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## We'll Want It When We Say We Want It: How the Market Speaks to the Publishing Industry via Crowdfunding, and Why Publishers Should Listen

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We'll Want It When We Say We Want It: How the Market Speaks to the Publishing  
Industry via Crowdfunding, and Why Publishers Should Listen

Alan Scott Holley

May 10, 2016

Submitted to the Department of English  
and the Faculty of Portland State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree:

Master of Science in Writing

With a Focus in Book Publishing

Graduate Panel:

Per Henningsgaard, Ph.D.

Abbey Gaterud, M.A.

Kathi Inman Berens, Ph.D.

Research Question:

Do crowdfunding campaigns serve as a true test of market interest by helping gauge the size and characteristics of a book's potential audience? If so, what are best practices for publishers looking to capitalize on this pre-publication information in order to sell the book to audiences after the completion of the crowdfunding campaign? What are the most common pitfalls or hurdles to reaching this secondary market?

With its utilization of an environment as fluid and innovative as the internet, it's no wonder that the digital revolution is an ongoing phenomenon that is reinvigorated time and time again with no signs of slowing down. As advanced digital technologies and practices are rolled out by developers and embraced by consumers, commercial companies are thrust headlong into a necessitated showing of adaptability, progressiveness, and up-to-the-minute technological fluency. For the publishing industry, these expectations have been met with a slow yet relatively steady adherence—an understandable reaction considering how so many digital innovations appeared at the time to have the express goal of depreciating traditional publishers to the point of obsolescence.

One such digital innovation was the development of online crowdfunding platforms. While seemingly innocuous, these destinations for internet fundraising were actually thought by many publishers to pose one of the greatest threats of disrupting the traditional publishing business model, the likes of which had not been seen since the advent of the ebook or the rising popularity of self-publishing. However, as the crowdfunding boom continues to intensify, once-hesitant publishers have begun to take note of the two primary, enticing benefits of using these platforms: upfront capital via backer pledges, and the ability to anticipate whether readers will—or will not—respond well to a book project. While the first benefit is undeniable—money raised is money spent—the second is more nebulous. Can crowdfunding campaigns really serve as a trusted means of discerning market interest for a book pre-publication, and if so, how can traditional publishers take advantage of this growing trend in a way that is authentic and sustainable, if at all? This dissertation seeks to prove, by way of

industry research and the opinions of trade professionals, that such a utilization of online crowdfunding by the publishing industry, while greatly advantageous, cannot take place without the adoption of an entirely new publishing business model.

### **The Emergence of Crowdfunded Publishing**

While online platforms like Kickstarter weren't possible until modern times, the concept of crowdfunding can be traced back centuries to when members of aristocracy funded the arts in the 1700s. Digital crowdfunding was first conceived in 1997 when a rock band used online donations to fund their reunion tour, but it wasn't popularized by creatives until 2009 with the launch of Kickstarter, and now the annual growth and revenue streams between most platforms continue to increase every year.<sup>1</sup> What the success of these platforms represents on a macro level is the rising of a creative culture wherein the distance between creators (read: authors and publishers), their products, and consumers is effectively erased. Part of the ethos that fuels crowdfunding is the idea of "cutting out the middlemen," which has much to do with why it was initially a source of apprehension for publishers; for many, the difference between a "middleman" and a "gatekeeper" is nothing more than semantic.

Much of the misgivings felt by publishers surrounding crowdfunding can be attributed to the fact that, since the publishing industry began, readers have grown accustomed to being handed the books that publishers deemed worthy of consumption, written by authors that publishers thought right for publication. Now,

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<sup>1</sup> "The History of Crowdfunding." Fundable.

using crowdfunding platforms, readers are able to get in on the ground floor of the publishing process, choosing and funding the projects that *they* deem desirable. If readers were to become acclimated to this sort of choice-making environment, what would become of the entities once responsible for making those choices for them?

While it's true that crowdfunding does allow for some authors to circumvent the traditional publishing trajectory, publishers offer many more services than simply the acquisition of titles that no crowdfunding platform can deliver in the same way. With the specter of crowdfunding platforms as an industry disruptor now fading, publishing professionals are able to start looking at the platforms' methodology as a valuable potential supplement to their business practices. In fact, much of the rhetoric being used by those involved in the industry today is exploring how crowdfunding could positively impact the publishing landscape. In a post on publishing strategist Jane Friedman's blog, Inkshares VP of Marketing Matt Kaye writes, "Bringing passionate readers along for the publishing ride [via crowdfunding] creates deeper fans and stronger advocates—and ideally grows the overall number of books sold."<sup>2</sup> Once publishers were able to look at crowdfunding as a process of partnering with readers rather than being supplanted by them—and once there were some enticing sales figures, of course—the entire crowdfunding industry became a world of possibility. For authors like C.E. Murphy, who used crowdfunding to publish a spinoff project that her regular publisher wasn't interested in, the fusion of crowdfunding and traditional publishing can only result in mutually beneficial relationship for all parties: "I genuinely

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<sup>2</sup> Kaye, Matthew. "What You Need to Know About Crowdfunded Publishing." Jane Friedman Blog.

think the entire crowdfunding and independent publishing scene is good for the publishing industry. I'd like to think it's creating a more robust system that allows both writers and traditional publishing some room to breathe and learn a little more about what readers want."<sup>3</sup> As publishers begin delving deeper into the mindsets of readers than ever before, the "robust system" Murphy refers to is continuing to take shape.

### **A Comparative Look at Crowdfunded Publishing**

The term "crowdfunding" encompasses a lot more than merely book publishing. Everything from tech gadgets and clothing lines to small businesses and food products have had campaigns launched in their name. As it is with any new digital tool, the ways creators have attempted to utilize online crowdfunding have varied dramatically and seen myriad degrees of success, and the publishing industry is no exception. As it stands, authors and publishers are making use of this tool in one of two ways: employing existing fundraising platforms that provide upfront cash flow and reader interaction, or creating their own platforms that exist as full-service book publishers with crowdfunding as one incorporated element. Both of these utilizations of crowdfunding incorporate the discerning of market interest as the main driving force behind their efforts.

Inkshares is the prime example of crowdfunding platform turned book publisher. Launched in 2014, Inkshares is a web-based publishing entity that refers to itself as "crowd-driven." By this, they mean that, while they will accept any book project

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, Michael M. "Crowdfunding in Sci-Fi and Fantasy." *Publishers Weekly*.

submission, completed or not, they will only edit, design, produce, market, and distribute that book once it has received enough positive feedback from its online community of readers in the form of preorders. When that number of preorders—currently 750 per project—is hit, authors receive a 50% royalty rate for print books and a 70% rate for ebooks for every book sold beyond the initial goal.<sup>4</sup> According to Inkshares, all funds raised up to the point of 750 preorders are “applied directly to the cost of production,”<sup>5</sup> and little to no marketing is done for a project until it has reached this funding goal. This means that hitting that goal is almost entirely dependent on the outreach efforts of the author themselves, but more important than that is the fact that Inkshares—and, by extension, crowdfunded publishing as a whole—defines the success of its titles as having taken place before the book was ever published, with publication determined based on the feedback of readers and not editors. In other words, what they call a funding goal is more accurately a *response* goal. This crowdfunding model has since been adopted by companies such as PubLaunch (formerly Pubslush), and it represents the further evolution of crowdfunded publishing, from being about money to being about a new business model of publishing that refuses to treat readers as an afterthought.

Despite having none of the book publisher services or infrastructure, Kickstarter has remained the dominant crowdfunder of books and publishing-related projects since its launch in 2009. In 2014 alone, Kickstarter saw “2,064 successful [publishing] campaigns, out of 7,050 projects launched (a 28% success rate), raising \$21.9 million

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<sup>4</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions.” Inkshares.com/faq

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

in pledges,”<sup>6</sup> according to Margot Atwell, Kickstarter’s Publishing Outreach Lead. This amounts to approximately 70 million dollars that have been pledged to publishing campaigns since 2009, with the number of book-related projects tending to more than double every year.<sup>7</sup> The reason for Kickstarter’s preeminence in online crowdfunding can likely be attributed to one simple fact: creators want to go where the money is. So far, the quality of the projects funded on Kickstarter, book-related or not, has far exceeded anything any other crowdfunding platform has offered, and until a book on any of these other platforms becomes a breakout phenomenon, Kickstarter will remain the predominant destination for authors and publishers alike.

The nature of Kickstarter as a crowdfunding device and marketing tool is also a noteworthy element of the platform. Because there is no book publishing infrastructure involved, creators are free to experiment with their projects in whatever way they see fit. This can allow for a great deal of novelty in the construction, personality, and presentation of a campaign, which, in turn, can result in increased marketability and appeal to potential backers. For example, Eric Ries, an author previously published by Random House, took to Kickstarter in 2015 to fund a book titled *The Leader’s Guide*, with the unique aspect being that the book would be available exclusively to those who backed the campaign. As a result of the author’s existing popularity as well as the campaign’s restricted nature, Ries’s funding goal of \$135,000 was surpassed by the end of the first day, and the project went on to become Kickstarter’s all-time most

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<sup>6</sup> Reid, Calvin. “Publishing Thrived on Kickstarter in 2014.” *Publishers Weekly*.

<sup>7</sup> Bausells, Marta. “Kickstarting a Book’s Revolution: The Literary Crowdfunding Boom.” *The Guardian*.



funded campaign with a grand total of 9,000 backers pledging over \$500,000.<sup>8</sup> The success of Eric Ries and *The Leader's Guide* is most certainly due to the author being able to craft his campaign as he saw fit, a campaign that was sure to attain viral status within the communities that Ries had targeted, whose interest proved to be far beyond what anyone had likely projected.

Using Kickstarter, a creator only receives capital if their fundraising goal is met within the campaign's duration (usually 30 days), both of which the creator sets themselves. Each campaign is made up of a series of rewards that are offered to backers who pledge at different levels, and it is required that the most prevalent reward be the product (read: book) itself. If the funding goal is not reached exactly, falling short by even a single dollar, the campaign fails, and no money is transferred to the creator. This all-or-nothing model of crowdfunding is not only what Kickstarter is best known for, but it also best represents the potential for market viability analytics that are available as a result of crowdfunding. On the surface, the creator is left with no upfront capital after a book's campaign fails, but even more significant—if the campaign was marketed effectively—is the lack of interest demonstrated by the book's intended audience. For reasons that will be explored further in later sections, this means that no creator can afford to be under the impression that they are *not* testing the market of their book when crowdfunding it. Even Margot Atwell of Kickstarter, a publishing veteran and successful crowdfunder herself, refers to the Kickstarter model as “a better crash course in marketing than seven years running a publishing company.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bausells, Marta. “Kickstarting a Book's Revolution: The Literary Crowdfunding Boom.”

<sup>9</sup> Reid, Calvin. “Publishing Thrived on Kickstarter in 2014.” *Publishers Weekly*.

## Conceptualizing Crowdfunding as a Tool for Market Viability

Six years after online crowdfunding became popularized, authors and publishers are only recently beginning to look at the platforms as potentially the best, most dependable means of assessing the interest of the reading public for their books on a massive scale. To be sure, any author or publisher who has used crowdfunding in the past has already knowingly or unknowingly participated in this process of extensive marketing appraisal, but now that the newness of crowdfunding platforms has begun to wear off, people are beginning to dig a little deeper. Considering the fact that web spending in the U.S. in 2014 totaled over \$300 billion—a number that continues to grow by around 15% every year<sup>10</sup>—it’s safe to say that the internet’s infinite user base, with a boundless propensity for shopping, will not stop looking for things to buy anytime soon. However, the amount of space on the internet is equally as infinite, and with millions upon millions of commercial products vying for attention around every corner of the web, the relevance of what money is spent where cannot be undervalued. This idea is echoed by people like Justine Schofield, who served as communications coordinator at former global book-crowdfunding platform Pubslush: “Even if a supporter only pledges \$1, it demonstrates an interest in your book and can help you gauge your book’s initial market viability.”<sup>11</sup> This idea of “every dollar counts” is at the heart of what makes crowdfunding an invaluable marketing tool that is readily available to book publishers.

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<sup>10</sup> Enright, Allison. “U.S. Annual E-Retail Sales Surpass \$300 Billion for the First Time.” Internet Retailer.

<sup>11</sup> Schofield, Justine. “Publish Your Next Book with Crowdfunding.” Positive Writer.

When crowdfunding first became a well-known and easily accessible internet tool, it was understood by both the media and the general public to be a vehicle for bankrolling products or experiences that would otherwise be discontinued or not possible at all. This, however, was never a hard-and-fast rule; it was merely the appointed ethos of the thing, a truth that is evidenced by platform names like Kickstarter. Now, in a sort of paradox, people are coming to a deeper understanding of crowdfunding by merely looking at what it offers on the surface: a contemporary commercial platform with an endless power of spreadability and a dedicated community all its own. Moreover, at the same time that popular crowdfunding platforms are grossing more revenue and being used by more authors/publishers, more and more readers are becoming a part of that community. These readers are constantly taking note of the unique projects found in and growing success of crowdfunded publishing, and the day is drawing near where a significant percentage of titles will be bought by readers via crowdfunding platforms before a physical book even exists.

Schofield is well aware of the fact that readers are beginning to look toward crowdfunding with a sort of expectancy when it comes to the books they want to see published. Whereas the funds these literary backers contribute were once front and center, it is now the backers themselves who have become the focal point and have collectively begun being referred to by a term much more familiar in the publishing industry: audience. As Schofield notes, "Although the goal of a crowdfunding campaign is to raise funds, *the number of supporters is also important because it can*

*help determine if there is a market for your book.*"<sup>12</sup> Speaking directly to self-publishing authors about the importance of combining crowdfunding campaigns with social media engagement, Schofield adds, "Making connections via social media can help you build your platform and find your audience, both necessities of book marketing, while raising funds for your book at the same time."<sup>13</sup> Book marketing is as much a publisher's task as it is an author's—albeit vastly different—and to identify as well as reach and galvanize a book's audience is likely the most unpredictable burden inherent to the publishing industry. Yet, here again, one finds the auspicious exception that is online crowdfunding and its unique usability. Because crowdfunding lives on the web, and because the web is made up of an inexhaustible network of different communities, there is no conceivable limit as to how far a single campaign can reach or how many communities it can touch. John Byrd, business partner and son of the cofounders of Cinco Puntos Press, a publishing company that has seen much success crowdfunding its poetry collections, characterizes this element of crowdfunding as not only an intrinsic benefit of digital marketing, but also a fundamental flaw of the classical publishing framework: "[The internet] creates opportunities for discoverability that didn't exist 20 years ago...It gives us one more way of finding [an] audience that isn't being reached by the traditional book industry structure."<sup>14</sup> Considering the innate hardships of publishing and promoting poetry through any distribution channel, the fact

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<sup>12</sup> Schofield, Justine. "Publish Your Next Book with Crowdfunding."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Garibay, Lisa Y. "On Breaking Demographic Borders for Books with Crowdfunding." Publishing Perspectives.

that crowdfunding has been able to amass an audience for a publisher like Cinco Puntos speaks volumes about the value of this tool.

There is one misconception about crowdfunding that has likely hindered a more widespread adoption within the publishing industry, and that is the idea that the majority of crowdfunding campaigns only tend to be backed by the friends and family members of their creators and are not usually exposed to new audiences. In reality, this idea is nothing more than a self-fulfilling prophecy: If a creator believes their project will not appeal to a wider audience, or they rely on their peers to spread the campaign and reach the intended audience *for* them, then the marketing strategies for that campaign will only extend to those individuals. These campaigns usually fail, and that's because depending on people close to a project is actually the *least* effective means of finding support for it. In his book *The Kickstarter Manual*, business journalist Don Steinberg interviews several successful Kickstarter creators—all of whom agree that friends and family pledge little to no money at all to projects—and makes clear where that support actually comes from:

Mostly, it seems, the core of pledge dollars come from a middle ground of backers that you need to assemble and rally, people who are part of your extended network, acquaintances, those connected to your acquaintances by multiple degrees of separation. They're strangers who may already be fans either of your work or of the genre you're working in. They're people who share your passion whom you've never met before, but you're able to pull them in by making connections as well as by getting mentioned in the media outlets they pay attention to.<sup>15</sup>

This is the essence of what makes crowdfunding about more than just raising money.

It's about establishing your audience, intended or unintended, through digital

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<sup>15</sup> Steinberg, Donald. *The Kickstarter Handbook: Real-Life Crowdfunding Success Stories*. Page 74.

networking and targeted outreach to internet communities. It's about building a new tribe, not inciting one that already exists. Done effectively, while it may not differ all that much from a typical publisher's marketing plan, a strategic crowdfunding campaign *can* bring together an audience early on that is high in number, strong in vocality, and rich in vibrance.

### **Crowdfunding as a Business Model for Publishers**

As it has been demonstrated, an exploration of the workings of crowdfunding reveals its primary appeal for publishers to be twofold: money by way of selling the book before it's published, and audience by way of messaging the book via digital channels. Given the highly desirable nature of these two outcomes, the integration of crowdfunding as part of the publishing business model may seem like an overtly favorable decision, but such a process does not come without its intricacies. In short, jumping onboard is effortless; keeping afloat takes proficiency.

Such a move makes the most sense for self-publishing authors and small independent presses, who are the most likely to be in need of upfront capital in order to publish at all. Deborah Emin, the publisher of Sullivan Street Press, is no stranger to financial adversity when it comes to getting books to market, and she has fortunately found success in asking the market itself to help finance new Sullivan Street projects: "Finding ourselves cash poor to put the money up front to launch a title, but certain that these titles need to be read by as many people as possible, small publishing companies like mine are now in essence creating long, intense pre-publication

campaigns to raise the money needed to produce their titles.”<sup>16</sup> While this may be one necessary basis for small presses launching campaigns, Emin is not ignorant of the other ways in which crowdfunding is benefitting her titles and authors via reachability and audience-building, going on to say that the “combined social media and more personalized outreach via email opens up the author to pushing forward her ideas of who her community is, how to interact with it and then once the book is published to use that community of initial funders to build outward into the communities of her community.”<sup>17</sup> Sullivan Street Press has also chosen not to employ the use of a platform like Kickstarter to crowdfund their books—opting instead to have readers give money on the company’s website. Though this may make it impossible to gauge the success of the campaigns themselves, their method has at least created a backlist for them as well as a few forthcoming titles.

Not only would the adoption of a business model that includes crowdfunding provide publishers additional capital and publicity, but it would also allow for more prudent risk-taking when it comes to niche projects and debut authors. If there’s one thing that has remained true about crowdfunded publishing, especially on Kickstarter, it is that niche projects have reigned supreme as far as popularity and frequency of success are concerned. Two notable examples are *Lightspeed Magazine* and Iron Circus Comics. *Lightspeed Magazine* has run three successful Kickstarter campaigns for special magazine issues—*Women Destroy Science Fiction*, *Queers Destroy Science Fiction*, and *People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction*. All three had a modest goal of

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<sup>16</sup> Emin, Deborah. “Crowdfunding as a Source of Book Marketing Power.” *Publishing Perspectives*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

\$5,000, and all three garnered over \$50,000 in pledges. Iron Circus Comics, on the other hand, is perhaps the most successful crowdfunded publisher to date. Operated by Spike Trotman, Iron Circus has launched nine Kickstarter campaigns, all of which have been successful. Trotman's brand of female-centric, sex-positive erotic comic anthologies—known as *Smut Peddler*—have been tremendously well-received on the platform, raking in over \$185,000 and \$160,000 in the two most funded campaigns. Without crowdfunding to both jumpstart and sustain her company, it's difficult to say what publisher Trotman's anthologies could have been pitched to, let alone where they could have found success.

Trotman's crowdfunding success is being shared by creators—many of whom are publishers themselves—of all types of niche projects. Alisa Krasnostein, who crowdfunded a YA anthology focused on diversity in urban fantasy, believes that crowdfunding is paving the way for independent publishers to feel more willing to gamble on projects they formerly would have thought to be money-losers. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Krasnostein stated, “[Crowdfunding] offers something really important as an alternative model for smaller publishing outlets. Crowdfunding is enabling niche projects to become viable by providing the cash flow up front, something that can otherwise be limiting for smaller operations.”<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, this crowdfunding benefit also applies to debut authors hoping to be acquired by a traditional publisher. Whereas the publication of a well-known author brings with it less developmental reconstruction and smaller marketing budgets, debut

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<sup>18</sup> Jones, Michael M. “Crowdfunding in Sci-Fi and Fantasy.”



authors are frequently subject to more in-house scrutiny as they are reshaped according to market standards, a process that is exacerbated by the additional dollars that must go toward attempting to get their name into the marketplace. However, as Margaret Schimming argues in an essay on crowdfunding's changing of author-publisher relationships, the ability of these platforms to cover the increased costs of publishing a debut author "not only open[s] the landscape of publishing to a wider selection of writers, it allows publishers more freedom to acquire a text that might need more front-end work than a text from an established author."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, for the independent press, there is very little that effective crowdfunding can offer that is not a significant improvement in the way business is currently conducted.

Though a great deal of self-publishing authors and independent presses have already begun adopting a crowdfunded publishing model, whether or not larger, more well-off publishers will follow suit remains to be seen. The benefits of crowdfunding may be the same between publishers of all types, but the ongoing conversation amongst larger publishers is whether these benefits are worth the risk of appearing disingenuous or appropriative to their readers. This is the opinion of people like Ellen Datlow, an accomplished anthologist and crowdfunder, who believes that publishing conglomerates using crowdfunding would inescapably be an act of co-opting: "The idea behind Kickstarter is in its name. It's meant to kick-start something—that means it's a one-off to help a business get started. [O]nce you get it going you have to create

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<sup>19</sup> Schimming, Margaret. "Changing Publisher-Author Relationships in the Midst of Developing Crowd-Funded Publishing Platforms." Page 6.

your own business model for the future and not rely on donations over time.”<sup>20</sup> Even Margot Atwell of Kickstarter, who wants to see as many users as possible on the platform, acknowledges that such a trend could be problematic: “This only works if backers respond. If traditional publishers do projects that are really appealing to their fans, great—if someone were to use the platform more cynically, readers are smart.”<sup>21</sup>

However, Datlow’s use of the word “donations” demonstrates a basic misunderstanding of how the platforms operate. Kickstarter is a platform for *commercial* enterprises, not philanthropic ones; users are actually barred from raising funds for non-profits or charity organizations. The central focus of the campaign is the product itself—in this case, the book. Backers are not donating to the publisher; they are in effect purchasing the book by way of a preorder. Of course, preorders are nothing new in publishing, but *time* (early pre-publication) and *place* (online networks) make these particular preorders especially desirable. In the absence of crowdfunding, publication is a foregone conclusion for publishers after a book is acquired, but with crowdfunding, the success or failure of a well-messaged campaign could impact everything from print runs to marketing budgets to whether a book is published at all. Industry leaders are realizing the plausibility of these platforms more and more each day, and it’s only a matter of time before a sizable publisher makes a move to incorporate crowdfunding in a big way.

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<sup>20</sup> Jones, Michael M. “Crowdfunding in Sci-Fi and Fantasy.”

<sup>21</sup> Bausells, Marta. “Kickstarting a Book’s Revolution: The Literary Crowdfunding Boom.”

## **Zeal Books Case Study**

Because crowdfunding is still only just beginning to arrive on the book publishing scene, and because research into the partnering of the two is currently observational and limited to industry examples, the best way to validate the market-detecting prowess of these platforms is to take a more in-depth look at one singular instance of crowdfunded publishing. Zeal Books, a new Christian publisher based in Portland, Oregon, launched two consecutive Kickstarter campaigns for their first two titles, with hopes of getting the company off the ground financially as well as creating pre-publication launch teams for both books. The distinct outcomes of those two campaigns, paired with the insight of the publisher's Marketing Coordinator, serve as an illustrative example of crowdfunding as a business practice in publishing.

Zeal's first book, titled *Space at the Table: Conversations Between an Evangelical Theologian and His Gay Son*, is written by a father-son duo, both debut authors. Its campaign was launched with the lofty goal of \$30,000—much higher than a typical publishing campaign on Kickstarter, mostly due to the fact that the funds were intended to also jumpstart the company as a whole. In its first twenty-four hours, the campaign raised over \$8,000 toward that goal, and it ultimately succeeded with over \$31,000 pledged by more than 600 backers. Most interesting, however, was the reality that the vast number of backers who pledged toward the project and bought the book were people unknown to both the authors and Zeal's employees, people who had learned about the book via social media before Zeal's campaign marketing plan had even gone into effect. When asked what she thought attributed to the campaign's early success, Laurel Boruck, Zeal's Marketing Coordinator, had this to say: "First, the

[book's] target audience is broad and skews young, which overlaps with the demographics of Kickstarter's core backers. Second, it's about an issue that people are passionate about, which meant that backers were interested in sharing the campaign in the hopes of it being fully funded."<sup>22</sup> The combination of accessible audience and timely subject matter resulting in a campaign's fervent online circulation is the pinnacle of what creators hope to achieve when using crowdfunding platforms, and the slew of online backers Zeal's campaign amassed—who just so happen to be the book's intended audience—have provided a momentum that has carried the book through the crowdfunding stage into a profitable post-publication phase.

Needless to say, the hope of everyone at Zeal Books was that their second Kickstarter campaign would be just as successful as their first. The book, called *The Freedom Factor*, deals with the practice of forgiveness and is written by Bruce Wilkinson, a famous Christian teacher and multiple bestselling author. The campaign had a slightly smaller goal of \$21,500, but it was cancelled after raising barely \$1000 in the first week with no signs of improvement. While there are a number of factors that can go into what makes an unsuccessful crowdfunding campaign, the misfortune of *The Freedom Factor* on Kickstarter truly comes down to how it differs from *Space at the Table*. According to Boruck, "*The Freedom Factor* has a slightly older target audience, and it's also geared towards a more old-school and conservative audience. Even though the book is by a bestselling author whose books have sold millions of copies, Kickstarter wasn't the right channel to reach the book's audience."<sup>23</sup> Boruck

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<sup>22</sup> Author Interview with Laurel Boruck.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

also acknowledges that *Freedom Factor*'s subject matter is not nearly as conducive to the type of word-of-mouth marketing that allowed *Space at the Table* to spread so far online, as its content and themes are not as present in the public consciousness as LGBTQ issues. Therefore, the lack of an already-impassioned, primed-and-ready social group, plus a primary audience of mostly non-digital natives, made for a crowdfunding campaign that, while probably not impossible, did not have the odds in its favor.

As Zeal Books continues to look forward and consider crowdfunding as a viable option for every book it plans to publish, the team also repeatedly returns to their first two campaigns, using hindsight to unpack what they learned about crowdfunding as it relates to discerning market interest and audience-building. For Boruck, the viability of using crowdfunding in publishing is not really platform-specific or even publisher-specific, but book-specific:

Most of [my] takeaways are more about what kind of book lends itself to a successful crowdfunding campaign than what a crowdfunding campaign can teach publishers about a market's size and makeup. Seeing the things that made *Space at the Table*'s campaign successful, I wasn't particularly surprised that the campaign for *Freedom Factor* didn't get as much traction—rather, it reinforced what I already assumed about the book's audience. (It's important to add here, though, that an unsuccessful campaign doesn't mean a book won't be successful in the market—it just means that a crowdfunding platform isn't the right channel for reaching that market.)<sup>24</sup>

Boruck still expects *The Freedom Factor* to do well when it officially publishes in late May, 2016, and while Zeal may only have one successful crowdfunding campaign to its name, they have learned quite a lot about the platform's capacity for revealing a book's audience and mobilizing them to be its best, most spirited champions.

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<sup>24</sup> Author Interview with Laurel Boruck.

## Conclusion

In an article on the website *Publishing Perspectives*, cofounder of Inkshares Adam Gomolin shares his impression of what crowdfunded publishing means for the industry as a whole:

In the traditional publishing process, executives decide what they think people will want to read—or perhaps more precisely, what they think people will want to buy. By contrast, in crowdfunded publishing, that decision belongs to the individual reader or consumer. Simply, crowdfunding books is about readers making decisions about what they want to read and playing an active role in the production side of the literary world we all inhabit.<sup>25</sup>

All in all, what this process represents is bringing readers into the fold in a way that is universally beneficial to all parties involved. Not only is capital raised, but creators are given the chance to substantiate a book's intended audience by going exactly where they live online and interacting with them. Contrary to what may be suggested by some, these online supporters are not a secondary audience at all, and they should not be regarded as such. They are the same readers who would have pulled the book from its place on the shelf, the same readers who would have preordered the book on Amazon. It would behoove publishers of all sizes and persuasions to take a second look at these platforms and consider how targeting readers in their online communities and bringing books directly to them for support and input might bring everyone closer together, as well as how their response might influence both individual book projects and, by and large, the entire publishing industry. Sooner or later, readers will demand to be given the voice that they are due, and crowdfunding is the first step toward that end.

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<sup>25</sup> Gomolin, Adam. "On Crowdfunding Books: When People Vote with Their Money." *Publishing Perspectives*.

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