MARKETING YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK: 
THE GOOD AND BAD NEWS 

Katie L. Wood 

David Rees, Project Chair 

ANALYSIS COMPONENT 

Publishing a book can be the pinnacle of a photographer’s career and a great way to share work at a time when newspapers and magazines are doling out fewer and fewer assignments. However, books are large and expensive projects that can take years to complete. The publishing world is forever changing, making the task of navigating it overwhelming. Bill Marr, former creative director of National Geographic who has helped many photographers edit and design their books says, “The publishing world has become fractured and broken up just like everything else. I think if people want to do books they can, but they are going to have to do a lot more on their own to get there.”

THE STATE OF PUBLISHING 

Before photographer Rick Smolan published his first photography book in 1981, A Day in the Life of Australia, he was told that a book of photography would never sell. He had pitched his idea to over 35 publishers and couldn’t convince anyone to get behind it. Then, on the advice of Australia’s Prime Minister, Smolan began looking for sponsors. After talking to over 200 companies as well as computer innovator Steve Jobs, who he had never heard of at the time, Smolan was able to secure six sponsors to fund his first book. In total, that book sold over 1.2 million copies and opened the door to countless other book projects for Smolan and the company he now runs with his wife, Against All Odds Productions. But even Smolan acknowledges how much the landscape has changed
since then, “People will spend $80 a month for their Internet connection, but they won’t spend $40 dollars for a photo book anymore.”

While there are still some “one percenters” out there that get book deals dropped in their laps, they can actually give up a lot to take the traditional publishing route. Generally publishers expect photographers to cover a good deal of the production costs up front to alleviate some of their financial risk. The cost can easily climb into the tens of thousands of dollars. Photographers can also give up a lot of their control to work with a publisher and sometimes only receive small royalties or none at all.

This reality is what pushed photographer Jason Eskenazi to turn the book workshopping he did with friends into an official LLC, Red Hook Editions. Eskenazi’s book WONDERLAND: A Fairy Tale of the Soviet Monolith was recognized by POYi as the Best Photography Book of 2008 and features work he shot over half a decade in Russia after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Eskenazi says Brooklyn-based Red Hook Editions is a publishing community focused on helping fellow photographers complete their books, “I’ve heard many many horror stories from photographers working with publishers. I’ve experienced things I didn’t like as well and decided after that I would be my own publisher.” Photographers who work with Red Hook still tackle the bulk of the work themselves and retain the rights to their final book, but they have a group of other photographers to lean on for guidance on everything from photo editing to distribution. Recent Red Hook alumna, documentary photographer Glenna Gordon says, “I’m still printing out labels and walking my book over to the post office. But I also keep my profits and will ultimately make more money.” Gordon’s book Diagram of the Heart was released in February and received recognition from POYi, New York Times Magazine and PDN’s Photo Annual. So while there is plenty of bad news about the state of book publishing, the good news is that there are a growing number of indie publishers and self-publishing options, and the more work you do on your own, the more you stand to gain.
ALL THE EYEBALLS

Before you can gain anything though, people have to know about your project. The easier it is for someone to encounter your book, the easier it is for them to buy it. In their how-to book, *Publish Your Photography Book*, Darius D. Himes and Mary Virginia Swanson explain, “If you want your book to be seen and purchased, people must know about it.” So if you learn nothing else about marketing, know that you need to get your work in front of as many people as possible.

A good way to start is by getting your project featured in newspapers, magazines and online publications. Doing interviews about your work gives people a chance to learn more about you and your project and can have a bigger impact than ads alone. And focusing on media that is central to your target market (more on this later) is key, so think about where your audience will be looking.

Launch parties, book signings and public lectures are all good ways to generate more buzz in the press and give your audience a tangible way to interact with you and your work. Being featured on popular blogs and social media outlets are other good strategies. And landing your book on holiday gift guides and other “best of” lists can increase your exposure tenfold. Photography book sellers *Photo-eye* feature both a “Book of the Week” and a “Book A Day” calendar. Getting your book featured on either of these lists is a great way to get the word out. And booking tables at photography and book festivals is another great way of getting your work in front of people.

Be creative and find fun ways to promote your work. *Red Hook* hosts an annual gumbo party that sometimes doubles as a release party. For the first book in the series about the Missouri Photo Workshop, book editor Joshua A. Bickle and students from the University of Missouri built a float with a giant version of the book on it for a town festival in St. James, Missouri where the workshop had been held that year. Not only did they win the award for the best float, but Bickle said he had a lot of people coming up and asking about the book just because they saw the float and wanted to know what it was for.
For one of his latest book projects, *The Human face of Big Data*, Rick Smolan got Fedex to sponsor the book and deliver it to 10,000 world leaders and Fortune 500 companies in a single day. Smolan admits it was a stunt but that Fedex loved it and his real goal was to get people to think critically about big data and what it means for the future, good and bad.

A few other options include selling limited edition prints with your book and creating video trailers. Trailers are a somewhat newer approach that can give your audience and the press a different way to engage with your work. A video can live with your book anywhere it is available online and can be used with crowdfunding campaigns and on social media.

YOUR MARKETING PLAN (A GAME OF POKER)

You need a marketing plan and you need to plot it out as early as possible. Ideally you should start thinking about this at least a year before your publish date. To start, make a list of all of the ways you want to promote your project, from doing interviews with the press to entering your book in contests. In your plan, include a calendar of important dates and deadlines. Reach out to the press and find out when their deadlines are for book reviews and try to coordinate any big events like launch parties and lectures around that.

Create a press package early including a press release, your bio, images from the project and quick facts. If this is completed early you can use it as a guide to keep you on track and have talking points ready to go when you do book interviews.

Finally, like any good poker player, consider how to make the most of key times in the cycle of selling your book. Glenna Gordon says she did a good job of promoting her book when it was first released, but admits, “I didn’t understand how precipitous the drop off was going to be. If I had known that the bulk of my sales were going to come at the beginning, I would have pushed yet harder.” Gordon sold out of books at her launch party but averages a couple of sales a week now. Jason Eskenazi who she worked with
at Red Hook Editions says marketing is a combination of many different approaches and urges photographers to use every method they can.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER ONLINE ENDEAVORS

When Red Hook takes on a photographer they look at how involved the photographer is on social media and encourages them to be as active as possible to build an audience. Social media can be intimidating but it also provides a place where you can engage directly with your audience as well your friends and family. It provides a space where you can post and talk about your work without directly spamming people’s inboxes.

I was recently surprised and refreshed to hear from a representative at Facebook that people respond more to authenticity. Promoting your work on social media can feel slimy, but people are generally excited to be involved with your project.

You should also promote your work on your own website or even consider building a website specifically for the project. Just make sure any websites are up to date, SEO friendly and have consistent branding. You want people to recognize your book right away. Don’t make them work to find it.

Instagram should also be a staple strategy for photographers. As the most visually oriented social media site, Instagram is a great place to post photos and outtakes from your project.

Think of your website as your portfolio with links to all of the social media sites you are active on. Then use social media to offer people a look behind the scenes, all while making sure everything you publish and post is unique and interesting. Consider your audience and what you would be interested in if you were them. If you do a Facebook Live post every day people will stop tuning in. Finally, stay active and respond to your audience. Think of it as one long Q&A on your work where you have the chance to offer up information people wouldn’t get otherwise.
BOOKSTORES

Bookstores can be a mixed bag, especially if you’re doing this completely on your own. Big bookstores generally tend to work exclusively with well-established publishers and distributors, but it might be worth looking into local and independent bookstores, especially ones that specialize in selling photography books such as Photo-eye in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Spaces Corners in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Ampersand in Portland, Oregon. But do your homework and try to work with bookstores and sellers that fit the tone of your book and customer base.

Also keep in mind that if you are already selling your book online you might lose some leverage with bookstores who are less likely to carry a book if it is already available online because of the price undercutting. On the other hand, selling your book online can help you reach a wider audience. Glenna Gordon says she was hesitant to sell her book on Amazon but sold more copies when she changed her mind, “I ultimately would have sold more copies if I’d had my book on Amazon at the beginning.” Online retailers may take a bigger percentage of your sales, but it might be worth it if it gets more eyeballs on your work.

NON-MARKETING MARKETING

You have to start early to market your book well, and it goes beyond building calendars and stalking the press. There are a lot of little things you can do to ensure that your audience remembers your project. Rick Smolan says that with every project they do at Against All Odds, they try to incorporate a cool technological hook that will resonate with people and give the media something extra to write about. With the book America 24/7, Smolan’s intern and now Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist Josh Haner had the idea to let people put their own photos on the cover. When this approach got Oprah Winfrey’s attention and she featured it on her talk show, 80,000 people tried to order the book at once and literally melted a web server. In Smolan’s book Big Data, readers can
access different videos *embedded* throughout the book with a mobile app and little icons throughout the book that act like QR codes.

To expand your audience have well known writers and photographers write essays or introductions for your work. Also write a subtitle packed full of keywords. Old school SEO.

Think about your book design too. Book covers give the first impression to potential buyers, so this can be crucial to your success. Your cover is also the face of your brand, so you want it to be memorable and recognizable. Think about how your book might be displayed and how people will encounter it for the first time, whether it is in bookstores or online. Even consider doing a handmade book to expand your audience to rare book collectors if it makes sense for your content.

Staying in the public eye after your book has past its peak marketing window is key to keeping it on people’s minds. Take advantage of other projects you are working on to refer back to your book. And consider offering discounts to certain groups and getting your book on discount sites like Groupon. That may sound hokey but if you can do it in the right market, this could really increase your exposure.

**ALTERNATIVE FUNDING**

Crowdfunding may seem like an odd thing to consider as marketing, but it is actually a great way to develop your project and build a solid audience early. It’s also a good way to fund marketing efforts later on. Rick Smolan gave Kickstarter a try for a recent project and had a good experience noting, “Asking people to give me money felt really awkward, but I found people loved the idea of helping.”

There are also a growing number of book dummy competitions that provide another route for funding. The Luma Rencontres Dummy Book Award provides €25,000 to a winner to use towards publishing their project. Entries are also featured at the annual Rencontres d’Arles photography festival that hosts almost 100,000 people every year.
FotoEvidence recognizes a documentary photographer every year and publishes their work in a book. Even if you don’t win these competitions, entering is a good way to get exposure and feedback.

Another route to consider is teaming up with sponsors. Smolan suggests asking organizations and companies that could benefit from your work to support it financially. Not only can this help cover your production costs, but it can also be a way to reach entirely new audiences. Against All Odds often works with sponsors. “We are very clear with sponsors that they have no editorial input and we don’t feature their products in our projects. Remarkably they say OK because we have gotten so much publicity for our projects. There have been so many covers of Time and Newsweek and so many TV shows and blogs,” says Smolan.

PUBLICISTS

If all of this still sounds too overwhelming, hiring a publicist is an option. They can help you navigate the publicity maze and manage your calendar of important dates and deadlines. Some publicists work on a freelance basis, so that is an option if you are working on a budget or with a smaller project. Either way, if you go this route, be sure to find someone that is excited about you and what you are doing. If you’re going to hire a publicist, they should be one of your biggest cheerleaders.

Still, no one is ever going to care more about your project than you, so don’t be afraid to tackle all of your own marketing. Rick Smolan says he has always had better luck handling his own PR, “If I call somebody up, at least I can say why I think this would be of interest to their audience.” Jason Eskenazi says he finds satisfaction in promoting his own work, “It’s kind of like fixing the bathroom yourself.”
YOUR TRIBE

Just as it is important to hire a publicist that believes in your work, it is important to figure out who your audience is and embrace them. Marketing is about eyeballs but sales are about actually connecting with people. Think critically about who would be interested in your work. Whether that is the photography community or the people in the community you worked in, or both, try to think about where they would be most likely to see your work. Then get your book out at those places: festivals, workshops, sporting events, etc. Ask people who are excited about your work within those communities to help you make connections. While editing his book, Joshua A. Bickle stayed at the mayor’s home in St. James, Missouri when he was in town working. The mayor turned out to be a great help in spreading the word about the book in the town.

Reach out to people in the photography community. At the least they can provide feedback, and they might be willing to share their contacts with you or share your work with their network if they believe in what you are doing. Jason Eskenazi says that is the goal of Red Hook Editions, “Since we’re all a giant community of photographers, editors and the like, we can combine forces and get books out into the market and get them sold.” But not only is it important to know who is on board with your work, it is just as important to know who is not on your team. Rick Smolan learned that the hard way when he was in the middle of a huge project and the publisher he was working with changed hands. The new publisher wasn’t interested in the project and never put a dime into promoting it. The takeaway? Get people on board because they care, not because you need people on board.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There are easier ways to make money than publishing photography books. Most people who publish photography books are doing so as a way to raise awareness about an issue or to increase their reputability as a photographer. Still, no one wants to go broke
making a book. Rick Smolan says his first *Day in the Life* book came close to failing, “I wanted to call it off at one point because I was so in over my head, but at that point I had no way of paying any bills so I had to keep going.” He added, “You’ve got to act very confident even if you are scared shitless. No one wants to help you if you look like you are sinking already. You have to act like ‘Don’t you want to be a part of this big success story?’”

There are a lot of ways you can promote your book, but just as photography can’t tell a story without being seen, there will be nothing to see if you don’t put your work first. Jason Eskenazi is now based in Istanbul and working on his next project. He compares the process of developing a photography book to writing a novel, “The book is kind of a living thing. It takes time to marinate and to see what comes out of all of the work that you’ve been doing over some years.” So don’t rush it and when the time comes, embrace the work that goes into making a photography book, marketing and all.