



John B. McHugh, Publishing Consultant
PO Box 170665 • Milwaukee, WI 53217-8056
414-351-3056 • jack@johnbmchugh.com • www.johnbmchugh.com

McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Success in Association Publishing: An Interview with David Beacom of NSTA

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Association (nonprofit) publishing has its own characteristics to which those who have worked in both commercial and association publishing will attest. In order to provide insights into what it takes to provide effective association publishing leadership, I interviewed my client David Beacom, Associate Executive Director and Publisher for the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA, www.nsta.org). In our interview David provides insights on how to succeed as an association publishing executive. He also acknowledges the importance of talented and smart people contributing to a successful publishing program. Finally, David shares his thoughts on how to work within the context of association politics as a publishing executive.

Q Can you describe the NSTA publishing programs in terms of the number of staff in publishing, total sales, number of books published, journals in print, and any other relevant metrics you want to share?

A Direct Publications staff is a little over 30—including editorial, design, production, web and other technology, and new products—supplemented by four “Field Editors” (working educators) for our journals; an army (hundreds) of reviewers, some paid and most volunteer; plus some centralized business functions housed in other departments (marketing, finance) and an outsourced fulfillment operation managed by Pubs.

Total Pubs Sales revenue (not including advertising or membership) roughly \$3.5 million.

20-25 new books published each year. Four journals—three are K-12 and publish nine issues, including a summer issue (when, teachers repeatedly told us, educators “have time to read”) plus a bimonthly college journal.

Sales of books and related content (including, slowly, e-books and -chapters) has increased by double-digit percentages for the last several years (at least five). This year, by contrast, sales are up only very slightly over last year—our best ever. Reasons—education sales are always a lagging economic indicator, so we are experiencing our Great Recession this year instead of last. That said, at least a half-dozen factors keep us in good stead (and keep me optimistic, despite endangered school budgets):

- A decade ago, I inherited a publishing program that was fitful, at best, and highly unproductive—so I also inherited massive (and lucrative) pent-up demand;
- Members—they are not our only buyers, certainly, but having 50-60,000 potential customers who are (generally) quite happy to hear from us makes selling books a lot easier;
- Price point—in a depressed economy, most anyone lucky enough to remain employed can afford the price of a book, while more expensive goods (including other NSTA products and programs) languish;
- Distributors, chief among them Amazon. While Amazon exerts a steady and worrisome downward pressure on book prices, including ours, income from it and other outside distributors has quadrupled in the past six or seven years and now provides almost 20% of our sales revenue;
- An e-mail list of more than 300,000, including not only members but also previous book buyers, lapsed members, conference attendees, etc.
- An amazing staff. I know, everyone says this—but (partly because of the abundance of a highly educated workforce in Washington, partly because I’ve had a decade to build the team), it’s really true in this case. Incidentally, between a third and a quarter of the

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current Publications staff has been at NSTA longer than I—another lucky inheritance.

Q What are your recommendations for being politically successful in relationships with your volunteer members serving in governance and on various NSTA committees?

A I am entirely available to any inquiry from governance, and respond—even with a mere “I’ll check and get back to you”—the same day in better than 95% of the cases. Moreover, every member of elected governance receives each journal and every book we publish during their term, and I keep particularly effective evangelists for NSTA content on my “comp list” long after they leave office (virtually perpetually). I also strive to place our publishing program in a wider industry context in my reporting—so that there’s a generally high level of sharing of industry intelligence, including trends. And when there’s bad news, I share it fully and as soon as possible. Lastly, whenever we’re having a good year, I make very clear that “this won’t last forever—it can’t.” I doubt that those warnings are always clearly heard, but they are persistently and insistently delivered.

Q How do you involve the member volunteers in NSTA’s publishing program? How do you effectively harness the talent of the volunteer side of NSTA?

A Our members provide incalculably valuable service—mainly as content reviewers and, from a smaller cohort, as authors. And, as mentioned earlier, as evangelists for our content. With teachers, no marketing force is more powerful than word of mouth. So I am very lucky to have such persuasive (and increasingly numerous) advocates.

Q How do you get buy-in from other key staff members such as the chief financial officer and executive director for the NSTA publishing business?

A Here, too, I was lucky in the individuals I got to work with. But also, happily, I had a successful publishing career prior to NSTA—and at places with a lot of brand-name luster. That helped immensely at the beginning. Yet I think what helped even more—then and more recently—was candor and forcefulness on my part. That is, I tell the truth—even bad news—and there is, obviously, no better way to build trust. Moreover, I am confident in my knowledge of my funny little niche of the industry, and of general publishing verities. Example: I cannot tell you how many times I was forced to explain to my colleagues that we had no hopes of building a book business *unless we gave away a lot of books*. (See “evangelists” and “word of mouth,” above.) They never quite believed me, but I insisted that that’s the way the publishing business works—and *gave away a lot of books*. Eventually, we started selling a lot, too.

Q What tips do you have to ensure a profitable growth strategy? How do you balance the tension between the need to make a profit and still serve NSTA’s mission as a nonprofit organization?

A I feel no tension whatsoever on this front. My job is to provide science teachers with high-quality, attractively presented, high-value content that improves teaching and learning. Teachers are notoriously thrifty, but will gladly pay a fair price for *anything* that makes them better at their job. Consequently: Sales of our content are rising, as other parts of our business are flattening, even declining. So I have no choice but to try my best to maximize return for the benefit of the entire organization and for the teachers, whether or not they’re members.

McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Success in Association Publishing: An Interview with David Beacom of NSTA

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Q What are the three or four metrics that you use to evaluate the performance of NSTA's publishing program?

A Reader response (measured in surveys and focus groups), circulation trends (for example, my biggest journal declined by 20% over the past five years—and *I didn't even notice*—so I need to improve dramatically in this area), income dollars, number of new book titles published, copies of all books sold year-to-year.

Q How do you evaluate the financial viability and market potential of new NSTA publishing projects?

A I'm not sure I've developed any wisdom in this area, because I am in the happy position of (a) still having pent-up demand in (b) a field with extremely well-developed lines of logical product development and (c) multiple market niches that by their very existence pretty much dictate the content needed—intelligence on all of which is delivered to me by (d) members and other readers through surveys, focus groups, chance encounters at conferences, board meetings, etc.

Q What is the optimal reporting arrangement for those who report directly to you? What is your balance between verbal and written reports from your managers?

A I don't know that what I have is optimal, but it does seem to be tolerable for my staff—each direct report needs to give me a short written activity summary every month or so. They understand that the primary audience, however, is outside of Pubs. That is, I share these reports with my colleagues on the Senior Management Team, so they have a steady sense of what we're up to—or at least can't claim they were never told. (Also so, as I tell my staff, "in case I get hit by a bus," there is a written and contemporaneous record of Pubs

staffers' actions and productivity.) Beyond that, however, there's a fair amount of informal, conversational back-and-forth. But I don't really ask for much else (other than numbers) and probably run the risk of appearing remote or incurious or even lazy and detached—because I really leave most folk pretty much alone most of the time.

Q How do you tap the creativity of your staff? Stimulate the flow of new ideas? Encourage new initiatives? Recognize those who contribute new initiatives?

A Above all, I know how to say "Thank you." Also, I share credit as widely and explicitly as possible. And I make sure we survey our readers *a lot*, so there's a steady flow of new and practical ideas for us to consider. Lastly, I'm pretty much willing to try anything if someone here is willing to take on the work.

Q What in the next five years will be three major trends in association publishing that will be opportunities and three that will be obstacles?

A Free online content, Amazon and its far-reaching impact (or that of some future ilk), and (for us) massive teacher turnover. All three carry pretty potent risks and opportunities.

Q What thoughts do you have for our readers?

A I have greatly exceeded the word limit so will wait for further questions that press me in any area where I have been obscure or incomplete. In the meantime, I'm grateful for this opportunity to reflect.

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ABOUT DAVID BEACOM

David Beacom is currently Associate Executive Director and Publisher for the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), where he heads the product development effort—which includes books, professional journals, a newspaper, Web sites, and e-newsletters. David joined NSTA after two decades with the National Geographic Society, where he developed hundreds of school programs—ranging from traditional print and audiovisual media to advanced technologies. During his tenure at the Society, he was the lead creative and editorial voice in education and developed Geographic's pioneering electronic media titles. He has written on travel and design for *National Geographic Traveler*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and other publications, and on publishing for ASAE's Association Now. David lives in Washington, DC. He can be reached at dbeacom@nsta.org.

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM MCHUGH

Posted on my Web site are 80 free *McHugh Publications* on various aspects of publishing, including one section exclusively dedicated to association publishing. Here is the link:
http://www.johnbmchugh.com/free_mchugh_pubs.htm

ABOUT JOHN B. MCHUGH, PUBLISHING CONSULTANT

John B. "Jack" McHugh, a 30-year veteran of the publishing business, is a successful publishing consultant. He is the author of the *McHugh Publishing Management Series*—80 practical publications on all aspects of publications management, which are available free at www.johnbmchugh.com.

In the book publishing business, McHugh has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary's Press. McHugh is also an experienced association-publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality, a 100,000-member professional association based in Milwaukee, WI. For a two-year period, McHugh served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute, a Newtown Square, PA. based, 240,000-member professional association.

Jack McHugh's specialties include book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, organizational design, and startups. McHugh has advised a variety of association publishers including: Alliance for Children and Families, ASCD, ASTM, AWHONN, Boy Scouts of America, International Employee Benefit Foundation, NSTA, Police Executive Research Foundation, SAE, SMACNA and SNAME.

Jack McHugh can be reached at
jack@johnbmchugh.com or 414-351-3056
Web site: www.johnbmchugh.com.

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