



# LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 133

## Why Do You Want To Publish? *(continued)*

who see publishing as their way into the business world and an opportunity to be independent and make a good living.

Publishing competitively these days is an expensive gamble. In 1976 I could publish 1,000 books for \$600 and sell them for \$2-\$5 apiece, or \$5 for a magazine subscription. Now it can cost \$2-\$5 just to produce each copy of a book, plus much more for promotion and marketing – then postage is a couple bucks apiece to send books to reviewers, and of course you can't get a book into a bookstore or newsstand without a distributor. Every step of the way makes the book more expensive.

The possibility of making money on a book is much more realistic for a publisher today than it was in the late 1970's. The market is larger. Independently published books are better produced and more widely accepted by the public. If you can get a large distributor to handle your book or magazine, it will be on more bookshelves. But, the risk is huge. You've got to have the right publication at the right time in the right market right away.

There are easier ways to start out. I hear from college students who want to start a magazine at least once a week. I invariably advise them to find a magazine or newspaper in their area and try to get on as an intern. Internships can earn college credit, build the person's credibility when it comes to finding investors and advertisers, and open the student's eyes to the reality of being in business.

Beginning book publishers can start out with eBooks or publish-on-demand books that don't require a big investment, but can give them a feeling for the direction they'd like to take when they are ready to invest in a printed book project.

Anyone interested in publishing can start with a website and do a book or magazine later if their site arouses enough interest. I've said many times before that having a website is a great way to promote or sell a book, but the opposite can also be true – there have been numerous examples of books being published as a natural extension of a popular website.

But why do you want to publish? That's the ultimate question. Publishing is a primal urge within human beings. When a caveman drew stick figures representing a bison hunt on a sandstone wall, that was publishing. We have a need to share what we know, what we think, what we feel. And we have a need to preserve those things in some way so others can learn from them or marvel at them. It may be by word of mouth, through stories or songs, drawings, letters, books or magazines, but it all comes down to communication.

As publishing became more sophisticated, it became necessary and desirable for the publisher to be reimbursed for their time and trouble. And in many cases, profit became the motive, but that's okay because it encouraged more communication and some of it has enriched our lives.

But if you want to publish, don't feel like you have to do it like everyone else. If you can afford to publish and promote a trade paperback for \$20,000, great. If you have the resources and stamina, you'll probably make your money back. But if you just want to lay down your family history or share your poetry or preserve some recipes, you run off a few dozen copies on a \$100 bubble jet printer. Two of my most treasured volumes are family histories done by two of my sisters and bound in three-ring binders. It would be nice if they were bound books, but then again they'd never have been published.

Don't be restricted by today's technologies. I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "But I can't use a computer." Well, don't use a computer. There were a number of good books written and published before personal computers. Type it on a typewriter and photocopy it, or hand write it even. Just do it.

Here's an example of one of the e-mails I have gotten that is typical. The writer is starting a magazine called *Full*: "I read your web page and I loved the information I received. I would like to know where would one go for grants and loans to get this *Full* project off the ground. I have laid out my blueprint. Now I need to know how to get the advertisers as well as the financial backing other than my life savings. I know that will not be enough."

How can I answer that? What is *Full* full of, and why do you want to do it? So I have to go through a maze of assumptions. If *Full* is a literary magazine, go here, but if it is a regional magazine, go there. If it is an entertainment magazine, as are most are that people want to start up lately, you need to do this, but if it is a trade magazine you need to do that. How old are you? What do you do? What do you want to do? Are you doing this by yourself, or will you have a staff? Paid or volunteer? Are you going to write it yourself or bring in writers? How will you pay them?

It is likely the person writing the e-mail does have specific goals and plans, but they have a hard time expressing those plans in 100 words or less. They've thought everything out, they have a rough plan, but they haven't gone through the motions of writing it out.

That's going to have to be their first challenge in getting their publishing company underway. If

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## Why Do You Want To Publish? *(continued)*

you can't tell me what you want to do, how are you going to explain it to readers, subscribers, distributors, advertisers, investors, suppliers, partners, or employees?

You need to articulate your vision, and the most common way to do that in business is with a mission statement. This is a 25-100 word statement that encapsulates what your business is, what you want it to do, and how you intend to get there.

Granted, many companies have turned their mission statements into meaningless propaganda to be used for self-promotion. I think there must be an MBA class in writing long, lavish statements that say nothing whatsoever. That's not the purpose of a mission statement.

The mission statement is a tool to help you define your business and what you want from it. It doesn't have to be profound. This would be a good start for a magazine: "*Horn* magazine takes a fresh look French horn players with profiles of young musicians and interviews with professionals. With aggressive marketing to school and collegiate music programs, we project growth of 15% per year."

That is by no means a great mission statement, but it is a start, and much better than, "I want to start a magazine called *Horn*. Now what?"

Once *Horn* has published an issue and tried promoting it, the publisher will take what they've learned and revise the mission statement. And they'll continue to do so throughout the life of the magazine. The same applies to book publishing and any other business for that matter.

One reason to do a mission statement is to keep you honest. With magazines, especially, it is easy as time goes on to lose sight of

your original purpose. You start signing the wrong advertisers or printing the wrong articles and gradually you move away from your subscribers. Then they, inevitably, leave you. Your mission statement is a touchstone to help you keep focused on what is important to you and your business.

Once the mission statement is done, you need to work on a business plan and budget. A business plan is just an outline of what you want to accomplish and how to get there without expending all your resources along the way.

Your business plan should project expenses and goals as far as you can foresee them – at least a year, preferably several. And be realistic in your expectations, The Enron and dot-com disasters happened because of exaggerated projections.

The plan is what you'll have to present to loan officers, advertisers, and anyone else you want to invest their money or services to your endeavor. It is absolutely essential if you hope to win grants or get loans to help you get started and support you along the way.

You wouldn't start a garden without knowing how much space you have for planting, the soil conditions, what kind of plants you want to raise, which will do well in your area, and how much money you have to spend.

If you didn't pay attention to those things, you'd probably end up with an expensive, dead garden. The best of intentions won't make tulips bloom in the desert.

The same is true in publishing. Wanting to do it is not enough. You've got to look at why you want to do it. The gardener could say, "I want to raise tulips to make my yard colorful." Well, do some research and plant flowering cactus instead. Or move to another part of the country. You'll have better results and reach the same goal. ●

## Laughing Bear Inbox

*(continued)*

'zine' that was later adopted by the larger self-publishing and small press community.

"Yeah, I know, it's only science fiction, but I like it...."

"Thanks for the informative site!!"

– Steve Miller

*Liaden Universe*, co-author – <http://www.korval.com>

• • •  
"Hello,

"My friends and I want to start a free music mag. We are going to pay all the costs out of pocket but are at a loss about how to get the magazine printed. At first we thought that going to Kinkos would suffice, however we calculated the cost to be staggering. we want about 1,000 copies and we were wondering if you knew of a cheaper way to get our mag printed."

– Anonymous

*"For 1,000 copies, you will do better going with a regular printer than photocopying. Try some local print shops and get estimates. You'll probably get a better price from a small independent shop than from one that belongs to a chain since you can bargain a little. Repeat business is very important to them, so tell the printer you intend for this to be a ongoing relationship with them and they will probably give you a better price. They can also be helpful with your layout – are your margins big enough, did you leave enough room in the middle for the gutter (center fold), etc. Remember, if you have any images that bleed – in other words, ink is going to have to go all the way out to the edge of the paper, it will cost you a lot more. If you have them fold and staple the magazines, it may cost more, but you may save enough on printing to pay for it.*

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## Laughing Bear Inbox

(continued)

*It'll save a lot of time, you won't have to buy special equipment, and it will look better."*

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"What is your thought about buying an existing magazine?"

"What should the price be?"

Thanks, Jim Herrera

*"It depends on how healthy the magazine is and why the previous owner wants out. Buying an existing magazine that has a reasonable circulation and, more importantly, a strong rates of subscriber renewal could save you a lot of startup costs and time. You need to have all the circulation numbers, from renewals to new subscribers, for the past few years.*

*"You need to find out the liabilities of the magazine – outstanding debts and loans; contracts with suppliers, advertisers, distributors, legal actions, and even writers that you are going to have to be responsible for if you become the new owner; real estate or leases, condition of equipment, warehousing for back issues. These are all factors that could cause you problems.*

*"You also need to find out what the magazine's assets are. That could also include contracts with writers and advertisers, as well as any real estate, equipment, and inventory.*

*"You need to take a look at the business plan for the magazine and tax returns, and ideally have a lawyer and/or accountant look at them too. This is kind of like buying a very expensive used car. It may look nice on the outside, but it's what's under the hood that counts in the long run.*

*"As to a fair price, you need to weigh the liabilities against the assets and especially the circulation figures. Then based on its current condition and rate of return, decide how long you can*

*wait for it to turn a profit for you. In overly simple terms, if it costs \$100,000 and has shown a profit (not gross income) of \$25,000 a year, it would take four years before you see a cent. That's assuming you pay cash and continue to run it as it has been run in the past – no loans, boost in marketing, or other new expenses.*

*"That may sound expensive, but startup costs can be proportionally much more for a brand new startup that has to build a market from scratch. A new magazine can easily spend five years losing money before you'll know with certainty whether it has a viable, long term market.*

*"There have been very few overnight successes in the magazine industry that have survived the first few years. Look at John Kennedy, Jr.'s George – a huge success a first, but ultimately a huge bust. And The Atlantic and Vanity Fair have been resurrected every decade or so since time began. Even Life and The Saturday Evening Post have been around the block a few times.*

*"You need to look closely at why the magazine is being sold. If the current owner is retiring due to age or health, that's one thing. But if they are trying to sell because they see a decline coming, that's another. The only way you can be assured of their motives is to do some research. If they don't want to show you the information you need to establish a fair price, walk away. Same goes if they try to rush you into a commitment. If they need money fast, something is definitely wrong." •*

## Announcements

• **The Poetry Connection** (<http://www.ThePoetryConnection.com>) is a newsletter listing editors and publishers, as well as other resources and information for poets.

• **Writing To Be Seen** (Bob Grumman and Crag Hill, eds.; 1708 Hayworth Rd., Port Charlotte, FL 33952; \$24.00 ppd) is the title of volume one of the first major American anthology of visual and related poetics in 30 years – not *Waiting To Be Seen*, as I erroneously reported in issue 132.

• **The Proofreaders' Proofreader** (Jessica Keet, 1530 S. Saltair Ave., Ste. 11, Los Angeles, CA 90025; <http://www.proofreadersproofreader.com>; phone/fax 310-826-8310) is a professional proofreading service. Contact Jessica for a free quote on proofreading or copy editing.

• **Paragon Prepress Inc.** (Shailander Malhotra, N-31, Kalkaji, New Delhi-110019 India; phone: 91-11-622-4451; <http://www.paragonpress.com>) provides services for publishers from typesetting, layout and design to computer graphics.

• **Keith Larson** (Keithtoons@yahoo.com) is a magazine cartoonist who has done illustrations for a self-publisher and would like to do more books.

Advertising: Insert ads, in the form of flyers to be inserted in newsletter mailings, are welcome. Send 200 copies of the ad with \$50, and the ad will be mailed with the next issue of the newsletter. Contest and other events or promotions that solicit money in the form of reading or other entry fees will not be accepted.

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