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Whose bookshelf do you want YOUR book sitting on? (hint: it's not necessarily the bookstore's...)

By J.T. Kirk, Author of *Confessions of a Hiring Manager* (March 31, 2010)
(This article first appeared as a featured guest blog at FascinatingAuthors.com)

I once read an online comment from an author who wrote: “perhaps with a little luck, one of my books will get published by a traditional publisher, or any publisher that will place my books in major bookstores. That would be a dream come true!” When I mentioned that comment to an author friend, who has had books in major bookstores, his reply was: “Wow...this author needs a bigger dream. He doesn't need luck and he doesn't need a traditional publisher—and he surely doesn't need a major bookstore to be successful—especially when only 35% of Americans buy books in brick-and-mortar bookstores.”

Amazon, Lightning Source, LuLu, CreateSpace, and others have all contributed to the paradigm shift in book publishing and distribution. Individual authors and small publishers now have access to many of the same distribution channels as larger publishers. Other non-traditional distribution channels offer better terms (such as no returns, customer-paid shipping, and shallower discounts) than the usual outrageous stipulations of big-name distributors. With fewer people purchasing books through traditional bookstores, maybe the major distributors and wholesalers will choose to go with the flow, but that change may be like turning around an aircraft carrier: slow and steady, but not very swift.

Author Donn LeVie, Jr. (*It's All About HYMN: Essays on Reclaiming Sacred and Traditional Music for Worship*, Kings Crown Publishing) says that the “big bookstore” enchantment ended abruptly for him years ago when his first royalty check arrived for a book project where he was a co-author.

It's a thrill to see your book on the shelves of a major bookstore, but as you stare at the two copies stuffed between other titles in the same subject area, the thrill comes and goes quickly. Our share of the royalty was 12% of the net to the publisher. Because my co-author also provided the illustrations for the book, he got 7% and I received 5%. The book retailed for \$14.00, and the

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publisher's net was \$8.80, so 5% of \$8.80 came to \$0.44 per book for me. I received a \$3,000 advance for my share, but the royalties over time didn't even cover my share of the advance. The small media tour that the marketing department helped put together was partially subsidized out of my pocket. The initial printing of 5,000 copies sold out, so someone was making money—it just wasn't us. That was my first and last experience with co-authoring and working with a traditional publisher. The economics of that conventional publishing and distribution venture in 1990 convinced me that as a vehicle by itself, maybe a non-fiction book was not going to generate the revenue I thought it would—I had to rethink the idea of a book being just one component of a larger strategy, not an end product.”

Back in the late 1980s, I heard author and speaker Gordon Burgett at a workshop for writers talk about “topic spoking”, which is a process of identifying various spin-offs from a single subject that could be turned into revenue streams. Gordon mentioned how one idea for an article could turn into additional revenue from selling various publication rights, offering rewrites to different publications, creating workshops aimed at different audiences, and developing different media (at the time, cassette tapes) for communicating to yet other audiences the information found in that original topic. Little did Gordon know at that time that his topic-spoking idea—selling more than 100% of what you write—would eventually evolve into what today is called “platform building” or as Gordon now calls it, “ancillary publishing,” particularly when books are distributed in a variety of electronic formats for the various portable electronic devices.

Platform building is what information providers (as authors, we are information providers) use to build a media voice; to position ourselves and our books to online and offline audiences; to generate brand *identity*, create brand *recognition*, and generate brand *preference*; to drive targeted traffic to websites, and to sell books. But it doesn't stop there; it's not just about books, though books may be the prominent platform building block—it's about providing focused information to identified audiences who have a need for that information. Creating a platform requires a strategy that leverages the power of all the tools used in a synergistic way to create it: books, blogs, Twitter, websites, social networking sites, article syndication, internet and broadcast radio, TV appearances, free publicity, webinars, podcasts, speaking engagements, seminars, workshops, and so on. The well-designed and constructed platform allows us as authors to create a stronger, deeper, and more personal relationship with those who have a need for the information we provide. It creates a dedicated readership in whatever form “reading” occurs.

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The development of Internet 2.0 has been the impetus for how information is created, disseminated, consumed, and repurposed by a variety of target audiences. Virtual communities with shared interests now drive the direction of many social-, political-, and consumer-specific initiatives. That aggregated power and influence is something we as authors should make every attempt to contribute to, and perhaps even help steer with information that such communities value and have a need for. It's not about selling books; it's about providing information for people who have a need for it; especially a need that, when fulfilled, can improve some aspect of their lives.

And we don't need a major bookstore to do that. To sell more books, we have to get off the beaten path of traditional book distribution (as a priority) because we have to step over so many bodies that litter the course. Until authors and small publishers can attain more equity with large distributors and wholesalers in co-participation for a book's success, we should: (1) aggressively pursue building platforms that define the value of the content in whatever form it appears, and (2) prioritize those channels that are most receptive to it.

As an author, what's your dream? To see your book stocked on the shelves in *Borders* or *Waldenbooks*? To see it as a "Book of the Month" selection? Or, do you see your book as a tool for developing a platform to establish and promote your "brand," where the information you provide is available to a specific audience *with a need* for that information in multiple formats?

So, would I as a "disseminator of needed information for a specific audience" be excited about seeing *Confessions of a Hiring Manager* sitting on a major bookstore shelf? Sure, for a moment, but I'd be more excited about hearing from someone who bought the book and how that information—between the covers or linked to it through other elements of my platform—helped him or her find a job or change careers.

The bookshelf we all want our book to be sitting on is the one in a person's home, where its potential to effect change in lives has been unleashed; not the bookstore, where its potential lies dormant and unrealized.

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© 2010 J.T. Kirk. J.T. Kirk is the author of *Confessions of a Hiring Manager: Sage Advice for Daring Job Seekers and Career Changers in a Confused Economy* (Kings Crown Publishing, March 20, 2010, 238 pages, \$19.95). He is also the author of *Confessions of a Hiring Manager: The Workbook* (Kings Crown Publishing, April 30, 2010, \$10.00). J.T. Kirk has more than 20 years experience in technology, marketing, and communications hiring manager positions for Fortune 500 companies. He now writes books on job and career strategies, teaches workshops, and works with

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