



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

McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Successful Independent Book Publishing: An Interview with Judy Galbraith, President, Free Spirit Publishing

I-8 ©2010 by John B. McHugh All Rights Reserved

INTRODUCTION

Publishing books is a craft: a combination of art and process, along with a feel for numbers. In a prior McHugh Expert Interview on book acquisitions with Claire Reinburg, Director of NSTA Press, Claire stressed the importance of the service and relationship aspect with authors. The relationship with a book publisher’s authors is a critical component of successful book publishing.

However, one reads in the popular press that “book publishers are extraneous” and authors can now self-publish and distribute their books as ebooks through Amazon. For example, in an April 26, 2010, *New Yorker* article, “Publish or Perish” by Ken Auletta, these statements were made about Amazon and book publishers:

- “Many publishers believe that Amazon looks upon books as just another commodity to sell as cheaply as possible, and that it sees publishers as dispensable.”
- “Along these lines, Amazon seems to believe that in the digital world it might not need publishers at all.”

The reality is that there is a bit more to success in the book publishing business than pushing an ebook into the marketplace. Judy Galbraith, president of Free Spirit Publishing, will give us a top-down executive view of the value a “traditional” book company adds to the publishing process and other insights into what makes an independent book publishing company succeed.

Minneapolis-based Free Spirit Publishing publishes nonfiction resources for children, teens, educators, youth workers, and parents. A key part of Free Spirit’s mission is to support young people’s social-emotional health and educational needs. Judy founded the company in 1983. Read more about Judy at the end of our interview.

Q What is your background? Did you have any business or publishing experience? What motivated you to start Free Spirit? What is Free Spirit’s publishing specialty? Why did you pick this specialty?

A My original avocation was education and guidance and counseling. As a teacher, I specialized in work with gifted and talented children, and my graduate school thesis paper ultimately became the signature books for Free Spirit. *The Gifted Kids’ Survival Guides* are still in print, with several updates and revisions since the early 1980s. Bookstores were (and still are) full of self-help and psychology books for adults. I started Free Spirit

because I saw a clear need for books to help young people navigate life’s challenges. I began with my own books and had lots of ideas for other self-help books for young people. A key part of our mission is “to help children and teens think for themselves, succeed in life, and make a difference in the world.” When kids are supported socially and emotionally, there’s not much they can’t tackle. When this support isn’t there, they’re less likely to do well in school and to resist negative choices and behaviors. Hence, our niche.

McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Successful Independent Book Publishing: An Interview with Judy Galbraith, President, Free Spirit Publishing

I-8 ©2010 by John B. McHugh All Rights Reserved page 2 of 6

Q What were the three most difficult things for you during the start-up years of Free Spirit? What was at the top of your learning curve? What surprised you the most?

A The first challenge for me was financing. Everyone knows teachers don't make much money and I was no exception. But early on two women came forward and offered me what are now referred to as micro loans. Since I was the author of Free Spirit's first two books, I essentially paid back those loans in royalties. I also taught school part time my first year of business to cover necessities. After a year of teaching and working on Free Spirit, I decided I needed to choose a profession and give it my all. After publishing several titles, a small line of credit from a bank helped take me to the next level.

A second challenge was that I had no business background and I knew little about bookkeeping and accounting. I took a bookkeeping class, but it was a miserable experience. I was the only one who couldn't ten-key without looking. I stuck it out, but decided that I needed to make enough money to hire a bookkeeper. And that was, in fact, my first hire.

The third challenge, and the thing at the top of my learning curve, was sales and marketing. Authors never like hearing me say this, but writing books is relatively easy compared with selling them. My initial sales efforts focused on mail order. I was successful, in part, because it was easy to find mailing lists of guidance counselors and teachers specializing in gifted education.

In retrospect, the thing that surprised me the most, even though I didn't have a business background, was that I made progress and I credit that to basic common sense. Though this may sound trite, if you're passionate about what you do, you can succeed. I'm passionate about

wanting to help kids, and books are a powerful medium for doing that.

Q In light of quotes from Ken Auletta's *New Yorker* article, what value does an experienced book company add to the publishing process for an author and for the acceptance of a new book in the marketplace?

A Each year we receive hundreds of submissions from prospective authors, and I can say that the majority of them are poorly written and ill-conceived. These authors could very well self-publish their works as ebooks, but they would still be poorly written and ill-conceived. If you're serious about offering readers something of good value and quality, and getting your work into the hands of people who will benefit from it, then it behooves you to find a quality publisher. If you want to do it yourself, you need to be prepared to do the hard work that publishers do: editing on various levels, research, graphic design and illustration, publicity, sales and marketing, and more. Our titles provide young people with advice and information related to real-life challenges, so that content needs to be as sound as possible, and that can't happen if an author is writing in a void. We're here to help make the authors' work the very best it can be.

Q What has worked for Free Spirit in book acquisitions? Why are potential authors attracted to Free Spirit?

A We have a multifaceted approach. Some authors find us as a result of being a customer, liking what they see, and sending in a proposal. Many of our authors are educators or mental health specialists who work with children. We may learn of their expertise at a conference, and approach them about writing for us. We've worked with several agents, but we don't require an

McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Successful Independent Book Publishing: An Interview with Judy Galbraith, President, Free Spirit Publishing

I-8 ©2010 by John B. McHugh All Rights Reserved page 3 of 6

author come to us through an agency. Many of our first-time authors go on to write additional titles for us, and that's ideal because they've learned a lot about writing for Free Spirit after a first book.

Q What is Free Spirit's policy with regard to author advances?

A Our advances are very modest. Rather than large advances, we'd rather put funds into advance marketing for a title, which is in everyone's best interest. Also, I want authors to have a vested interest in helping to promote their books. If you know your payment is more reliant on royalties than an advance, it stands to reason you'll be motivated to get the word out about your book.

Q What attributes do you look for in a new acquisitions editor?

A First and foremost, the person has to "get" what we do. He or she has to have a keen appreciation for nonfiction, and in our case, in the social and emotional development of kids. It's also important that this person know how to work effectively with authors. That requires a certain psychology and finesse in and of itself.

Q How do you evaluate the job performance of Free Spirit's acquisitions editors? What criteria do you use?

A Hmmm . . . if only this was a fine science. Certainly we look at the experience of working with a particular author and the quality of the finished product. We also consider the sales record and the ROI of each resource we produce. Many of our titles get great reviews and win awards. We have a very collaborative acquisitions process so editors don't work alone in making decisions about what we publish. And the author's experience in the editorial process is also important.

Q On manuscript development: How do you define manuscript development at Free Spirit? Why is it important? What role does manuscript development play in Free Spirit's strategy?

A Many of our authors are experts in their fields but they're not necessarily writers in the true sense of the word. As a result, we do a lot of substantive editing and are often very involved in manuscript development. We work in tandem with the authors to flesh out their work so it's cogent, organized, appealing, and user-friendly. We have extremely high quality standards, we don't take shortcuts, and we take great pains to ensure authors' works reflect well on them and Free Spirit. Many, many customers have told us that they know they can purchase our resources sight unseen because of our reliable quality. We want to keep it that way.

Q Do you perform any market research to support book acquisitions decisions? What kind of sales, market segment, and competitive analyses are used to decide which topics and markets to pursue?

A We conduct surveys and consult with our advisory boards, which are comprised of professionals and teens. We do competitive research, and we listen to our customers. Obviously, we also look at what's selling by category and by market segment. This is an area that we know we can attack more aggressively given the glut of books on the market today.

Q How does Free Spirit maximize publicity for its authors?

A This is an area that requires changes given the advent of social media marketing venues. Authors who aren't willing to blog, Tweet, create a Facebook page, or otherwise engage audiences using these Web options simply aren't as likely to be as successful in terms of

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

McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Successful Independent Book Publishing: An Interview with Judy Galbraith, President, Free Spirit Publishing

I-8 ©2010 by John B. McHugh All Rights Reserved page 4 of 6

book sales as those who do. That said, we continue to do some of the traditional PR efforts to promote books and authors simultaneously, and we engage in social media marketing, too. Some of our authors engage their own PR specialists and we work with them to avoid duplication of efforts. We also encourage authors to speak at conferences, and we're in the early stages of launching a series of webinars conducted by authors.

Q How has your website affected your thinking about marketing and promotion of publications?

A The nature of technology means that we're constantly evaluating and working to improve our Web presence. This is an aspect of our work where we never can do as much as we'd like to, but we are committed to doing as much as our human and financial resources will allow.

Q How do you promote your online bookstore and drive traffic to it?

A We advertise our website throughout our catalogs, in eblasts, on ads, through PR efforts, and by encouraging organizations to link to us. We're working to improve our search engine optimization (SEO), and that's an ongoing effort.

Q How has Free Spirit used social media for publicity and promotion? What has worked best?

A It's difficult to gauge what's worked the best, since this is a relatively new way of promoting. We do know we've had a lot of success engaging bloggers who write about our books, and we know our success in getting people to follow us on Twitter, etc., is growing. Actually, we've always had social media in one area—word-of-mouth advertising has always been a key part of our

success.

Q How does Free Spirit distribute internationally and maximize its translation licensing income?

A We work with a variety of distributors and book-sellers around the world. Additionally, several U.S. wholesalers have international divisions that export our titles. We attend the Frankfurt Book Fair every year, and we alternate attending the London Book Fair and the Bologna Children's Book Fair. Selling rights around the world has been a growth area for us. We currently have books translated into 30 languages. Developing relationships with international publishers and finding those who have a market for our types of books has grown this business. Increasingly, more countries are seeing the need for resources to help kids grow up with social and emotional strength.

Q Does Free Spirit use print-on-demand (POD)? How and in what situations?

A We manage our inventory very carefully, but sometimes our best calculations go out the window because of a large order that we weren't anticipating (always a nice problem). To meet customer demand and fill orders quickly, we may do a short POD run.

Q At your website, you have an entire page dedicated to Free Spirit's 12 registered trademarks, with each mark reproduced on that page. What led to your conclusion that you need to take extra care in protecting Free Spirit's marks?

A Even with this "extra" care, we still encounter instances where companies will use one of our marks. Listing our trademarks is just one of the ways we demonstrate what's protected, which helps in policing

McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Successful Independent Book Publishing: An Interview with Judy Galbraith, President, Free Spirit Publishing

I-8 ©2010 by John B. McHugh All Rights Reserved page 5 of 6

our rights. It always shocks me when I learn that someone has used one of our marks because it's so easy to research what's already been protected before naming a company or using a tagline for promotion.

Q What is Free Spirit's approach to ebooks? Which ebook programs/channels have been most successful for Free Spirit? What do you think the growth trajectory of ebooks will be for independent nonfiction book publishers?

A Our greatest success so far has been with sales of ebooks for use on the Kindle Reader. That said, we're just at the early stages of developing our titles for a variety of readers, so that will change. I think there's great growth potential for ebook sales for publishers of all genres.

Q What advice do you have for an aspiring book publishing entrepreneur or organizations wanting to start a new book line from scratch?

A I'm not sure I'm one to give advice here since I've done everything wrong at least once. But since you've asked, I'd say that it's key to know what you're good and not good at. I've been successful because I carved out a niche that I knew a lot about, and though we've grown, our mission hasn't changed a lot over the years. Certainly there are publishers who are successful doing many different genres, but they likely didn't start out that way. Keeping focused on what we do well, and resisting the temptation to veer off in an illogical direction, has kept us grounded.

ABOUT JUDY GALBRAITH:

Judy Galbraith is president and founder of Free Spirit Publishing. She was the first publisher to focus on self-help materials to help young people lead better lives. Since 1983, Free Spirit has steadily grown and its offerings now cover grades pre K-12 and span topics from service learning and character education to counseling, bullying, social skills, and special education. Although primarily a book publisher, Free Spirit also produces a range of products such as card decks, posters, CD-ROMs, music, and the newly acquired In a Jar® line.

READ OTHER MCHUGH PAPERS ON BOOK PUBLISHING AT www.johnbmchugh.com

Available free at my website are 20 *McHugh Papers* on all aspects of book publishing.

McHugh Expert Interviews are available at www.johnbmchugh.com.

McHugh on Consulting

- *McHugh Interviews McHugh on Consulting* (I-1, June 2010)

McHugh on Association Publishing

- *Using Your Association Web Site to Sell More Advertising: An Interview with Richard L Barwis, IV, Cornerstone Media* (I-2, March 2010)
- *Success in Association Publishing: An Interview with David Beacom of NSTA* (I-3, March 2010)

McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Successful Independent Book Publishing: An Interview with Judy Galbraith, President, Free Spirit Publishing

I-8 ©2010 by John B. McHugh All Rights Reserved page 6 of 6

McHugh on Book Publishing

- *Book Acquisitions: An Interview with Claire Reinburg, Director NSTA Press* (I-49, June 2010)

Copyright

- *Copyright Aspects of Social Media: An Interview with Attorney David Koehser* (I-14, March 2010)
- *Ebooks and Copyright: An Interview with Attorney David Koehser* (I-15, May 2010)

McHugh on Digital Innovations and STM Publishing

- *Innovative Content Distribution: An Interview with Pam Boiros, Books 24x7* (I-5, June 2010)
- *Innovations in STM Publishing: An Interview with Mark Mandelbaum, Executive Director of ICST* (I-17, June 2010)

McHugh on the Library Market

- *The Library Market and Publishers: An Interview with Katina Strauch, Against the Grain* (I-48, April 2010)

ABOUT JOHN B. MCHUGH, PUBLISHING CONSULTANT

John B. “Jack” McHugh, a 30-year veteran of the publishing business, is a long-time successful publishing consultant. He is the author of the *McHugh Publishing Management Series*—80 practical papers on all aspects of publications management. He also publishes the *McHugh Expert Interview* series, interviews with publishing leaders on various publishing specialties. All of these 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. For a two-year period, McHugh served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute.

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. McHugh has also worked for commercial publishers such as Butterworth Heinemann, Cardiotext, Kendall Hunt, and Llewellyn Worldwide.

Jack McHugh’s specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, organizational design, and startups.

Jack McHugh can be reached at 414-351-3056 or e-mail at jack@johnbmchugh.com. Visit his Web site www.johnbmchugh.com