CHOP CHOP
How to keep your publications safe at budget time
Proactive strategic planning is the best way to justify expenses and investments and keep your publishing initiatives off the chopping block. But don’t wait — a strategic plan is more effective when you’re on the offense, not defense.

BY THOMAS MARCETTI

You have content. You have ideas. You have authors. But successful book programs need sound strategic planning — and recognition that the challenges are different than what you face with your other publications.

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The strategy of wrapping why around everything you do

BY RUTH E. THALER-CARTER
When it comes time for cuts, Signature sharpens its readers with insight on how to save their publications from the budgetary chop.

BY DANIELLE MOORE
GROWING BY
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When it comes to tackling large, complex issues facing your members and the future of their industry, few mediums are as adept at containing and distributing that wealth of knowledge as a book. However, without a strong book program behind it, even an excellent book can fall flat.

“Some associations think they can forge a new path for themselves in books based solely on their understanding of their specific audience,” says Claire Reinburg, director of NSTA Press and assistant executive director for National Science Teachers Association. “However, book publishing is a business with its own practices and customs, which are evolving with changes in customers’ reading and buying habits.”

As with any association publication, success begins with figuring out what success looks like.

“A successful book program is one that addresses the priorities of the organization and meets the needs of the demographic,”
says Jodi Lipson, director of AARP Books for AARP. “It’s also nice if the program can sell a lot of books and create a little revenue.”

“In our field, we’re challenged to keep up with changes in education as well as developments in science, in addition to what research tells us about how both teachers and students best learn science and engineering,” Reinburg says.

“A successful book program is in touch with the needs of its audience, responds to changes in the field, and challenges both itself and its audience to take risks and try innovative strategies.”

**APPLY STRATEGY TO BUILDING, GROWING, OR BEGINNING**

Christopher Murphy, publisher of ALA Editions and ALA Neal-Schuman for the American Library Association, says growing, building, or rebuilding a strong book program is not that different from starting a whole new one.

Murphy says the ALA program had been in flux in recent years, leading to some financial issues for the department. To get the program back on track, he went right to the core.

“First thing was to get our business model in place,” he says. “Who are we selling to? What are we selling? Where are we getting the content? Also, how are we selling? For example, we had a great marketing team, but over time, they had taken on a lot of non-marketing tasks. So we cleared their plate and let them focus solely on marketing. We also refocused the acquisitions team so they could be more effective in finding strong titles to publish. We increased the number, quality, and the marketing of our books.”

As with any content-planning process, Murphy says it’s important to look at what is being done well and what is being done that hinders your goals. “We are getting better at marketing because we’re letting our marketers do just that,” he says. “It happens a lot in a lot of organizations; as things change and are moved around, some things get lost, and some things get put in places that only make sense at the time. That’s why it’s important to have that strategic plan and refer back to it constantly.”

At his last association, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, Murphy led a similar refocusing with dramatic results. As part of its process to overhaul the business plan, the association was constantly looking at which content would help members do their jobs better — not just books, but any content.

Murphy says they had been solely focused on what international educators would need each year. Then they realized they could produce material that educators give their students.

“We started looking at fliers, pamphlets, and booklets,” Murphy says. “Because of the volume we could print, the cost was low for educators, but the revenue was good for us. Even though we had around 10,000 members, we rarely had an audience of larger than 4,000 for a book because of the type of content. But that group might have tens of thousands
of students every year — new students, every year.”

Murphy says the first year the student material was in their conference store, he instructed his team working there to give out free samples. “I got some push-back on that. Why should we give our content away for free? The way I looked at it, we were selling them in packs of dozens. Why not give them one as a sample? Let them take it back to their staff,” he says. “The line ended up being so popular that it is now bigger than NAFSA’s book line.”

By the time he moved on to ALA, Murphy says this line of student material was producing about 60 percent of the non-advertising revenue for NAFSA’s publishing department.

“The point is, you don’t need to follow a particular model. We found something our members needed, and we found a way to not only provide it for them, but to do so in a way that is financially useful to the association,” Murphy says. “In the book world, there is no magic formula; you just have to do the parts of the business that you need well.”

TAKE TIME TO FIND THE RIGHT IDEA

Lipson says AARP Books publishes very few books on its own. Most works come from putting together the book and taking it to a publishing house. AARP then gets advances and royalties. She says it’s not enough to consider only the topic of a proposed book.

“You have to look at the writer, the platform, how recently another book on the topic has been published, and so on,” she says. “I have a lot of great ideas coming across my desk. Sometimes it’s an important topic that just might not sell well if written by a relatively unknown author. Sometimes it’s an important topic that is just not worth a book. It’s rare that we can invest a lot in creating a book that may not sell.”

During building phases, book publishing can be tough because to do it right means to do it for the long term, not just a quick turnaround.

Reinburg says when she took over as director at NSTA Press, the book program was transitioning from publishing mostly grant-funded projects to developing into a full-blown educational publisher. The pressure was on to quickly ramp up and publish a lot of books right away.

Instead of chasing get-rich-quick schemes, Reinburg started building a foundation.

“The first track was to create a few books quickly by collecting great content from our journals into compendia on timely topics,” she says. “We were able to test out several topics to gauge interest while investing relatively little in development efforts. Some of these journal compendia became bestsellers, which prompted us to steer acquisition efforts into those popular topic areas.”

As the compendia were being assembled, Reinburg contacted authors who had written for their journal or presented at NSTA conferences. As manuscripts from these familiar authors came in for review, Reinburg and her team tapered down the compendia so they could focus on publishing new content.

NO LEAPING WITHOUT LOOKING

While innovation and risk taking are part of association book programs, that doesn’t mean leaping before you look — or before you have a solid base to leap from.

Lipson says some of AARP Books’ biggest successes have come from knowing its target audience, especially the members’ interests outside of strictly informative topics. For one project, AARP partnered with the Newseum to
present “The Boomer List: Photographs by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.” The exhibition featured 19 portraits of influential members of the baby boom generation — one born each year of the baby boom, from 1946 to 1964.

“We created a book to go along with the exhibit and sold it in the gift store,” Lipson says.

In addition to other projects, like a book with National Geographic about aging, Lipson says AARP has had significant successes by integrating what they know about their demographic’s interests, such as a book on the history of nostalgic toys like the hula hoop and AARP-specific coloring books.

“Coloring books were popular again, so we asked, ‘How can AARP distinguish itself in coloring books?’” Lipson says. “We created books with health information. Then we made pocket-sized coloring books for when you’re waiting in an office for a doctor, financial adviser, or one of the other dozens of places we end up waiting. Another popular coloring book was of postcards. You could color beautiful images and use them to keep in touch with friends and loved ones.”

Being established in science education and books for teachers, Lipson says AARP also explored publishing children’s trade books about science.

“By relying on our core audience of teachers to also find the children’s books beneficial, we’ve been fortunate to have a small but successful children’s book program,” she says. “One special book we published was a children’s book timed to coincide with last summer’s solar eclipse, When the Sun Goes Dark.”

It was a risk because it was tied so closely with a specific event occurring during the summer when schools weren’t in session. “By partnering with our enthusiastic authors and their networks of contacts and informal science centers, we managed to pull it off. We also distributed large numbers of solar glasses for safe eclipse viewing, which may have been a public-health service,” Lipson says.

With solid footing underneath, Lipson says AARP continued to strengthen its

WHAT DOES A SUCCESSFUL ASSOCIATION BOOK PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

Book publishers are in the business of linking content to markets and associations are perfectly positioned to do just that. Every good association knows both its audiences and their information needs.

Creating books that meet those needs can serve members while generating valuable non-dues revenues. Here’s how to set your association up for success.

1. **Define the market you want to serve.** Although we’d all like a bestseller, in the association space, a narrow topic is probably a better bet. Do an inventory of what’s available in the marketplace and identify topics that are underserved.

2. **Take advantage of your access to experts.** Ask them to name the resources they wish they had and the ones that may be outdated.

3. **While you’re soliciting your industry’s experts, talk with them about their interest in writing.** Books can provide professional prestige and marketing credibility. Don’t be shy to ask them to jump in.

4. **If you have a vibrant continuing-education area, look at the offerings that are in greater demand.** Identify the knowledge gaps and use your CE curriculum to develop books to fill those gaps.

5. **Marketing a book starts when you add it to your schedule.** Work with the author to create a timed plan to bring the book to market. Recognize the importance of metadata in selling a book and start promoting the book well in advance of your publication date.

6. **Print is not dead, but print alone certainly is.** Think e-book and audiobook, where applicable. The tools to make either are commercially available. If you’re not sure how to make a digital book, partner with a firm that does.

7. **Don’t stop at one.** Think about building a series of books. Plan for updates and consider selling similar titles published by others in your field while you build your own list.

“There’s more — there’s almost always more — but a successful program starts with content and markets, two things associations know better than most.” — Brian F. O’Leary, executive director, Book Industry Study Group
book publishing foundation and take on new challenges.

“One strategy I wish we’d pursued sooner is the publishing equivalent of diversifying our portfolio,” Lipson says. “We focused a little too much on building deep niches and might have tested out edgier areas sooner to uncover new topics for further development.”

FACING FRESH OBSTACLES

Reinburg says when an organization begins a new book program, there’s often tremendous pressure to produce results fast.

“Why did we start this if we aren’t going to see more revenue right away?” is a common question, she says. “It’s important not to cut corners or ramp up too quickly, or you jeopardize the foundation needed for a successful program. Go for the low-hanging fruit, definitely, but you should always focus on constructing a strong process for peer review and editorial development for the long term.”

Reinburg recommends taking advantage of the data and resources associations already have in their magazine, journal, website, workshops, and conferences. “Use your website analytics and search your data and post-conference evaluations to determine areas of high interest to your audience. Then you begin planning books on those topics,” she says.

Murphy says book publishing can be daunting to newcomers because there are so many differences and variables not encountered in other types of association publishing.

“When you finish one issue of a magazine, you know the next one needs to be done in a month,” he says. “There is no timetable like that for books. Projects can take six to eight months — that is very fast and very few projects are ever that fast — while others could take as long as two years. You can’t really stack the schedule like you would for another publication. You must be constantly filling the pipeline.”

Another issue that affects the timeline and has wider ripples is authors. “When you’re running a magazine, you can get a professional writer instead of a member volunteer. That means much more predictable timing, often a significant difference in manuscript quality, and less time to edit,” he says. “You can’t do that with a book. You need the member. You need the expert. Those experts are not always excellent writers. They also have a full-time job that isn’t writing your book.”

Lipson says book publishing can be a real crap-shoot. “You could have a great book that just doesn’t sell,” she says. “Someone told me they had just published a diet cookbook, and then President Bill Clinton had a heart attack while on that diet. There is nothing you can do about that.”

Murphy says the key with books is to understand that you will not necessarily be successful with all of them.

“You don’t want to have too many dogs, but some just are not going to sell as well. That is not as important if you have a few books that do really well,” he says. “If you’re publishing 10 books and four do poorly, that’s a problem. If you have 60 books and four do poorly, it’s barely an issue.”

Thomas Marcetti is associate editor for Signature.