

How Strategic Creativity Can Increase Your Sales

By Brian Jud

Book publishers exhibit a unique balance of strategic thinking and creativity – to a point. They apply innovation to all the tasks that must be done to get a book published (editing, internal layout, cover design and pricing). But this dance with originality usually ends with delivery of the first printing. Authors – working with their publishers -- are more likely to reach large-scale success by applying strategy and creativity to the post-production tasks of distribution and promotion of their books.

The typical distribution actions are to get the book lodged on Amazon.com and arrange distribution through bookstores and to libraries. Promotion is usually limited to social media, social networking and reviews. Nothing accomplished to this point has served to differentiate the product from the other 1,000,000-plus books published last year. The result? Poor sales.

Conventional thinking leads to conventional results, but at least doing *something* is better than waiting for inspiration to reveal itself, right? Not necessarily. There are at least four ways you can stimulate unconventional ways of thinking and grow sales to significant levels through challenge, connection, constraint and context.

Challenge. Look back to the video-rental industry ruled by Blockbuster in the early 2000s. It basically used a public-library model, and it was the only game in town. Netflix challenged the given assumptions, became the industry leader and put Blockbuster out of business.

Similarly, the book-publishing industry has conventional standards. One of the assumptions undergirding the publishing industry's norms is to only sell books through bookstores – both bricks and clicks.

Fortunately, you do not have to trash the status quo to succeed, just build upon it. How? Consider the concept of dual distribution to disrupt the status quo. Continue to sell through bookstores but add non-bookstore venues to your mix. You could sell to non-bookstore retailers (airport stores, supermarkets, gift shops, etc.) perhaps even using your current distribution partner. Then venture into the non-retail sector in which you can sell books in large, non-returnable quantities to buyers in corporations, associations, schools and the military. Stretch your ways of thinking to new heights to challenge your comfort zone.

Connection. Creativity can be enhanced by “just connecting things,” as Steve Jobs said. Link existing products or concepts that seem to be independent of one another to create something new. Look at what Apple and Nike did to introduce the Nike+ iPod Sport Kit which enabled Nike shoes to communicate with an iPod for tracking steps.

Look at groups with diverse expertise and brainstorm a new combination. For instance, why not have professional speakers sell your book (if it fits their topic) for a percentage of sales? Or coordinate with providers of complementary products to sell each other's products. If you have a book about Christmas, contact a glassware provider to bundle your book with a plate for Santa's cookies or a glass for his milk.

Constraint. Mary Shelly wrote *Frankenstein* when she was trapped indoors during an unusually cold and stormy season with nothing to do but exercise her imagination. Just as this constriction turned a limitation into an opportunity, you can turn an apparent weakness into a strength.

One way to unleash creativity is to ask how you might benefit from self-imposed restrictions. The Audi racing team believed that their cars could not go faster than competitors' cars. So, Audi developed a diesel-powered car which required fewer fuel stops than gasoline-powered cars and they won the Le Mans three years in a row.

Likewise, you may be laboring under the self-imposed constraint that you are not a "salesperson," so corporate sales are beyond your reach. Turn this into an opportunity by arranging for a non-competing author-salesperson to sell your book to non-retail buyers for a percentage of the sale. Contact Guy Achtzehn (guy@msgpromo.com) to sell your book for you. As a disclaimer, Guy is my business partner.

Context. If you investigate how a problem like yours was solved in an entirely different context, surprising insights may reveal themselves. Johannes Gutenberg did this in 1450 when he combined the coin punch and wine press to invent his historic printing press.

You can do this in step-by-step fashion. Start by making the easy leap from selling through bookstores to selling through airport bookstores. Then remove your book from competing with other books on the bookstore shelves by selling through non-book retailers on the airport concourses. The Louisville International Airport (<https://www.ifly.com/louisville-international-airport/shops-stores>) has a Churchill Downs Store (for your equestrian-related book), and the Louisville Slugger store (for your baseball-related content), or Brighton, a nationally known women's boutique that sells handbags, small leather goods, watches, perfume, jewelry and accessories as well as your book related to these topics. Fiction can outsell nonfiction in many of these outlets.

Take this one step further by thinking about other modes of transportation with waiting areas much smaller than those at airports. These could be bus and train stations. What if you sold your books (with complementary titles) through vending machines there?

At its core, strategy is still about finding ways to create and claim value through differentiation. Creativity can help identify innovative breaks from convention. You can significantly expand your book-selling opportunities by combining these two seemingly divergent ways of thinking. Information about where the edges of the market are today can signal where the mainstream will be tomorrow.

Brian Jud is the Executive Director of the Association of Publishers for Special Sales (APSS – www.bookapss.org), and the founder of Book Selling University (www.booksellinguniversity.com). He is also the author of *How to Make Real Money Selling Books*. Brian offers commission-based sales of books to buyers in non-bookstore markets. Contact Brian at brianjud@bookmarketing.com or www.premiumbookcompany.com

