Crafting a publishing strategy to address a very specific need

February 14, 2017 by Mike Shatzkin

Lena Tabori is, like me, a book publishing lifer who wants to work on climate change. She was an executive at Abrams when I met her and went on to be a founder of illustrated book publisher Stewart Tabori & Chang and then Welcome Books, the book publishing arm of her Welcome Enterprises. (Lena recently sold Welcome Books to Rizzoli.) We've known each other for 40 years, although we'd never worked on anything together.

We discovered our mutual interest in climate change at the memorial service for even-more-senior book publishing lifer Martin Levin (a lucky man who got to work in book publishing practically until the day he died at age 97) a little over three months ago. And, since then, with increasing focus and intensity, we've been trying to figure out how to apply our skills and our networks to making a difference for the planet, fighting the proliferation of CO_2 in the ecosystem that is the result of mankind's activity.

And now we've got a plan, or at least the outline of a plan. I've been writing about the reality of "verticalization" in the digital publishing world for over two decades now, so I'm not about to break my own rules by hijacking a publishing-interested audience to a climate-change message. When that's the thrust of my message, it will appear elsewhere.

But this is definitely about publishing, although only in the smallest way about books.

Lifetime book publishing pros like Lena and me naturally think about content-and-markets, which struck me as the core components of publishing understanding when I first started contemplating the digital transition 25 years ago. (This speech outlining that thought is 22 years old.) But once we'd defined the "market" (the audience), we rapidly outlined a project that reflected what struck me four years later: that publishers now needed to master "databases and networks" so they could actually provide the right content to the identified markets.

Lena and I realized quickly that we were the audience: smart and informed people who decide one morning that climate change is real and urgent and that they personally need to start doing something about it. We think there are a lot of us and more every day. The 2016 election clearly demonstrated that the internet allows previously unconnected people to organize pretty spontaneously and really challenge (in the case of the Democrats) or totally overwhelm (in the case of the Republicans) the groups — the establishment — that have been organized for many years.

The point has been made even more emphatically since. The women's march that followed the inauguration demonstrated the same principle. And so did the actions that took place at airports all over the country when the Executive Order restricting Muslim immigration was announced.

The same effect is going to be evident in the weeks and months to come with climate change. The longtime supporters of the established groups from Sierra Club to 350.org to the Environmental Defense Fund will soon be outnumbered by newbies as the climate emergency becomes clearer. This is already resulting in a surge of membership to liberal cause organizations, including those involved with climate change. **Citizens Climate Lobby**, a group whose Manhattan chapter meetings I attend, has seen attendance triple or quadruple — from 5 or 6 people at meetings to 20 or 30 — since the election. (Rapidly growing audiences are something experienced publishers are trained to identify.) This is typical. People are deciding to get involved.

To act on that decision requires two things.

The first is information about the climate change landscape: the issues, the organizations, the political battles.

The second is a choice of action steps: ways to get involved.

So we have conceived and will now start to build **climatechangeresources.com**, which will be a hub on the web for climate change information and action as well as a home for databases that connect to and build action networks.

Lena and I both have experience with using teams of researchers to aggregate information around a non-fiction topic. We recognize that the core of climatechangeresouces.com will

be aggregated information, organized for utility, that makes it easy for the next newbie to get informed and involved. But, besides aggregating, we'll also be curating. We want to help people by making judgments about what's important and leaving out what's not. For example, we've found many, perhaps dozens, of daily or weekly aggregating newsletters that keep you abreast of climate change the way Publishers Lunch keeps you abreast of the book business, by delivering links to the stories from everywhere that matter. But we can also see that — at least from the many we've seen so far — there are several that stand out. One that is much more complete than all the rest comes from ClimateNexus. (Norton gave me a warning about the site which I hope and assume is temporary but it would have been irresponsible to link to it under the circumstances.) Slightly less robust but extremely helpful aggregations come from Inside Climate News and The Daily Climate. A small but typical service climatechangeresources.com will provide is to get you quickly to the free newsletters that do the best job of filtering the climate change news.

We're getting started by recruiting interns and volunteers to do the research to inform our initial databases: of climate change organizations, of climate change events, of climate change courses at universities (including their reading lists). We'll create annotated lists of books, movies, and TV shows. We'll have a database of state and local legislative activity, like carbon tax initiatives. We'll have relevant information about Senators and Congresspeople. All of these are core content assets we can build to make the site compelling to anybody with an interest in climate change, and with links in and out to all the various interested parties, very highly SEOd.

If we succeed at what we intend, we will be continually directing many new recruits to all these organizations.

The databases should unleash network effects. We'll create a database of volunteering opportunities, for example, to which every organization we enable (we're curated, remember) can post their needs for help. The curated database of events we'll manage will make it easy for anybody to find out when Al Gore or Bill McKibben is speaking in their proximity.

And, over time, we'll find "captains" for the many vertical topics of interest under the overall heading of climate change: extreme weather events, sea level rise, wind, solar, the military perspective (and more) so that we can create space for each of those interest groups to find both the information they need and other like-minded people to work with.

That's what it means to us to be a hub for both information and action.

Yes, books will also emerge from this. The research could produce a directory of organizations. We have an idea for a "settled science versus legitimately debatable" exposition that we think is needed for discussion of the future roles (if any) for nuclear, pipelines, and fracking. We plan to create lists of "everyday things you can do for climate change" and of "climate change heroes". Compilations like that for the site could also turn into books.

And there will be a store. We figure people would want to find climate-friendly "stuff" as well as things like Environmental Defense Fund t-shirts. Lena's quick summary of that idea was "whole earth catalog" and, of course, climatechangeresources.com will attract precisely the audience who would want to buy what the 2017 version of that catalog would offer.

We're still in the earliest of early stages. We are still figuring out whether we're a not-for-profit or a for-profit or both. We are self-financing right now to get the ball rolling, but that's a "while we figure it out" model, not a sustainable one. We're getting help from people in our personal networks who are willing to give their assistance, as we are for now, without compensation. Immediate thanks to Mary Tiegreen, for example, who is our designer and Benjamin Harlow, who is providing overall tech expertise.

But the book publishing world in which we have — between Lena and me — a century of experience and lots of friends has legions of other smart, literate, thoughtful people to help us get this started. We know we need website developers to work with Mary and Ben, and "researchers" to start connecting with the organizations we need to loop into our efforts.

If you want to help us, please send an email to Lena (lena@welcomeenterprisesinc.com) or me (mike@idealog.com) and tell us how. We'll get right back to you.

One big PS here: I am most emphatically not "retired" from consulting to the publishing community. I have an active and engaged interest in OptiQly, the new venture headed by Evan Schnittman and employing my former colleagues Peter McCarthy and Jess Johns. That assures that I am still in touch with cutting edge thinking about marketing and SEO

from which my other clients continue to benefit. And I continue to work on behalf of other ongoing publishing industry clients that include a major distribution company, a global publisher, and a specialist distributor, as well as some targeted book creation and agenting activity.

And Lena isn't retired either. She's still packaging beautiful books for her clients at Welcome Enterprises.

As this post should have made clear, work on "climate change" has become work on building a new publishing enterprise that in some ways is a new model. I think "publishing innovation" is so thoroughly encoded in my DNA that it will never be scrubbed out. Helping clients think through new initiatives and breakthrough ideas has always been a big part of my practice. That continues and climatechangeresources.com fits right into that; it is not really a departure as much as it my consulting practice applied to my personal interest.

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