

The Beautiful Plan

~ Publishing Strategies from Patron Saint Productions ~

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“My New Publishing Technique is Unstoppable!”

(The Skinny on BEA and PMAU)

by Steve O'Keefe

Skinny is the right word for this year's slimmed-down Book Expo America, the annual booksellers bacchanal held May 30 through June 1 at the Los Angeles Convention Center. Despite the growing use of wheeled luggage for storing tchotchkes, there was ample room to maneuver the aisles, unsold floor space where one could sit and sort, and people available to answer questions — even at the most popular booths.

PMAU

Preceding the BEA, Publishers Marketing Association holds its annual Publishers University (PMAU), a two-day event that includes the Benjamin Franklin Awards. This year, PMAU offered a whopping 69 educational sessions divided into nine tracks.

The credentials of presenters at PMAU are stunning, including such industry luminaries as publishing attorneys Jonathan Kirsch and Ivan Hoffman, consultants Tom Woll and Howard Fisher, publicists Kate Bandos and Alice Acheson, marketing gurus John Kremer and Shel Horowitz, publishers Pam Art and Dominique Raccah — the list really goes on and on.

If you've not been to Publishers University in a few years, you really owe it to yourself to attend. The cost is extremely reasonable, and the talent can't be beat. Under PMAU's standard arrangements, presenters are not compensated, nor are their expenses covered. They are all volunteers, and there

are strict rules against using a presentation as a sales pitch. My experience at PMAU is that sales pitches rarely erupt and, when they do, presenters are seldom invited back.

One downside to PMAU is that the programming is threatened by its own success. Many PMA members have grown from single-title operations to substantial publishing houses, thanks in no small part to participating in PMA programs. These publishers are ready for post-graduate work, while Publishers University is still focused on beginners. It's hard to talk about licensing book characters when there are people in the room who don't understand how to register copyright. One solution



Dummie and Dummier do Hollywood

might be to offer graduate courses restricted to those who pass the prerequisites or have equivalent industry experience.

A second problem with PMAU is the use of multi-presenter panels. Most sessions run for 90 minutes. With time set aside at the beginning for introductions and at the end for questions, each presenter on a 3-person panel gets 20

minutes. That's long enough to sketch, not teach. Some topics lend themselves to overviews where multiple perspectives are welcome, but most topics benefit from an in-depth presentation by a single speaker imparting the learning of a lifetime.

BEA

By comparison, Book Expo America's educational program was a real disappointment. Educational sessions are held Thursday (before the Expo) and Saturday. I attended several Thursday events and they felt more like infomercials than training sessions. The sessions were used primarily as sales pitches. There was no use of technology in the sessions I attended, such as Power Point presentations, live Internet feeds, or even educational handouts. I talked with a book editor from Minnesota who had the same general impressions I did, except she attended sessions I hadn't and reported they were even more commercial.

If you've always wondered whether BEA's educational “conferences” are worth paying for, my advice is to skip them unless you get a strong recommendation for a specific speaker from someone who attended in previous years. The expo itself is educational enough.

BOOKSELLER BUZZ

The most educational sessions I had at BEA were talking to publishers and booksellers on the floor. The news I kept hearing — no surprise here — is

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that sales are down, down, down. Business book publishers were glum, with many of them paring down the number of titles scheduled for fall release. Travel book publishers were stunned. The one-two punch of September 11 and SARS may prove to be knock-out blows for some travel publishers.

The BEA's Bookseller Buzz forum, where six esteemed editors were supposed to preview two books from the fall, turned into a marketing session for current releases. I can't blame the editors. The event was televised on C-SPAN, and while hardly a ratings threat to *Law & Order*, why would you want to talk about books that no retail customer can purchase when you've got good books rotting in the warehouse?

What I *can* fault at least one editor for is her choice of books to promote. Julie Grau, co-publisher of Riverhead Books, picked *My New Fighting Technique is Unstoppable* as one of her top two fall books. Several issues ago, I ran a satire in *The Beautiful Plan* about the shift to graphic novels as a way to dumb down books enough to sell to a larger audience. Unfortunately, that satire is starting to sound like the new publishing paradigm.

My New Fighting Technique consists of crude clip art cartoons with lame and profane "thought bubbles." The book is supposed to be some sort of hip hop sensation. Please, say it ain't so. Riverhead is the publisher of the Dalai Lama's *Art of Happiness*, although it appears they're closer in philosophy to Suze Orman's *The Courage to Be Rich* by bravely publishing ugly, stoopid books in hopes of out-dumming the dummies, insulting the intelligence of idiots, and finding a new bottom for bottom-feeding bestsellers.

I understand *why* publishers produce the kinds of works that dominate bestseller lists (cat humor, romance novels, dieting books) — I just don't understand why a publisher would hype such a book at BEA Bookseller Buzz or why they would try to pass it off as cutting edge. This is like a serious jazz musician working a little rap into the

act; there's nothing about it that feels genuine.

THE BEST PARTIES

In keeping with the economy, BEA parties seemed more subdued this year. I did my best to help end the recession, however, by spending more on cab fare getting to Hollywood parties than I spent airfare getting to L.A.

Bonus Books held a theme party at the legendary Whisky a Go-Go to promote *Straight Whisky*, a book about the Sunset Strip's three most famous nightclubs. The mismatch between a youthful venue and older crowd was sometimes awkward. Annoying bouncers kept forcing patrons out of the aisles, clashing with the spirit of the club where stage diving was born. The highlight of the night came when author Erik Quisling took the stage and played a set of covers.

Justin Charles & Company threw a lovely party for *Sex in the South* author Suzi Parker at the adult products store, Grand Opening, on Santa Monica Boulevard. The event was a tasteful mixture of food, brew, toys, and talk. The only missing ingredient: excerpts from Suzi's manuscript.

SCB Distribution sponsored a fete at the cafe des artists for all the pierced people at BEA and their square friends. There were way more beautiful people than could fit in the club, so I hooked up with two Lonely Planet employees who got me into PGW's party at the El Ray. Even though the crowd was older and the bar was cash, everyone was dancing and looked happy.

THE BEST PRESS KIT

This issue of *The Beautiful Plan* is devoted to the subject of press kits. My pick for best press kit at BEA goes to Hara Publishing of Lynwood, Washington.

I know very little about Hara. I didn't visit their booth, and their web site wasn't at press time. All I can tell you is they do a darn nice job on press kits. Kits are presented in a simple twin pocket portfolio, with a front cover slick glued to the outside of the portfolio. Inside, Hara glued the back cover of the book to the left-hand pocket. This is an

effective way to display back cover copy, and has the added advantage of helping hold in the papers behind it.

The right-hand pocket held three sheets of paper: a fact sheet with cataloging info, a press release, and a profile (which should have been titled "author profile" for clarity). These sheets were trimmed so that the titles cascaded (see Alice Acheson's article on *Folding Techniques* on page 4). Hara used different colors of paper stock to help each item stand out. A very impressive effort for a small publishing house.

Honorable mentions for best press kit go to Pariyatti for their golden portfolio folders, Candlewick Press for their clasp envelope kits (which didn't lose their contents in transit), and The Huntington for their gorgeous gold foil stamping on an ecru folder.

I won't tell you who owned the worst press kit in the BEA press room. It was a large, multinational publishing company, and their "kit" consisted of poor quality, black and white photocopies of the catalog held together with massive black manuscript clips: ugly and dysfunctional.

THE BEST NEWS RELEASE

The "best news release" award goes to Solters & Digney Public Relations for their release promoting the Jodere Group. The retro-style release referred to the BEA as the book industry's "premier pow wow" and author Joshua Ortega as "the new 'it boy' of the science fiction world." The writing offered lovely alliteration, as in "palette of publishing projects," and concluded with the nicely symmetrical tag line, "new age solutions for age-old problems."

Another reason Solters & Digney get the nod for best news release is *they sent it snail mail*. I received dozens of e-mail news releases, and they were almost uniformly bad: way too long, loaded with graphics, poorly formatted, with distribution lists packed into the TO field or CC field instead of the blind copy or BCC field. Obviously, there is still a large, untapped market for my book, *Complete Guide to Internet Publicity*.