

Notes from Nov. 14, 2006 RMPPG Meeting on “The State of Small Publishers,” by Kalen Landow of Pub West

Kalen Landow, executive director of Publishers Association of the West, started out talking about Pub West, as the group of small publishers is known. It began as a social group, then expanded to something more professional as the publishers realized that, to compete with New York-based publishing industry, they had to learn how the publishing industry works. With a stronger structure and annual conference, Pub West now covers 31 states and 2 Canadian provinces and provides professional development and networking to members.

As the sister organization of Pub West, RMPPG members can get a discount on some events, use the job announcement service (to announce jobs or check its jobs available list). She suggested we could do programming together and share information. (web site: www.pubwest.org.)

Landow recently chaired a discussion at Naropa on small publishing, where the question was: Is this a good time to be in publishing? Her answer was a resounding yes, especially for smaller publishers. It's a time of active mergers and acquisitions, for example, Big Earth recently bought Johnson, and big houses are looking to buy smaller publishers. But it's not just big publishers gobbling up smaller ones. Gibbs Smith, perhaps a medium sized publisher, has been acquiring other houses.

At the same time, the big publishers (known as the Big Six, although the names of which change “every week,” she said, because of mergers and acquisitions) are downsizing. Random House recently eliminated 30 positions and they're also selling off imprints.

The good news for smaller publisher is they are getting authors the large publishers don't want, because they are taking fewer chances on unknowns and want authors they know they can sell. Landow said she's starting to see “big name national authors,” being turned away from big publishers because their books are not selling 100,000 copies. These authors are turning to the smaller publishers, where they get more personal attention, like having their phone calls returned.

Publishers and authors are trying new marketing attempts, exploring blogs and podcasts. No one really knows if they will help a book's sale, but it's a relatively inexpensive way to market, she said, and no one wants to be left behind.

Landow talked about the publicity campaign for *Freakonomics*, a *New York Times* bestseller about economic coincidences. It started with the authors/economists' own blogs, then the two authors invited other economists to comment on their book, and went to other web sites and blogs and invited comments, thus generating interest even before the book was published. Once it was published, they gave away copies of their books and soon everyone on their network of blogs were talking about it, creating a “huge buzz.” With the web, you can do niche marketing – find blogs about a particular topic and start a conversation, spreading the word about your work or project.

She said that the Internet has become so influential that all writers need a web site and need to “get on the train before it leaves the station.”

Landow was asked about the perception that big publishers are using fewer editors, and she agreed that big publishers don't feel they need editors as much, perhaps because the books sell anyway. Small publishers are more likely to care about editing, perhaps it being a source of “pride.”

She was also asked about on-demand publishing (or POD). She said the quality has improved greatly, and it's a great solution for self-published authors, but she also advised that you shouldn't ever pay anyone to publish your book (vanity press). Publishers are using POD more to print books that are steady but small sellers. In the industry, it's called short run and ultra short run. Cambridge University Press did \$9 million worth of business last year with short run and ultra short run books – revenue that didn't even exist 10 years ago, she said. Doing POD also means publishers can update books more quickly.

She was asked about publicity, and said big and small publishers are fairly similar in their approach, which seems to be to get the author to do as much publicity as possible, making the rounds of bookstores, radio stations, and even books clubs.