

Portland State University

PDXScholar

English Faculty Publications and Presentations

English

3-16-2022

The Many Moving Parts behind Brandon Sanderson's Record-Breaking Kickstarter Campaign

Kathi Inman Berens

Portland State University, kberens@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_fac



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Publishing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Berens, Kathi Inman, (2022). "The Many Moving Parts behind Brandon Sanderson's Record-Breaking Kickstarter Campaign," *The Hotsheet*.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

The Many Moving Parts behind Brandon Sanderson's Record-Breaking Kickstarter Campaign

The creation and fulfillment of Sanderson's Kickstarter relies on a crack team managing massive amounts of data as well as all aspects of production

By Kathi Inman Berens

Brandon Sanderson had been running a multi-million-dollar, mid-sized publishing company well before his March 1 Kickstarter shot north of \$28 million in two weeks, making it the biggest campaign—for now—in Kickstarter history.

Kickstarter is a crowdsourced funding platform used by startups and other companies—including small, self-pub, and niche publishers—to subsidize products in development. A Kickstarter backer pledges money up front and in return gets specified goods tied to the tier level they pledge. Higher pledge = more stuff.

Sanderson, a New York Times #1 bestselling fantasy novelist, moves nimbly between traditional and self-publishing. His deal with Tor allows him to develop some products for his exclusive ownership. *Secret novels* is synonymous with Sanderson-owned projects outside his contract with Tor. Sanderson said he spent 10+ years trying to get Tor to bundle ebook/print and ebook/audiobook for his fans, but conversations with the then-head of Macmillan went nowhere. “It’s hard to make that work with their distribution model,” said Sanderson during a March 3 livestream with more than 3,000 fans watching. “We, my team, can make it work on Kickstarter.”

Sanderson gives away a DRM-free ebook with every print book or audiobook he sells directly. “Once you’ve supported a project,” Sanderson told his fans, “those words should be yours. I want you to have access to those words for the rest of your life.”

Sanderson's \$28M+ [Four Secret Novels](#) Kickstarter tested a hypothesis: can he directly reach enough fans to leave Amazon? “Amazon is so dominant that we want to make sure that if things go south with Amazon, we are able to reach fans directly,” Sanderson said. He estimates that Amazon distributes the vast majority of his books. “Amazon controls the ebook market completely or almost completely, despite the efforts of our friends Kobo up in Canada,” said Sanderson, noting Amazon’s similar dominance in audio with Audible.

Though Sanderson says he has no plans to leave Amazon or Tor, this Kickstarter—his second—is a way to “give my team more experience.” (This begs the question of what the team could be preparing for that would be more arduous than fulfilling this Kickstarter.)

Sanderson’s Dragonsteel Entertainment is a full-service publishing house: editing, design, marketing/PR, and fulfillment. Sanderson is Dragonsteel’s only client. His webstore sells tie-in merch like movie-style posters, sticker sheets, patches, apparel, and so on from his fictional universes.

Dragonsteel’s first Kickstarter launched July 7, 2020, a couple months into the pandemic, and had 30,000 backers. With quarterly shipments, that’s roughly 120,000 separate packages to sort, box, tape up, label, and get to a shipping service. His website shows a charming picture of his fulfillment team boxing up the last of the orders in September 2021, 14 months after the July 2020 launch, at company headquarters in Pleasant Grove, Utah.

Before the pandemic, Sanderson spent 110 days a year on the road. When lockdowns hit, he and his digitally savvy fan base pivoted to virtual: livestreamed book signings, long weekly video updates, substantial readings of five or six chapters, livestreamed chats, podcasts. Sanderson has assembled a top-flight media team that ports his content into all available channels.

For fans accustomed to seeing Sanderson at cons or 1,000-person readings, the intimacy of having him in their home or on their phone and answering questions they type into chat seems to have stoked the community. Sanderson reports he’s delighted to shower and get on camera rather than a plane.

Like James Patterson and Stephen King, Sanderson trades his bestseller status toward his own brand development. Fans found him through books published by Tor, and with this Kickstarter, Sanderson is bringing them to Dragonsteel. And thanks to extensive media coverage in The New York Times and elsewhere, awareness of Sanderson has spread beyond his fans to folks who may never have heard of him or Kickstarter. It’s potentially a big boost, since a [May 2021 report indicated](#) that online book shopping would be among the most persistent of the pandemic shifts to ecommerce.

Sanderson said he gets about 70 percent of total sales on or before launch day. He’s trained his audience to line up with wallets open, like a blockbuster movie launch. And because he owns the data when fans interact with his site, he has much more

information about their behavior than he would looking at an author dashboard on Amazon's KDP.

As of this writing, Sanderson's current Kickstarter has four times more backers (124,000+) than his first campaign, many of whom ordered monthly shipments. That merry band in the warehouse is looking at 1.4 million shipments to get out the door in 2023. But warehouse labor is not the bottleneck. Acquiring that much paper on time will be interesting, given the industry's supply chain issues—as will international fulfillment—but is probably doable, given Dragonsteel's experience.

It's also crucial to have a software system to organize the millions of backend details on 124,000+ orders without mistakes. While fulfilling the first Kickstarter, Dragonsteel hired [BackerKit](#), a company that works in tandem with Kickstarter to keep track of backers' selections, shipping details, apparel sizes, pledge levels, special customizations, whether the credit card on file worked or was rejected, etc. Fulfilling Dragonsteel's Kickstarter will be a crucible moment for BackerKit, too.

Sanderson reported that Stormlight Archive 5, forthcoming from Tor, may be delayed because he spent more time revising *The Lost Metal* (due to release from Tor on Nov. 15, 2022). The writing of four "secret" novels plus a 30,000-word middle-grade graphic novel may also have had something to do with the delay.

Bottom line: While few authors enjoy Sanderson's combination of bestseller status and a digitally savvy fan base, Kickstarter campaigns can work for any author with the business chops to know their audience's digital habits and exploit direct-to-consumer channels.

[Kathi Inman Berens](#) is a Fulbright Scholar of digital culture, award-winning author, and Associate Professor of Book Publishing and Digital Humanities at Portland State University.