

# The Beautiful Plan

~ Publishing Strategies from Patron Saint Productions ~

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## BEA2004: of Blogs & Dogs

by Steve O'Keefe

Book Expo America was a real treat this year. Held in the heart of the heartland (Chicago), the Expo took on a practical, business-like tone, without the hijinks and hype of Los Angeles or the cynicism of New York. Most publishers were upbeat about sales, having trimmed their staffs and inventories in recent years, thus preparing themselves for profits.

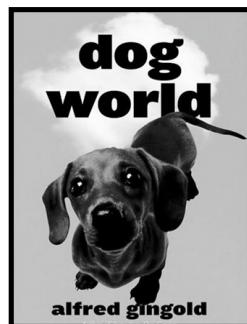
The Expo was more compact in Chicago; I could walk the breadth of the main floor in 10 minutes. The floor was less crowded than usual, with fewer attendees and a couple empty booths where one could sort catalogs. The weather was beautiful and showcased Chicago nicely, making up for the Baghdadish wasteland between downtown and the convention center.

Even the parties seemed more subdued, infused with the strains of South-side blues. If I were choosing a distributor based on the fetes they hosted, I would have to go with Independent Publishers Group (IPG). Their tasteful courtyard soiree at the Chicago Museum of Art was simply elegant, from the orchid sprays gracing every table to the jazz quartet swinging soulful tunes into the darkening dusk.

### Publishing Has Gone to the Dogs

The biggest trend I noticed this year is that it seems like every publisher has a dog book on the fall list. Grace Associates showed me *Dog Book*, by Emily Weinstein. Avalon Travel Publishing offered new installments in *The Dog*

*Lover's Companion* series. If you're in travel publishing, and you don't have at least one book on sojourning with animal companions, you have missed the boom. Wiley has a half-dozen new dog books through its Howell Book House imprint.



pile carpeting. I ran into a corgi, a collie, and a chihuahua, this last at the Gibbs Smith booth promoting, I believe, a cookbook! This all culminated in a canine carnival at the BowTie Press booth to help launch the new Pampered Pooch series, starting with *Dog Parties*.

The book publishing industry is almost completely driven by baby boomers right now—they are at the perfect age for buying lots of books. Dogs are the new children. Trust me, I know whereof I speak. My only daughter got married in May, with a standard bouquet even though my wife says that dachshunds are now the hot fashion accessory for brides. Like many one- and two-child couples, we finished child rearing too early. How can we fulfill our genetic imperative to parent? With Peanut, of course—our new passenger compartment compatible companion.

The number of dogs in attendance at the Expo also seemed to be on the rise.

People aren't the only creatures who appreciate those vendors who pay for plush

Boomers aren't just breeding dog book sales. Real estate books are almost as good an investment as real estate itself. This trend isn't simply the result of the dot com meltdown and stock market volatility. A few years ago, Congress virtually eliminated the capital gains tax on the sale of houses occupied by owners for two consecutive years. This provides an incredible tax-free road to riches which I have yet to see a book about: *serial homesteading*. Young, childless couples (or older empty-nesters) buy a house, fix it up, then sell it two years later. Look for more books dealing with investment properties, landlording, vacation properties, and buying property in foreign countries (part of a growing global perspective that is opening the door for all kinds of new titles).

In cookbooks and health & fitness titles, if it isn't low-carb, it's not getting shelf space. Who knows how long this trend will last? At least until people tire of the privations of Atkins and put those pounds back on.

In Internet books, there are two new areas where readers are hungry for good information: adword marketing and blogs. McGraw-Hill has a real winner with Andrew Goodman's *Winning Results with Google AdWords*. Due in September, it's the only book on the subject in Amazon's database. With Google's successful IPO, expect to see as many Google books in the coming years as there are eBay books today.

Publishers were proud that, for the first time since Watergate, *books* were

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leading the political discussion in the USA. Proving the point was an appearance by Bill Clinton promoting *My Life*, which brought cash registers to life for booksellers. Michael Moore briefly shifted the focus back to broadcast media. And then there are the blogs—again, that word—trying to make sure that this is the last year that any media as slow as book publishing has an impact on political discourse.

### Publishing Has Gone to the Blogs

One of my highlights at the BEA was getting to spend the best part of a day with a personal hero, marketing guru John Kremer. After an intense Wednesday teaching two classes at PMA's Publishers University, I spent Thursday with Kremer escalating and de-escalating through BEA's educational tracks.

The program was better this year, with fewer marketing pitches masquerading as education. I joined Kremer at the end of Seth Godin's session with Jay "Guerilla" Levinson. Godin was promoting his new book, *Free Prize Inside*, and praising his recently-completed blog tour. Godin's keen instinct is frustrating at times: he always gets there first, before the field is crowded, and the rest of us have to fight for space in channels he opened.

Godin wrote *E-Mail Addresses of the Rich and Famous* in 1994. By 1995, the rich and famous figured out how to keep their e-mail addresses private. He wrote *Permission Marketing* in 1999, ushering-in the era of opting-in, a strategy which is now all but used up. In 2000, he brought forth *Unleashing the Idea Virus*, and showed publishers that you could sell more bound books by giving away the e-book. Now you can't give 'em away. An early adopter of blog tours, Godin has probably gotten as much out of them as anyone ever will. Even in an age of instant publishing, you need to be inside Godin's bald head, because the opportunities he writes about dry up almost as fast as the ink that carries them.

After lunch, Kremer and I attended—what else—a panel on blogging, moderated by none other than Seth

Godin's former boss, Michael Cader, the chef behind Publishers Lunch. The discussion itself contained all the elements that makes it hard to like blogs: smug, self-congratulatory, snide, all with no visible revenue streams. Blog-masters spend inordinate amounts of time grooming these interactive diaries for little or no pay.

Both John and I wanted to know whether blogs would replace the dysfunctional technology of electronic newsletters, which have been crippled by spam filters (e-zines were probably one of Seth Godin's got-there-first ideas). Neither of us can see how blogs can avoid the same fate, and nothing we heard convinced us otherwise.

For what it's worth, here's my take on blogs. They are part of a shift to a more opinionated media resulting from Internet technology, reflected in the appetite for Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Why buy a whole newspaper when 75 percent of it is stuff you're not interested in—especially if you can get your favorite columnists for free online?

For the most part, people do not want "unbiased" media coverage; they want media that shares their personal bias. And the more outrageously expressed that opinion is, the more traffic the blog gets, the more attention the columnist gets, and that's what they're working for—since they aren't working for money (unless, of course, they can leverage their reputations into merchantable products and services).

Blogging will not go away anytime soon, though most blogs have already died, their carcasses gumming up the web worse than the dead sites left in the wake of the dot com debacle. Only those bloggers like Jim Romanesko and Heath Row, who were born for this, will survive and prosper. And the outlets that do survive will indeed be very important buzz factories for books.

### Polluting the Amazon

Speaking of vitriolic hyperbole, Dennis Johnson on the BEA's blogging panel representing the Moby Lives site, had nothing but unkind words for Amazon.com. Possibly the most reasonable member of the panel, he turned bull terrier when discussing Amazon's strong-arm tactics to force publishers

into 60 percent discounts or the Marketplace program.

*Publishers Weekly* also took a gratuitous swipe at Amazon with a front-page article in the *Show Daily* chastising Earth's Biggest Bookstore for its heavy-handed tactics negotiating with publishers. The piece, which contained little that could be considered news, focused on Amazon's efforts to get the largest discount possible from publishers as well as a piece of publishers' co-op advertising budgets. The article even upstaged reporting on former president Bill Clinton's speech. Of course, Clinton's remarks ran too long to make the *Daily's* deadline.

Let me play devil's advocate, then, and present a blog-worthy contrarian opinion about Amazon. Last year at the BEA, several mid-size publishers confided that Amazon had risen to their third-largest account, presumably behind Ingram and Barnes & Noble. Publishers on average were slow to grant Amazon the discounts it deserved based on volume—the same discounts they offered to other giant retailers buying on the same terms. Granted, Amazon was slow to tell publishers exactly how big it had grown; orders in the company's formative years were largely hidden in the Ingram buy.

This year, some of those same publishers told me that Amazon.com is now their biggest account, easily passing Ingram and B&N. Now Amazon wants co-op money. It deserves it. More to the point, publishers' budgets for online marketing have not kept pace with their results in that arena. I can't fault publishers, because it's hard to adjust so quickly to the sea change in our business wrought by the Internet.

What I can fault all sides of this debate for—Amazon, publishers, and bloggers—is the replacement of intelligent, cooperative dialogue with edicts, threats, vitriol, and cheap shots. Can't we all just get along? Amazon is an important partner, helping readers find and buy books. Good manners and good business suggest that we find ways to make this mutually-beneficial relationship work better.

Put that in your blog and serve it.

