

The 10 Awful Truths about Book Publishing

Steven Piersanti, President, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Updated April 15, 2014

1. **The number of books being published every year has exploded.**

According to the latest Bowker Report (October 9, 2013), over 391,000 books were *self-published* in the U.S. in 2012, which is an amazing increase of 422 percent since 2007. The number of non-self-published books issued annually has also climbed over the same period to approximately 300,000 in 2012. The net effect is that the number of new books published each year in the U.S. has exploded by more than 400,000 since 2007, to approximately 700,000 annually. And since 2007, nearly 10 million previously published books have been reissued by companies that reprint public domain works. Unfortunately, the marketplace is not able to absorb all these books and is hugely oversaturated.

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

Adult nonfiction print unit book sales peaked in 2007 and have declined each year since then, according to BookScan (*Publishers Weekly*, January 6, 2014, and previous reports). Similarly, bookstore sales peaked in 2007 and have fallen each year since then, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (*Publishers Weekly*, February 12, 2014, and previous reports).

3. **Despite the growth of e-book sales, overall book sales are still shrinking.**

After skyrocketing from 2008 to 2012, e-book sales leveled off in 2013. Unfortunately, the decline of print sales outpaced the growth of e-book sales, even from 2008 to 2012. According to BookStats data reported by the Association of American Publishers (May 15, 2013), revenues in the entire U.S. book publishing marketplace fell again in 2012, to \$27.1 billion. The total book publishing pie is not growing—the peak was hit in 2007—yet it is being divided among ever more hundreds of thousands of digital and print books.

4. **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 BookScan—which tracks most bookstore, online, and other retail sales of books (including Amazon.com)—only 225 million books were sold in 2013 in the U.S. *in all adult nonfiction categories combined* (*Publishers Weekly*, January 6, 2014). The average U.S. nonfiction book is now selling less than 250 copies per year and less than 2,000 copies over its lifetime. And very few titles are big sellers. Only 62 of 1,000 business books released in 2009 sold more than 5,000 copies, according to an analysis by the Codex Group (*New York Times*, March 31, 2010).

5. **A book has far 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 up to 1,500 (superstores). Yet there are several hundred thousand business books in print that are fighting for that limited shelf space.

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

Many book categories have become entirely saturated, with a surplus of books on every topic. It is increasingly difficult to make any book stand out. Each book is competing with more than ten million other books available for sale, while other media are claiming more and more of people's time. Result: investing the same amount today to market a book as was invested a few years ago will yield a far smaller sales return today.

7. **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.

8. 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 experienced authors now have an extensive (usually many pages) section on the authors' marketing platform and what the authors will do to publicize and market the books. 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.

9. 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 \$50,000 to \$150,000 in sales, which needs to cover all of these new product introduction 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.

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, churning of new technologies, and rapid growth of other media lead to constant turmoil in bookselling and publishing (such as the bankruptcy of Borders and many other stores). 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 digital channels for sales, marketing, and community building.**
- 6. Build books around a big new idea.**
- 7. Front-load the main ideas in books and keep books short.**