



## The Right Shelf 'Stuff'

Why Some Books Don't Work In Bookstores

By Mary Westheimer

When most people think of buying books, they think of bookstores. Bookstores are wonderful places to buy -- and therefore sell -- books, but they aren't the only places. What is known in the book industry as "special sales" refers to selling books outside of the traditional bookstore channel, whether it's in a retail location (like placing books about Labrador retrievers in pet stores) or selling in bulk to organizations that then resell or give those books away to others (such as selling to Amway or other multilevel marketing channels).

Some books simply aren't going to do well in bookstores because they don't fit the profile of a "bookstore book." Store buyers and consumers have expectations, and even good books that go against the grain can suffer in that channel.

Why aren't some books "bookstore compatible"?

### **The Price Is Too High**

Any book that is on the shelf beside other books on the same subject needs to have a price comparable to those other books. If the book's price is higher than its competing companions, it better have significantly more value, whether it's a better binding, more content, more color, newer material or a better authority. Even then, those enhancements must mean increased value for consumers -- if a larger format isn't perceived as better, the additional cost isn't justified in potential buyers' minds. To avoid this pitfall, publishers can visit bookstores to see what else is on the shelf where their books will appear.

### **The Market Is Too Narrow**

There are plenty of books out there that have audiences, but those people may not expect such a book to be in a bookstore. For instance, if a publisher produces a book on the history of aluminum toys, it is probably more appropriate to market it in catalogs or magazines for toy collectors, not in a bookstore. Publishers who pinpoint their audiences can plan other ways to market their titles.

## **The Material Is Too Regional for National Distribution**

Some titles can sell steadily in one region but will fizzle nationally because there just isn't enough interest outside of that locale. Books about tourist destinations and relocation information can be exceptions, but a local subject sometimes just isn't appropriate for national distribution. Such books certainly can be sold in local bookstores, by direct mail, through joint marketing efforts with local merchants, and on the Internet.

## **DESIGN**

### **Unprofessional Cover Design**

Contrary to the cliché, people do judge books by their covers. An ugly or unprofessional cover can ruin the reputation of an otherwise fine book -- fewer people will open it to find out that it is worthwhile. Just as publishers should use professional editors, professional cover designers are a requirement of the business. Professionals know the accepted standards for covers (for instance, a cover should be recognizable even when its image is no larger than a postage stamp. Booksellers use these small graphics in catalogs and on the Internet). They know how to place text on a spine and where to get an appropriate UPC code. They know how to convey a subject visually as well as how to make a book "comfortable" but distinct in its niche. For instance, a business book shouldn't look like a novel, and vice versa.

### **The Package Doesn't Match the Audience**

When is a paperback original appropriate or a case binding necessary? Should a book's interior be in full color, or is black and white accepted and expected? A book's packaging should match its audience's expectations. "Delivering the goods" inappropriately sends a subconscious message that a publisher really doesn't know its subject or its readers. Research into current books in a niche helps publishers sidestep such pitfalls.

### **The Binding Is Inappropriate**

A common error of rookie publishers is using an inappropriate binding because it's easier (or cheaper) to produce. Most bookstores reject spiral, comb and saddle stitch bindings for good reasons: Such bindings don't hold up well and sometimes mean no text can be printed on the spine, which is important because most books on a shelf are "spine out" (and no, having a binding that can't show a title is not going to encourage bookstore employees to put a book face out). Most important, though, is that such bindings are generally not professional, which turns off buyers. *You never want to give buyers a reason to say no.* If the package isn't professional, questions arise about the content, too. Once again, market research can provide information about what is appropriate in various niches.

## **The Format Is Unusual**

If every other paperback is mass-market size and a publisher produces an edition in a trade format, what are the odds that a buyer will take a chance on it? What format is used for other books in that niche? A variation can make a book stand out, or it can kill it before it takes its first bookstore breath. Once again, a little research can go a long way. Publishers can consult with employees who stock and select books to get even more insights about what is appropriate.

## **CONTENT**

### **There Are Too Many Other Titles on This Subject**

Even a mediocre book can be successful if there are no other books on a popular subject. Conversely, if there are too many other titles on a specific subject, a book has to be extraordinary to catch buyers' eyes. Publishers need to research their market using *Literary Market Place*, *Forthcoming Books In Print* and bookstore and library shelves. If there are already a number of books on the same subject, that's a red warning light to any wise publisher.

### **The Title is Inappropriate**

A serious book with a humorous title, or one that doesn't relate to the subject or the readers, can face an uphill battle. Consumers may not consciously know why they steer away from such inappropriate titles, but bookstore buyers know to look for this sort of "disconnect." Sometimes a title is too cryptic. While there are always exceptions to this rule -- who can forget *What Color Is Your Parachute?* as one of the classic Titles That Breaks All the Rules -- they are few and far between. A straightforward title that begins with a keyword can also help when people are checking *Books In Print* for a subject. For instance, if someone is looking for job information, titling a book *The Job Seekers Guide to Career Success* improves the chances a potential purchaser will see, understand and therefore buy it when looking under the word "job."

### **The Editorial Matter is Unprofessional**

No matter how beautiful a book's cover may be, poor editorial material can scuttle selection by a bookstore or library buyer or a consumer. Typographical errors, incomplete information and lack of indices in books that really need them are the sorts of editorial gaffes that can kill a book in any market. Professional editorial assistance is not optional, yet bypassing this important step is a shortcut some smaller publishers take. A professional editor knows how to make certain a book is complete, focused, accurate, appropriately paced and grammatically correct.

### **The Scope of Material is Inappropriate**

Knowing the market and having an author who knows the subject helps publishers avoid focusing too closely or too broadly on a subject. While some of this decision-making usually comes down to "trusting the gut," research helps make such judgments on a "well-fed belly."

### **The Topic Is Too Personal**

Not every book is appropriate for general release. Although certainly important in their own right, personal journeys are of great interest to family and friends, which makes them appropriate for private printing. That doesn't mean, though, that the public will be interested enough to buy. Unless a personal experience or life story has global impact or insights, it usually is best printed in small numbers and shared with its true audience.

### **The Book Is Hard to Shelve**

Any publisher who understands how books are shelved can help buyers (and bookstore employees) by making it clear where a book belongs in a store. Is a book an autobiography, self-help or New Age? If a title can fall into one of a number of categories, a publisher might let the bookseller know what's selling best right now or offer more than one option. If the subject isn't clear or there isn't a bookstore section for that focus, a buyer might turn down a title rather than guess. Publishers who designate categories in the upper left-hand corner of a book's back cover help buyers and shelvees-and their own companies.

If a publisher wants to tap into national markets, the "hot spots" mentioned here are worth extra attention, but being turned down for bookstore distribution is not necessarily bad. Publishers can successfully market by direct mail, in local markets, or through specialty catalogs and channels. The key is to know the product, the competition, the audience and the market, and to plan accordingly. If publishers do their homework, a book's success is significantly more likely.

Mary Westheimer is CEO of BookZone, the Net's largest publishing community. BookZone has helped 3,300 publishing professionals with Web site hosting, development and promotion services.

**TGS PUBLISHING**  
**HTTP://WWW.TGSPUBLISHING.COM**  
**22241 PINEDALE LANE**  
**FRANKSTON, TEXAS 75763**  
**903-876-3416**

