5 trends in publishing

On the information landscape, associations can build on lessons learned by academia

By Arnie Grossblatt, PhD, Director, Graduate Program in Publishing, The George Washington University

Can a Graduate Program in Publishing offer any lessons for the publishing industry? The answer is “yes,” including for the association community. Here’s how:

Academic and business challenges

The changes sweeping over publishing created challenges for graduate programs, similar to those facing the industry at large. In 2001, Wikipedia had 200,000 articles (it now has more than 3 million); newspapers were profitable; XML was in its infancy; “kindle” was a verb; “Google” was not; Apple’s most recent tablet computer was the Newton; and Tim O’Reilly was three years from introducing the Web 2.0 meme. Publishing programs clearly needed to update their model of the necessary skills of a professional publisher.

Similarly, those on the front lines of publishing were facing the same changes, with the additional responsibility of running profitable businesses. In both industry and academia, the pace of change required we continue established practices, while developing new skills and business models. As with the industry at large, we had to adopt new practices, make investments, and place some bets on the future direction of the industry.

For example, in the George Washington Program in Publishing, the course in book design is expanding into a course in information product design. Our production management course now encompasses print and e-book production, our editorial courses have added treatment of digital workflows, and technology is a component of every course we teach. Like many publishing companies, publishing programs do everything they did in 2001 and more because publishing has become more complex.

The academic vantage

Academic programs have a great vantage point to view and differentiate between opportunities. They can study developments across the publishing landscape. They have the ability to draw on the collective experience of a practitioner faculty. Equally important, digital-native students bring experiential understanding of new media and its potential. Based on this talent pool’s insights, some significant trends and lessons that shape academic thinking about publishing’s future are discussed below.

Multiformat publishing

No one expects print to go away, but the trend line on digital content consumption cannot be ignored. Amazon now sells more e-books than hardcovers. BISG reports exponential growth in 2010 e-book sales, with e-books now accounting for 5% of the US book market. Publishers must efficiently put their content into many containers. “Manage in one place and publish anywhere” should be the mantra of publishers.

Gourmet consumption model

In an era of content abundance and reading platform abundance, expect readers to become selective information consumers. Empowered readers expect to have format choices and the ability to combine content across platforms. Portions of your content may be sampled and served as an appetizer on a mobile device, or consumed as a meal on a tablet for another reader. The future will belong to agile publisher, able to customize content and delivery for more demanding audiences.

Technology DNA

Publishing is increasingly technology dependent. Successful publishers will be the ones who can integrate technology throughout their operations. Technology DNA doesn’t mean that publishers become technology companies, but it does mean that the ability to make fact-based technology decisions reflecting the specifics of your operations is critical. Technology operations may be outsourced; technology decision-making should never be.

Content wants to be valuable

Publishers used to worry when the “visionaries” stated that “content wants to be free”; but if content wants anything, it wants to be valuable. But there’s good news for publishers – there are increasing possibilities for adding value. The publisher’s value-added toolkit includes linking, syndicating, sharing, tagging, embedding, e-books and mobile apps. And next year the list will be longer.

The kids are all right

In contrast to many publishers, students are without exception optimistic about the future of publishing. They embrace the change they see in the industry. They see change as opportunity, and they back that up by investing their time and money in the most important “upgrade” of all — their education. They also understand that sustainable advantage in the business world derives from continued learning and collaboration, and they put that into practice with social media and online tools for collaboration. You can see an example of this in action at www.netvibes.com/gwpubs.

The George Washington University offers a Master of Professional Studies in Publishing, Graduate Certificate in Journals Publishing and participation in the GW eBooks Lab for academic and non-profits. Details: Arnie Grossblatt, arnlie@gwu.edu, or Helen Former, hfomer@gwu.edu.