



**Scott Flora, Executive Director
Small Publishers Association of North America (SPAN)**

Interviewed at PubWest Conference 2009

Q: We're in Tucson, Arizona for the 2009 PubWest annual conference, a gathering of publishers not exclusively from the Western part of the United States, but many of them indeed are from that region. And joining me right now is Scott Flora. Scott is the executive director of the Small Publishers Association of North America, known best as SPAN. SPAN was founded in 1996 and now has 780 members. They are based in Colorado Springs, so Scott's own journey to Tucson wasn't as long as mine from Boston. But he's here every year and SPAN is a PubWest conference partner. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Scott.

A: Thank you, Chris. Great to be here.

Q: It's good to have you back again. Nice to see you again. We were chatting just a year ago at a point in the economy when things looked – well nobody knew what was going to happen. Here we are a year later, 2009 has been a mixed year for book publishers. What's it been like for your members?

A: Well for our members it's been a tough year. They're kind of at the bottom of the market. Some of them have gone out of business. Some of them have been very flat and some are thriving, so that's good.

Q: So are there any particular things that people are doing that have proven more successful? I mean as an association you hear from a lot of different people, a lot of different experiences. Is there one way of approaching this particular time that seems a better bet than others?

A: Well I think that in any economy, and in this economy especially, our members are working to create a whole platform for themselves and for their companies. A lot of our members, the smaller publishers are professional speakers or consultants or coaches and they use book publishing to augment that both for their credibility and for their income.

Q: Well what are some things that you're doing to help them with that? SPAN conducts webinars and seminars and does a whole variety of things for its members. Tell us about some things that might be coming up.



- A: Sure. We're definitely an education-based trade association for our members and we are working on a series of webinars with Brian Jud, a book consultant and author – very much marketing-oriented both toward non-bookstore sales, which is Brian's expertise, but also getting into the bookstores. Our next webinar is next week, next Tuesday, and it's on creativity. And people can find out about that on the SPAN Web site. The other thing that we're working on is a lot more online education and we are developing an online community for our members and actually membership in that community is free to anyone that wants to sign up for it, so that's a great thing that's coming up.
- Q: You're here as an exhibitor as well as a conference sponsor, and I wonder whether you can tell us about your sense, still early hours here at the PubWest conference. Really things got underway this morning. But a sense of the mood here. The attendance is very strong. It appears that people have gotten away from the gloom, if you will, of last year, and looking forward to next year. Tell us a bit more about what you think the mood is at the conference.
- A: I think the mood here is optimistic. Most of our contact so far has been with other exhibitors, just the way the scheduling has gone. And the exhibitors that we know are optimistic about the future, about this season – actually the holiday season printing is pretty much over for these printers. But then looking toward next year, they're looking for a good year.
- Q: And you mentioned something there about approaching the sales piece of this. And for people who might be not as familiar with the business as others about non-bookstore sales. Why does that matter, and why does that matter particularly to the independent publisher?
- A: Sales outside the bookstore is a great route to go for independent publishers. And really what this means is finding markets outside that traditional train that goes – train or distribution channel that goes into bookstores. It could be corporate clients, it could be to educational clients, associations, museums and that kind of thing. And one of the things that's really important here is people can be selling cases of books at a time, say to a corporate client for training or education – and those books aren't going to get returned. A lot of times the returns from bookstores of unsold books can be a problem for a small publisher, especially with respect to the cash flow, because the distributors don't really want to pay until they're sure that the books aren't being returned. So that's one of the advantages of sales outside the bookstore.



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- Q: I know it really can make a substantial difference to a publisher to be really effective in that particular corner of the business and for people probably just getting into it, they might not realize how important it is. They don't have the returns to worry about, the sale is a final sale and they get the price that they negotiate right there at the top. All of that really matters because at this point, every dime counts.
- A: Absolutely. And I think that the most successful publishers that we see in our membership are the ones that have found the niche, and really followed up on that tight niche – specialty nonfiction books. And those are really well-adapted to sales outside the bookstore just because they can find the places that'll use those books, sell the books, buy them by the caseload so that that works well for those publishers.
- Q: Well looking ahead to 2010, what are some things that SPAN's going to be trying to do that you want to tell our audience about?
- A: The main thing that we're working on is this online community, which will go active in the next couple weeks and people can look on www.spannet.org to find out where we're at with the community. And if it is actually live, that will be the community. We're hoping – I shouldn't say hoping. We are planning to have lots of resources very much content-driven by member, member content-driven resources, discussion groups, lots of articles. People can post videos of their own presentations and hopefully people that are in the business of helping publishers and authors will get on the site and provide content for people. So it'll be a very active community and we're very, very excited about getting this up and running.
- Q: And they can have a conversation there with their peers that will probably be very helpful to them. And we were chatting before the interview about About Books, which is a book production company, and about the challenges you face when people are coming to you to publish e-books. Just give us an idea of some of the questions that a publisher or a small publisher, independent publisher ought to be asking themselves about the e-book world. We're hearing a lot about it, but there's a lot of – there's as much confusion as there is clarity, I would say.
- A: Absolutely. And I think we can simplify it into questions about format. I'm a great fan of the e-pub format that has – will quickly become the standard in the industry and that'll – it's one thing that'll really help e-books, to have one standard format. The new readers are coming out that'll read the e-pub format. I guess the other format that people need to get to that I'm not quite as excited about because it's so proprietary is Amazon's Kindle, and that's not too hard to deal with, their interface



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and upload the software and upload their content for that. So I guess format's one of the important things. Distribution is really important. So many of the small publishers have their own Web sites so that they can be distributing their content through their own Web sites – again if they have a platform, an expertise then people will come to them looking for this content.

As you and I were talking about, e-books for a long time will still be a very small percentage of the book world – something like \$2.4 billion worth of paper books sold last year and \$150 million worth of e-books sold, so the percentage is still really small. But I think that consumers are going to be looking for that. And I think that one of the things is having e-books – or e-book content, even if you're just selling a chapter at a time – can lead to the sales of your paper books. So I think that's – there are a lot of creative concepts there available for digital content because it's pretty easy to create and easy to distribute.

Q: One thing we can guarantee about the online world is that if we join again next year in 2010, when I understand the PubWest conference is going to be in Santa Fe, there'll be something that has happened that we couldn't have even known about. If we sat together in 2008 and either one of us said the word twitter, it would have been a cause for laughter. In fact you still laugh. So my question is do you get a lot of inquiries from members saying oh my God Scott, do I need to be tweeting now on top of everything else?

A: Well sure. We get a lot of questions about new things coming up. We work real hard to distribute information to our members. We don't feel like we need to explain it word-for-word but mostly just point them to those resources and they can figure it out themselves. Do I feel like they need to be tweeting? No not necessarily. I think Twitter is a world unto its own and some people really get it and really love it and some people don't. But I think the general public – the general book-buying public – doesn't have to have Twitter. That said, a lot of people are creating their platform, their communities, and using Twitter to communicate with those folks – both broadcasting out bits of information and also broadcasting links to their Web site for additional information. But also communicating on a two-way basis, which can be real powerful for creating the community around your expertise.

Q: Or just letting people know that a book signing is happening or a book has just arrived and kind of conveying their excitement about those kinds of events.

A: Oh sure. It's a great way to communicate. I think I'm probably a little bit more firm believer in creating a mailing list, a digital e-mail list and sending out a blog or



an e-mail newsletter where you can say a little bit more. But at the same time there are a group of people that are dedicated. So you do with social media have to use the shotgun. I mean marketing for years has been about the rifle shot and pinpointing those markets, but with social media one philosophy is it pays to be in a lot of places all the time.

Q: Well we can only be on one place at one time still, Scott, but each year when we get together it's a pleasure to see you. We've been chatting with Scott Flora, executive director of the Small Publishers Association of North America, best known as SPAN, here in Tucson for the annual PubWest conference. And thank you very much again for joining Beyond the Book, Scott.

A: It has been a pleasure, Chris. Great to visit with you.

Q: Likewise. And please join us for more installations from the PubWest conference 2009. As always we're on beyondthebook.com.

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