Do you mean to tell me you have one hundred and fifty books in print and you've never had a publicist?”

more than what they got from me. If you want to be reminded what publishing is all about, go to Canada. There you will find houses driven, not by profits, but by passion.

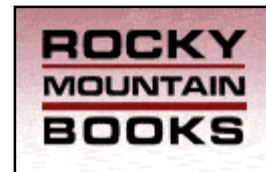
The staff of Canadian publishing houses is poorly paid—if paid at all. They're in publishing because of the “psychic benefits.” They help unknown authors get established. The minute they start to make the cash register ring, their best authors are lured by American publishers with big advances and fat promotional budgets.

Canadians care, passionately, about the production values associated with their books: quality paper, fancy endpapers, superior binding, exquisite graphic design, transcendental typography. I'm so sick of American publishers who give no thought whatsoever to finding a design motif that reinforces the editorial message of their books, of publishers who think poor quality laser printing cheaply reproduced on see-through

stock and glued into a clipart cover is somehow an adequate package to convey an author's ideas. Canadians publish a book because they believe in the editorial—not because they think it will sell. They value the arts of editing and production, even if they lack the conviction and resources to ensure each book has a chance to find an audience.

Due to the peculiarities of funding, Canadian publishing is, indeed, “Canadian.” It displays a reverence for nature, a pride of place that helps books sell well locally. The books reflect the small size of Canadian markets, so geographically dispersed that no wholesaler has been able to make a go of it in the provinces. They encompass a diversity as broad as the native peoples, ex-Europeans, and expatriates that populate Canada's shores. Just as her husky hockey players glide gracefully over ice on a few centimeters of steel, so Canada's publishers produce graceful books on razor-thin margins. It is a joy to watch them play, even though they seldom score.

The things that Canadians fail to see as well as this consultant is that the professionalism and concern they bring to their books, their naturalism and nativism, is something readers worldwide hunger for. Who buys Rocky Mountain Book's hiking guides to the Canadian Rockies? Foreign travelers, mostly. Who buys Lone Pine's sumptuously illustrated field guides? Nature lovers the world over. Who buys Margaret Atwood, Douglas Coupland, Michael Ondaatje? Anyone who appreciates a story well told.



What's the secret to selling Canadian books into the American market? How about taking the bushel off your light and sharing some of that midnight sun with your culture-deprived brothers and sisters to the south?

