



Marketing & Events: Best Practices and Takeaways

The second theme in the Indie-to-Indie Conversation series looked at the various marketing channels and the intentions behind each: publishers marketing titles to booksellers; booksellers marketing titles to customers; publishers marketing their brand to consumers; booksellers marketing their brand to consumers; booksellers marketing publishers' brands to consumers; and publishers finding ways to improve and increase booksellers's abilities to market themselves, specific titles, and publisher brands to consumers.

Hanging over each of these marketing discussions is the fact that big 5 marketing budgets dwarf the indie channel as a whole. These corporate conglomerates are able to influence consumer demand through media and review coverage, they produce and invest more in galleys, and can afford to devote much more time to pestering for IndieNext nominations. This imbalance is a major cause of the imbalanced and disadvantaged position of indies in the industry, and contributes to the homogenization between indie booksellers and other retailers, putting the channel at a further disadvantage.

Over the course of three conversations, booksellers and publishers discussed the following opportunities to focus efforts to maximize the impact of their marketing, further diversify inventory between stores, and build more consumer awareness about the value of independent businesses:

- The branding of "independent," and how booksellers and publishers could work more closely together to reach consumers
- Rethinking events to promote "Indie" companies and ideals, rather than specific titles
- Developing new tools that will enable booksellers and publishers to generate consumer awareness about indie titles in indie stores

The "Indie" Brand

Thinking about how companies use the term "independent" in their marketing can strengthen their position in the marketplace.

- The term "independent" is different from "small business" or "locally owned" in that it connotes a business with a unique vision; commitment to a specific mission; passion for its inventory, staff, and clientele; creativity and flexibility in its business model; and disruption of the status quo.
- Bookstores have successfully branded themselves as "independent" with consumers, but consumer awareness of publishers in general is lacking. It doesn't have to be.

- By assisting in building the “indie publisher” brand, bookstores can further distinguish themselves from competitors and bolster their identity as centers for independent culture.
- Increasing consumer awareness of “independent” businesses will educate them to the importance of small and local businesses to their community
- Independent Bookstore Day is an existing opportunity for indie presses to emphasize their support for and connection to indie bookstores, and should be utilized to a much higher degree than it currently is.
- Small Press Month (March) is an existing opportunity for indie bookstores to emphasize their support for and connection to indie presses, and should be utilized to a much higher degree than it currently is.
- Clearly defining an “independent press” may be necessary in order to increase consumer awareness.

Rethinking Events

Approaches to events have changed during the pandemic, and while workload and costs associated haven’t decreased, the sales derived from events has. But events can still motivate audiences and accomplish many bookstore and publisher goals:

- The “author event as sales driver” days are essentially over, excepting very big name authors
- Bookstores are increasingly treating events less as sales drivers and more as marketing and community building opportunities
- In-store events that celebrate a theme or provide entertainment value (rather than a traditional, promotional reading of a newly released book) are more likely to generate an audience.
- Authorless events that focus on publishers’ lists, brand identities, and personnel are a good way to generate excitement and educate customers
- Multiple-store virtual events can still pull together a decent audience, especially for events that feature multiple authors who are stylistically or thematically similar.
- The more creative the event, the longer the tail is (if archived online). Sales are no longer immediately tied to the event due to the timeless nature of the Internet.
- Indie presses are more agile, can change plans more easily, and can be more creative with event structures than major publishers.

Indie-Specific Marketing Tools

In order to increase awareness of the “independent” nature of bookstores and publishers, we need tools that communicate these ideas to consumers.

- A significant portion of consumers become aware of books once they’re listed on a bestseller list, because this increases media coverage, bookstore orders, and in-store display treatment.
- Hitting a bestseller list requires coordination (timing, sales channels, etc.) and isn’t always representative of the true sales performance of a book. An indie BSL could instead focus on a longer sales period and highlight titles with strong cumulative sales performance.
- Indie press titles could be distinguished in national and regional bestseller lists. The list could also be divided into different genres and include frontlist and backlist titles.
- An “Indie Bestseller List” would provide a way for bookstores to identify titles they don’t have in stock and a theme around which to build displays, raising awareness among consumers of those titles as well.

- ABA's IndieNext list also impacts sales, and they're guaranteeing a certain number of indie press titles per month. But getting on that list is also time-consuming and requires investment in marketing budgets.
- A resource that tracked booksellers' recommendations of indie press titles, parallel to a BSL, would also allow booksellers to identify titles they may be missing, and could be used to build displays and raise consumer awareness.

Ideas & Action Items

- Brainstorm and develop new marketing materials that announce bestselling indie press titles with transparent parameters that better reflect the actual sales presence of titles, to be disseminated to bookstores and their customers.
- Develop a user-friendly aggregation of booksellers' recommendations of indie press titles and make these recommendations available to booksellers, either via Edelweiss, standalone promotions, or both.
- Publishers should incorporate Independent Bookstore Day more fully into their production pipeline, planning exclusive items for indies to promote as part of the event.
- Bookstores should promote and participate in small press month, including events that highlight small presses or small press authors, small press displays, newsletters, etc.
- Publishers should attempt to release major books on Independent Bookstore Day so the record high number of customers who visit stores on that day will see those titles and associate bookstores with unique inventory.