



"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"

An Interview with David Beacom on Association Publishing

© 2018 by John B. McHugh & David Beacom

Recently, I announced that my former client and **McHugh Advisor**, David Beacom, will be joining me in my consulting practice. I extended this invitation based on my knowledge of David as a leading thinker in our business and an executive with an outstanding track record of solid accomplishments. From David's biography:

David Beacom is a long-time publishing executive, primarily in the nonprofit sector. For more than 15 years, Beacom served the National Science Teachers Association ([NSTA](https://nsta.org)) as Chief Content Officer (formerly Publisher) and Associate Executive Director. Previously, Beacom spent two decades with the National Geographic Society, where he was long the lead creative and editorial voice in education. See LinkedIn <https://bit.ly/2J5Umfb>

In fact, David impressed me so much that we did an interview back in 2010 that I included in the **McHugh Expert Interview** series. See <https://bit.ly/2J1MbMI>

Eight years later, I share this new interview with you to provide an update on David's thinking and to shine some light on what he brings to our collaboration.

JM: In your former life, you were notably successful in dealing with a crowded mix of staff, association executives, members, volunteers, committee members, officers, and other elected leaders. You discussed this at length in our 2010 interview. Do you have any additional thoughts on this subject?

DB: Back then, I placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of familiarizing volunteer leaders with our content—primarily by “sampling” them with comp copies of books and journals, reporting results from surveys and focus groups, and the like. (That sampling, by the way, tended to be viewed internally only as a cost—rarely as a downstream benefit.) In any case, sharing the content and inviting comment established an atmosphere of openness and began to lay a foundation of trust. Further, reporting on my own market research—along with industry data gathered through contacts across AAP, AEP, and AM&P—further demonstrated a businesslike, results-oriented approach.

Looking back, it's clear that I was merely treating the volunteers not as a burden or obstacle but as a resource—respected for their knowledge and experience, which was entirely different from my own. This open acceptance and respect built a further reservoir of trust—not to mention a culture of evangelism around our content.

So what would I add today? Merely a doubling-down on that same basic approach. Elected officer or rank-and-file member—each has a helpful role to play in building the success of an association publishing enterprise.

JM: If an association publishing program is losing money or experiencing declining sales, where would you start your evaluation in order to develop a plan to improve financial performance?

DB: Well, Jack, you certainly don't beat around the bush—that is usually THE question behind the hiring of any publishing consultant.

We both know that any expert advisor will take an appraising look at cost and revenue trends, the scale and age of the total product line, rough market size and association reach, available sales channels and current marketing efforts—the works. That's all a given.

But I prefer to begin by briefly doing some gentle probing about the association's reasons for being—plus the particular goals of its publishing program.

For example, what are the organization's strengths and weaknesses? Who makes which decisions, and how well-regarded is that process? Would members and staff answer such questions differently? How do you learn what your members want? Who is your competition? (It's OK to respond, "Duh, the Internet.")

Answers to those kinds of questions provide a vital frame for understanding how to move a struggling publishing operation toward a more prosperous and successful future. Then you get down to the nuts-and-bolts items I cited at the outset of this response.

JM: On pricing books: Did you use any formula to set the price of NSTA's books? Now that ebooks are a revenue producer, were you able to predict the ratio of sales contribution of print books vs. ebooks? Finally, what differential did you use in pricing books sold to members vs. nonmember prices?

DB: Claire Reinburg, the invaluable head of NSTA Press, established an orderly process for looking at the market environment—anticipated interest in a particular title, presence or absence of competing works, likely perceived value of a book of similar size and type—in setting prices for individual books. We also reviewed the overall list every year or so—raising prices modestly on the strongest performers, dropping the price (which usually helped only slightly, if at all) on poor performers.

What we never, ever did was divide the total development cost by the number of the initial print run—a practice that generally prices a given book way above the competition while simultaneously failing to deal adequately with runaway costs.

Predicting the share of total sales in ebook format? I never mastered that. All I knew was that the ebook share rose every year—until, in the last couple of years, it didn't anymore. I wish I had a more scientific answer, but I find that colleagues across the industry face a similar quandary.

When I arrived at NSTA, the member discount was 10%. That struck me as insufficient return on the investment of a member's dollars, and—after a vigorous internal campaign—I raised it to 20%. Of course, Amazon undercuts even that lower price on bestselling titles.

JM: Funny, that was my next question. Amazon is now the indisputable leader in book sales. What have you learned in your dealings with Amazon, and what advice do you have for book publishing executives?

DB: First, resistance is futile. Amazon is both ally and necessary evil. It cannot be outsmarted or outmaneuvered. Do as Amazon asks; and small publishers, especially, are likely to enjoy a pleasingly helpful supplementary revenue stream as a result. But you need not commit to total surrender. Make sure to build and maintain your own online store, if at all possible. Even with healthy sales through Amazon, roughly 70-80% of NSTA's book sales were still handled through its own online store. That meant we knew who and where our customers were and the kinds of content that appealed to them—information that is priceless. Plus, our margins were better from sales through our own channels.

JM: How do you see the role of social media in book publishing? Specifically, how did social media platforms help NSTA acquire books, promote authors, and sell books?

DB: I wish I could say I was a leading expert here, but that would be untrue. Moreover, looking back, one mistake we made at NSTA—where Claire developed an enviable cadre of vital, new authors—was taking only baby steps in building communities of interest around those creative drivers.

But these days the NSTA Marketing team is moving forward full-steam in making that happen.

Perhaps more important, just as journalists have developed new skills across media and formats to enrich and advance their stories, published authors likewise now need to take on a more active role in developing community around their content. And the most successful authors at NSTA tended to be those who got way out in front of us in doing just that.

One caveat, true not only at NSTA but at several associations I know: Our liveliest online communities—even at this late date—were Listservs. Don't make the mistake of ignoring—or, worse, scorning—these dedicated, engaged audience groups solely because they rely on technology widely regarded as old-hat.

JM: How did you organize the licensing of content at NSTA? How was licensing staffed—full time staff vs. contractors? What tips do you have for maximizing licensing income?

DB: We had a full-time staffer who devoted a few hours a week to building licensing revenue. Successfully so but — because of the specialized nature of NSTA's content—we didn't believe that a much bigger effort would produce dramatically larger licensing revenue.

Beyond that, after several only-partly-successful efforts on my part at the Frankfurt Book Fair and other venues, I turned over the licensing of NSTA content for translation to an experienced independent contractor who represented several association publishers at each show. Her effort was admittedly slow to build, but ultimately far more productive.

JM: During your tenure at NSTA, you oversaw the launch of a new line of children's trade books, published under the NSTA Kids imprint. What drove that decision, and what factors argued for going in that direction?

DB: The world of children's books is highly competitive and chockablock with ardent, distinctive voices. For most associations, trying to shoulder your way into that world would be folly. Why NSTA could take the chance came down to five factors that substantially mitigated the risk for us: (1) We had a leading and well-known author of other NSTA titles who came forward with not only a series proposal, but also several near-complete illustrated kids' books at the ready; (2) We had more than 50,000 teacher-members, many of whom had dedicated their careers to elementary students—where children's books constitute an essential key to science learning; (3) Nearly all NSTA members were parents or grandparents, often on the lookout for great books for their offspring; (4) We had long been positioned even among non-member educators and librarians as a top authority on children's books—courtesy of a decades-old annual awards program in which NSTA identifies and promotes a powerful list of each year's "Outstanding Science Trade Books"; and (5) Our catalog and our email promotional program were both of sufficient size that marketing the new NSTA Kids books created only incremental costs.

I cite all this not to play expert about the children's book business but, instead, to argue that associations can (on occasion) find themselves uniquely situated—because of intrinsic qualities of the organization—to thrive in a new venture that might be too risky for other groups. The key is that clear-eyed, top-line analysis of association strengths and weaknesses I mentioned earlier.

JM: Related to the above question, how does an executive stimulate creative thinking with his/her staff?

DB: I never thought of myself as the stimulus—instead, I was the response.

Most staffers want to make a contribution, and want to do so without a lot of “helpful” second-guessing. Mainly, my contribution was to stay out of the way for my staff—and, just as important, to support them in their explorations *and* run interference with colleagues outside publications who had meddlesome tendencies.

Beyond that, I know how to say “Thank you”—and how to share credit as widely and explicitly as possible.

JM: *At NSTA, your division was responsible for the production of not only publications materials but also marketing pieces, membership materials, even conference programs—you often mention “more than a million printed pieces each year.” How did you manage?*

DB: I got lucky—and inherited an expert staff. That said, I did centralize printing within a single group, which saved hundreds of thousands of dollars each year (for the past 15 or so, so it’s added up). My added contribution was to make sure the Production group kept current on prevailing industry practices—but they frankly needed little help from me in doing so.

JM: *When you asked me to undertake a complete management audit of NSTA’s publishing program, I was impressed by the talented and accomplished staff you had on board. What tips do you have for identifying and recruiting top staff? Mentoring younger promotable staff?*

DB: Being located near Washington, with its unending supply of new talent, helped immensely. So did getting a reputation as a forceful but fair boss. As did admitting—and dealing with—the hiring missteps I made along the way. As many of them as possible, that is.

Beyond that, it goes back to luck—and to allowing staff maximum freedom and treating them with obvious respect. Also, a quick and mainly self-deprecating sense of humor confers a huge advantage.

JM: *How do you think you can contribute to our clients’ success as we collaborate on assignments?*

DB: In addition to all the bragging and self-congratulating I’ve already done above? I would humbly state that I am a good listener, a trenchant analyst, and a cautious yet creative thinker. And each of those no-doubt-sterling characteristics has been honed by decades of successful experience in nonprofit publishing.

JM: *How has the publishing business changed during your time in the business? Which three changes would you rate as the most profound and why?*

DB: Amazon, the Internet, and the resulting breakdown in common culture and experience. The good news is that associations and other nonprofits are among the most vigorous societal forces in tempering and humanizing those massive agents of change.

John B. McHugh

John B. “Jack” McHugh is a 40-year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary’s Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. He is a member of the ASAE Advisory Board for Publishing, Communications, and Media Issues and Practices.

Jack’s specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, new ventures, organizational design, and social media strategy and policy. Mc Hugh is also the manager of the LinkedIn™ group, **Association** and **Nonprofit Publishing**.

Contact Jack McHugh, 414-351-3056

Email jack@johnbmchugh.com,

Website <http://www.johnbmchugh.com>.

LinkedIn <https://bit.ly/2JL0r06>

A-31 -7/15/18 BK, JAF