

Caravan New Horizons for Bookselling

by Peter Osnos

Over the years, as an avid consumer of information and entertainment, I have become increasingly aware of my choices.

For movies, there are DVDs and videos, movies on demand, on cable and broadcast. I can own, rent and, oh yes, go to a theater with stadium seating.

For music, there is radio, music on cable, satellites, broadband and MP-3s and, oh yes, CDs or dusty old albums.

For news, there are news sites, news aggregators (Google, Yahoo etc.), RSS, MSNBC, streaming video and oh yes, the morning paper.

But somehow, when it came to books, aside from audio on CD, cassette and MP-3, we seemed to be stuck just beyond the starting blocs in taking advantage of evolving technology. E-book category killers have come and gone and the market remained miniscule. Why, I wondered, can't we do the same kind of simultaneous multi-platform release of books that we do with other forms of quality data (i.e. stuff to read)?

As a publisher, I encountered another whole set of issues; summarized by a steadily increasing returns rate of unsold inventory. On most front-list hardcovers, as a publisher serving booksellers from the neighborhood independent to the big box national chains, I would manufacture 10 copies of a title to net a sale of six, an egregious waste of money and energy, literal and psychic. The inventory challenge made a hash of publishing economics, never celebrated for its natural return on investment. Careful management could reduce returns, but inefficiency – too many of some books, not enough of others – defined the business.

Meanwhile, vast headway was being made in technology that provides book “products” on demand, for sale and delivery on order. The question for the retail arena was whether customers asking for a book could be satisfied by the knowledge that it will be delivered to their home in a day or two. By the late 1990s, Amazon's surging sales, fueled by many factors of price, assortment and convenience, conclusively answered that question as yes. But most brick and mortar booksellers continued to take the position that

customers should be expected to return in a week or so to pick up the book and then pay for it. “I'll see if I can get that book, was the potential customer's thought about my high-end non-fiction,” rather than the “I can have it where, when and how I want it” model developing for movies, music and news.

So in the autumn of 2005, after turning over the publisher's role at PublicAffairs, the company I founded in 1997 and where I remain immersed as Editor-at-Large, I began work on The Caravan project, a non-profit collaboration to create a system of multi-platform publishing of serious non-fiction. Three components were necessary:

Partners. Kate Torrey, the respected director of the University of North Carolina Press agreed to provide the essential 501c3 base for the project and with the backing of the Association of American University Presses helped recruit the publishers at Yale, University of California, Beacon Press, New Press, Island Press and the Council on Foreign Relations Press. Using two decades of experience in publishing and an endorsement from the American Booksellers Association I solicited what became a group of seven leading independents and Borders stores to participate as retailers. The New York Public Library expressed interest. And finally and crucially, Ingram's top executives including its chairman, John Ingram and CEO, Jim Chandler offered to provide assistance in building the infrastructure for the system.

Technology. We were not proposing to invent gadgetry. Rather, it was necessary to understand what was available in Print-on-Demand, digital delivery and rights management and what was possible to bring down the high cost of making books into audio and large print versions. We looked at the digital work being done by Google and others; the development of reading machines by Sony and Amazon and early work to translate text into digital speech. We concluded that all of these innovations make a contribution as tools in our broader objective: devising a system that would make books available in all the ways technology now permits.

Funding and Staff. The John D. and Catherine T.



MacArthur Foundation provided the essential money for our first phase, a grant of \$225,000. This covered all the costs associated with producing what became 23 books. I anointed myself as executive director, coordinating a small group of consultants, led by Della Mancuso, overseeing production, Gene Taft, who took on marketing and publicity, Brian Morris, who oversaw the audios, Janet Tingey, who designed the Caravan site, Prafull Kotecha of Infosys who built it and Kent Freeman, the chief technical officer of Ingram Digital Ventures, whose confidence in the vision, knowledge and problem solving skill made him increasingly important to us all.

Over eighteen months, the outlines of the system emerged and two main objectives became clear. Caravan should enable publishers to produce books in traditional print versions, POD, digital formats, audio and large print. We concluded that turning printed text into digital speech wasn't yet ready for the commercial marketplace and Morris took on the considerable task of arranging for the reading of all of our books by authors and free-lance readers using public radio studios and the ISDN line in his own studio. With the assistance of Ingram's British company, we adopted a large print technology that been designed in response to U.K. regulations about services to the sight-impaired. Freeman coordinated our work with Ingram's Lightning Source division for on-demand books and brought in Infosys to support the transaction and delivery site.

In visits and discussions with booksellers, the emerging goal was a delivery mechanism for digital and downloadable books that was, effectively, as simple to use as, say, ordering from on-line booksellers or surfing a search engine. The ABA's leadership tasked Len Vlahos, who heads Booksense.com to complete their own project for delivering digital books through member booksellers. So, Caravan's mission was to enable publishers to create and booksellers to sell (in what became our motto), "Good books. Any way you want them. Now."

This spring, Caravan is releasing its first books. In addition to the independents and chain stores, the project has signed on with Overdrive, a leading supplier of digital material to libraries which will make the e-books and audio books available in 500 library systems. Testing and tweaking the system continues as it prepares for a live launch when customers will make their first purchases. For example, we discovered that when the URL for a purchased book or audio is sent to the customer's computer – the key step in delivery of the PDF or file – the e-mail sometimes was diverted to spam. That knot was unraveled at Ingram. Instructions on the site have been gradually honed to make them ever more intuitive and information about the books

and the project updated as we went along.

The project received a second grant from MacArthur – another \$1 million and \$200,000 from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Century Foundation in New York agreed to be the host and provide financial and administrative services. In coming seasons, Caravan will add books from Harvard, Columbia, Michigan, Minnesota and Kent State Presses and begin to offer our expertise to other independent publishers, within the limits of our time and resources. At the end of 2008, Caravan will release a final report and operating manual that can be used by anyone with an interest in multi-platform publishing at any point in the process from author, to editor, publisher, bookseller and reader.

From the beginning, Caravan has had to explain to all comers, that we are not a business or a vendor. This is a project conceived to deal with tactical and strategic problems that confront the world of books as they do everyone in this age of headlong information transformation. Perhaps the best appraisal of the project came in an exchange about Caravan in The Washington Post, which observed a demonstration of the site at Politics and Prose one of the participating independents. "It's a relatively small group of books," I said, somewhat defensively about the 23 books in our first season, "but a very big idea."

Coming to my rescue, Mark LaFramboise, the head book buyer at P and P interjected, Caravan is "trying to do nothing short of change the way the entire industry publishes their books." If it works, he added, "It would be huge." Let's hope LaFramboise is right.

Editor's Note: Caravan is foundation funded and charges no fees for its services. Publishers interested in its mission, as well as booksellers and librarians, should go to www.caravanbooks.org.

