



Beyond the Book®



Interview with Scott Flora, Executive Director Small Publishers Association of North America

*Also featuring
Barbara Brannon, founder
Winoca Books & Media*

**A vision for change in independent publishing:
Certification program as Professional Independent Publisher (PIP)**

**For podcast release
Monday, June 21, 2010**

KENNEALLY: We're having a look today at a vision for the future of independent publishing. Welcome to Beyond the Book. This is Chris Kenneally, your host, and it's a pleasure to be back with you. Joining me on the phone today is a return guest, Scott Flora. He is the executive director of Small Publishers Association of North America. And Scott, it's good to talk to you again.

FLORA: Thank you, Chris. It's great to be back.

KENNEALLY: Well, what we're going to do today is chat a bit about a vision that you've been having that goes well beyond SPAN and takes a look at the publishing situation that we see before us today in 2010. And by that I mean, the growing importance to readers and to publishers of the independent sector of the marketplace. And we really are seeing an explosion of titles, and a great growth in that area.

And with that comes a certain amount of responsibility. And I think that's the vision that you have. You want to try to shape independent publishing for the better as we go forward. Tell us about that, Scott.

FLORA: Well, sure, Chris. In short, the mission of our organization, the Small Publishers Association, is to support the success, and improve the success, of independent publishing companies. And we do that through education, and communication, and group-buying discounts with our trade association.

Our new idea is the idea of creating a class of publishers that stand out, that stand above the crowd by using certification. And certification is a very common



Beyond the Book®



technique with trade associations for showing who's professional in that trade. And CFPs, RNs, MDs – all sorts of certifications. Some of them are protecting health and safety, like the RNs and the MDs. And some of them are showing professionalism. And that's what we're trying to do. That's what we're working to do with our publishers' certification program. This program is just getting off the ground in the design phase this summer and fall, and our plans are to have it activated and implemented by the end of the year.

KENNEALLY: Well, you know, it's a good point that you mentioned, which is to kind of refer to other professions where certification is required. We forget that things like RNs and MDs aren't just granted by degree institutions. These are something that are policed throughout the country by various bodies. And I guess the question that probably comes to mind for most people is that the new world we're in is allowing many, many people who never could before to become publishers. But why would it matter that they would seek this kind of certification, Scott.

FLORA: What we're working to do is to show quality of both product and process. So that, say, for instance, a distribution company or a reviewer is looking at their slush pile, and they come across a publisher who has certified the ideas that they get to the top of the pile. It certainly doesn't guarantee distribution or sales, and it doesn't guarantee reviews, but it does make them stand out. And that's what we're really trying to do is to make the publishers who gain this certification stand out.

KENNEALLY: Right. And they would stand out for a variety of different areas in the review process for bookstores and so forth. And that standing out is going to be critical to success.

FLORA: Absolutely. The numbers of books published every year is astonishing. When you parse that number out, a lot of them are technical manuals and reprints of public domain titles. But still, even for independently published books, the numbers are between 100,000 to 200,000 books published every year. And people need to stand out. And that's what we work to do, both with a certification program and by teaching how to be a quality publisher, book producer, entrepreneur, all those areas.

KENNEALLY: Right, and that is the interesting piece about publishing, I think, that attracts so many people. It requires a variety of skills. There's a creative piece to it. There's a business piece to it. This all comes together with publishing.

In the certification process, and we're calling this the PIP, I believe, Professional Independent Publisher. That would be the designation. What are the kinds of things that would be encompassed within a PIP certification?



Beyond the Book[®]



FLORA: We are going to develop a committee of publishers and other industry professionals to develop those criteria this summer. So they haven't been exactly designed. But some of the areas that we will look at are objective yes/no kinds of questions of have you published a book before? Do you have your own ISBN? Do you have publishing software? Can you produce financials? Some of these kind of things where we just know that they've obtained a level of professionalism. And then we will also look at the quality of their product, and that will be a more subjective kind of criteria. What's the cover look like? How's the editing. How's the content? And that kind of thing.

KENNEALLY: Right. And, you know, the editing is a concern for a lot of people. Readers like me, for example, who aren't necessarily fussy, but who certainly care about things like grammar, and spelling, and the organization of works, because it's an indication of how much care went into the book itself. We really care about all of that.

And joining me on the line is someone who has some thoughts in that regard and how they apply to Scott's vision. Barbara Brannon is a writer, editor and publisher. She started Winoca Books and Media half-a-dozen years ago to help emerging authors publish better works. And Barbara, welcome to Beyond the Book.

BRANNON: Well, thanks Chris, and hi Scott.

FLORA: Hello. Barbara, how are you doing?

KENNEALLY: Well, Barbara, you are there in Lubbock, Texas, I believe, and where it's a rather hot day, as it almost always is, I suppose. And you've got experience both with your own company and with various other aspects of the publishing field. But your particular concern, and the one that attracts you to Scott's vision, is the notion of editorial quality. Why is that important?

BRENNON: Well, one of the things, Chris, that I learned immediately in joining publishing education a few years ago, I did a stint in a creative writing program where we taught emerging writers how to publish better.

One of the things that I discovered from that experience was just how hard it was for good writers and good authors to learn anything about the editing process, or to learn how to be good editors, or to learn what constituted good editing. And as we set up a curriculum in that area, it became pretty evident to me that right there at the same time as the rise of print on demand, that the book industry, the publishing



Beyond the Book®



industry. was tending to lump in small publishers and independent publishers with the whole masses of self published authors.

So how can we set ourselves apart if we are in any vein of independent publishing. so that booksellers, and reviewers, and libraries, and ultimately readers understand that we're in this, not only for the creativity, but for the purpose of producing a professional product.

KENNEALLY: Right, and you know, it's true, I think, and you can tell us your own feelings about this, but an unedited or a badly edited book can be deceiving, because, frankly, we often judge things, books, a first glance. We judge by the cover or the subject matter. It's only when we get the book home, if you will, that we find out better.

BRANNON: Yeah, I agree. I think a badly produced book is just as great a turnoff to the consumer as a badly produced movie or TV show. It just takes us longer to figure out that it's bad.

So if I pick up an author's book and I see right there in the front matter that it says "Forward," like the opposite of backward, I'm a pretty savvy reader, and I'm not likely to feel much confidence that the publisher is taking care with the rest of the book. But if there are 100,000 to 200,000 new books coming on the market each year in the United States, nobody has the time to even glance through a book before making a judgment about whether they will or will not buy it, will or will not read it.

KENNEALLY: Right. And I know you've given some serious thought to this. And again, we mention that you've worked in university presses, and you've been a writer yourself. Have a Ph.D. from a creative writing program, and so forth. And this is not anything new, necessarily. I believe back in the 1950s, there was a program that helped certify editions of some of the great literary works,

BRANNON: Yeah. Yeah. Editorial quality, I think, is one of the hardest characteristics to evaluate about a book, even when you set up a big grant-funded program like the American Literally Editions program that you're talking about. But if we think about what matters most to us about a book, then the editorial quality ranks right up there.

We take a lesson from some other things that matter to us: like the accuracy of our banking and financial information, and we take for granted that banks and accountants operate according to generally accepted accounting principles.



Beyond the Book®



But books are such a highly individual and creative endeavor that we have probably not given much thought as to whether we could institute some sort of generally accepted publishing principles, and either voluntarily participate with a program like that to the benefit of everybody, or join up with a program like Independent publisher certification that Scott's talking about.

KENNEALLY: Right. And you know, thinking about the experience one might have of, shall we say, purchasing some hamburger. I mean, if you are in the supermarket, you know it's got USDA. And so that kind of give you some assurances. It's not a perfect system, but better than nothing.

On the other hand, you can go to a farmer's market, and if you trust the farmer and understand how they conduct their business, the USDA isn't essential.

So what we're not saying, as I understand you both, is that this would be a requirement of publishing, it's just a way to help consumers understand whether a work has been through a certain process or not.

BRANNON: Yeah, it's a concept that goes hand-in-hand with the certification of the publisher. If we want to find a way of saying that this certified publisher stands out from the pack, well, what is it, what is it besides whether they know how to run their software and they have an ISBN that helps assure reviewers and booksellers that they want to acquire those books.

Well, something that attests to the editorial expertise and the editorial quality that they bring to their products would probably be a welcomed thing.

KENNEALLY: Right. And Scott Flora, the qualifications that SPAN has to kind of put this forward, is that you've been conducting your SPANpro education program for some years. What are the kinds of things that you've covered in that program?

FLORA: Sure, Chris. The cover – the program covers really all areas of publishing. I guess one of our expertise is in the area of marketing and promotion, because we feel like that so many publishers come to SPAN, and they have a book. Their book's produced. And they needed to learn how to sell it. We also cover book production. We cover editing. We work on design issues, and then, also, some legal issues, entrepreneur kind of – entrepreneurship kind of issues of how to run a business, how to handle staff. Some of those kinds of things. And, also, some writing ideas.



Beyond the Book®



We're not really as strong on helping people learn how to write, because there's so many organizations that do that, but we provide some ideas, and certainly in the area of copyrighting, which is essential to marketing. We examine that as well.

KENNEALLY: Right. For the catalog or for whatever else.

Well, it's an ambitious effort. One that we look forward to checking in with you down the road a bit, Scott, about and to see where you are going. If anyone has any questions or interested in continuing their thoughts on it, Scott, what should they do?

FLORA: We have, in January, created an online community for publishers. And we've had an awful lot of people join that. Actually, we're at about 944 members in our community right now. And in the community, there is a discussion group for publishers' certification. So people can go to www.spannet.org, find the group's tab, and then when there are groups, it'll be easy to find publishers' certification. And people can read about it without joining the community. And if they want to comment, they can join the community and there's no cost to join that. So it's a great project and an exciting way for people to learn.

KENNEALLY: Well, wonderful. And we will point to that address from our own site at Beyond the Book.

I want to thank our participants in the call today. We've had on the line, Scott Flora, executive director of the Small Publishers Association of North America. Scott, it's good to talk to you again.

M: Chris?

FLORA: Thank you. I enjoyed it very much.

KENNEALLY: And we've also been chatting with Barbara Brannon. Barbara is a writer, editor and publisher and the founder of Winoca Books and Media. Barbara, thanks for chatting with us there from Lubbock.

BRANNON: Yeah, good talking with you.

KENNEALLY: And for everybody in the Beyond the Book audience, wishing you all the best, take care. This is Chris Kenneally for Copyright Clearance Center.

END OF FILE