

THE 10 AWFUL TRUTHS ABOUT BOOK PUBLISHING

Steven Piersanti, President, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Updated June 14, 2010

1. **The number of books being published in the U.S. has exploded.**

Bowker reports that over one million (1,052,803) books were published in the U.S. in 2009, which is more than triple the number of books published four years earlier (2005) in the U.S. (April 14, 2010 Bowker Report). More than two thirds of these books are self-published books, reprints of public domain works, and other print-on-demand books, which is where most of the growth in recent years has taken place. In addition, hundreds of thousands of English-language books are published each year in other countries.

2. **Book industry sales are declining, despite the explosion of books published.**

Book sales in the U.S. peaked in 2007 and then fell by nearly five percent between 2007 and 2009, according to the Association of American Publishers (April 7, 2010 AAP Report). Similarly, bookstore sales peaked in 2007 and have fallen since, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (*Publishers Weekly*, February 22, 2010). The major bookstore chains have been especially hard hit, with a 12 percent sales decline between 2007 and 2009 (*Publishers Weekly*, April 12, 2010).

3. **Average book sales are shockingly small, and falling fast.**

Combine the explosion of books published with the declining total sales and you get shrinking sales of each new title. According to Nielsen BookScan – which tracks most bookstore, online, and other retail sales of books (including Amazon.com) – only 282 million books were sold in 2009 in the U.S. *in all adult nonfiction categories combined* (*Publishers Weekly*, January 11, 2010). The average U.S. nonfiction book is now selling less than 250 copies per year and less than 3,000 copies over its lifetime.

4. **A book has less than a 1% chance of being stocked in an average bookstore.**

For every available bookstore shelf space, there are 100 to 1,000 or more titles competing for that shelf space. For example, the number of business titles stocked ranges from less than 100 (smaller bookstores) to approximately 1,500 (superstores). Yet there are 250,000-plus business books in print that are fighting for that limited shelf space.

5. **It is getting harder and harder every year to sell books.**

Many book categories have become entirely saturated, with many books on every topic. It is increasingly difficult to make any book stand out. New titles are not just competing with a million recently published books, they are also competing with more than seven million other books available for sale. And other media are claiming more and more of people's time. Result: investing the same amount of effort today to market a book as was invested a few years ago will yield a fraction of the sales previously experienced.

6. **Most books today are selling only to the authors' and publishers' communities.**

Everyone in the potential audiences for a book already knows of hundreds of interesting and useful books to read but has little time to read any. Therefore people are reading only books that their communities make important or even mandatory to read. There is no general audience for most nonfiction books, and chasing after such a mirage is usually far less effective than connecting with one's communities.

7. Most book marketing today is done by authors, not by publishers.

Publishers have managed to stay afloat in this worsening marketplace only by shifting more and more marketing responsibility to authors, to cut costs and prop up sales. In recognition of this reality, most book proposals from agents and experienced authors now have an extensive (usually many pages) section on the author's marketing platform and what the author will do to market the book. Publishers still fulfill important roles in helping craft books to succeed and making books available in sales channels, but whether the books move in those channels depends primarily on the authors.

8. No other industry has so many new product introductions.

Every new book is a new product, needing to be acquired, developed, reworked, designed, produced, named, manufactured, packaged, priced, introduced, marketed, warehoused, and sold. Yet the average new book generates only \$100,000 to \$200,000 in sales, which needs to cover all of these expenses, leaving only small amounts available for each area of expense. This more than anything limits how much publishers can invest in any one new book and in its marketing campaign.

9. The digital revolution is expanding the number of products and sales channels but not increasing book sales.

We are in the early stages of an explosion in digital versions of books and digital sales channels for books and portions of books. However, early indications are that the digital revenues are replacing traditional book revenues rather than adding to overall book revenues. The total book publishing pie is not growing, but it is now being divided among even more products and markets, thus further crowding and saturating the marketplace. And although some digital costs are lower, other costs are higher while price points are lower – making digital profits even slimmer than print profits thus far.

10. The book publishing world is in a never-ending state of turmoil.

The thin margins in the industry, high complexities of the business, intense competition in a small industry, rapid growth of new technologies, and expanding competition from other media lead to constant turmoil in book publishing. Translation: expect even more changes and challenges in coming months and years.

STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO “THE 10 AWFUL TRUTHS”

- 1. The game is now pass-along sales.**
- 2. Events/immersion experiences replace traditional publicity in moving the needle.**
- 3. Leverage the authors' and publishers' communities.**
- 4. In a crowded market, brands stand out.**
- 5. Master new sales and marketing channels.**
- 6. Build books around a big new idea.**
- 7. Front-load the main ideas in books and keep books short.**