



From a Dictionary Man, the Word on Industry Trends – Interview with John Morse, Publisher at Merriam-Webster

Q: Well, hello, and welcome, again, to beyond the book. My name is Chris Kenneally, I'm the Director of Author Relations for Copyright Clearance Center, and the host for this ongoing podcast series that we do called *Beyond the Book*.

Joining me today is John Morse. John, welcome.

A: Thank you.

Q: John, is President and Publisher of Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, and has been since 1997. He's worked with the company, and it's parent company, for over 20 years. He was named Publisher in 1996, and previous to that, had been Executive Editor with responsibility for new product development, including the introduction of an electronic product line. And, of course, this a company that goes back nearly 200 years, so sometime before the electronic age. You continue to play an active role in expanding product lines and embracing new technologies. And you are a graduate of Haverford College, as well as having a Master's Degree in English Language and Literature from the University of Chicago. So, welcome again.

The reason we're talking today is that you are co-chair of the Publishing Business Conference and Expo which is taking place here in New York. I guess the first question I want to ask you about is who cares about books these days? Steve Jobs just recently said he wasn't particularly interested in the Kindle because nobody reads books. And as I heard the editor and chief of *Publisher's Weekly* say, well it depends on what you mean by books, and it depends what you mean nobody.

Why do people – this is a thriving conference, it seems to be a thriving industry as you wander around here. People do still care about books, right?

A: Very much so. And, in fact, it really is one of the themes certainly of Merriam-Webster's own publishing program. Which is to see this really as being the age of all sell, a time when really two different kinds of communication technologies exist side by side. There's the print technology, mature technology to be sure, but a

technology with, I think, a lot of life ahead of it. And the digital technologies. And I think actually we're in kind of a golden age where those two technologies can exist side by side. And certainly from this publisher's perspective, we continue to see robust print sales right alongside a very interesting and dynamic and expanding electronic business.

So, I guess I would beg to differ with Mr. Jobs on that. I think there really is, in fact, a strong book business. I think in fact, if you look at this most recent holiday buying season, one of the parts of retail where there really was an upturn in sales was in book retail. A modest one to be sure, but still in this economic climate, and against those kinds of predictions, the fact that we can look at a thriving retail climate seems very encouraging to me.

Q: You mentioned about the old technologies and the new technologies being side by side, but it's important to build bridges from one to other, clearly. They need to connect and have an interconnection. And the web is about connection. Any particular program that you've seen so far today, and I realize it's early days yet at the conference, but have you picked up any new insights, anything that strikes you as something that's worth taking back to Springfield and trying to apply to your own business?

A: Well, as a matter of fact, yes. I just came from a session that was really very, very interesting about how can publishers take advantage of various kinds of community building tools as way to market books. And we heard two very interesting presentations. One from a person at Harper-Collins who's talked about all the various community building techniques that Harper-Collins has been using both on their site, and on other community sites, to promote books.

And I thought the fascinating part of that particular talk was driving home a point that if you really want to build buzz and gather people to your sites to talk about books, you have to really let them comment about books. That we can't just use the web as a place where we put information about our books and expect to succeed with that. But if we can use the web as a place where people could come and tell us about our books, now we really are beginning to take full advantage of the web. And I think that's a very good observation. Something I certainly want to take home with me. What can we do to bring more people to the Merriam-Webster website, not just to look up words in the dictionary where we talk to them. But to really give them an opportunity to talk to us, and to talk to each other about dictionaries and about words and word histories and usage controversies and all those kind of things that engage people.

The other presenter was talking about really the effective ways we can use video for selling books, and had an outstanding statistic that something like 24% of all people who view a video about a book will take an action. That's a huge percentage, and I thought it was very interesting for all of us to think about how

can we be taking more advantage of the web, and the fact that we can now put video on the web to sell our books better.

So, clearly there are some nice connections back and forth between the books and the web.

Q: When you put in the context of the web it all sounds very new and exciting. But you happen to attend a program that I was a part of and told me something I had not realized, which was that Noah Webster, the first dictionary author or publisher in the United States was somebody very closely involved with the establishment of copyright regulations in this country. And as I was reading online about him, he cared tremendously about English as it was spoken in America. And so his dictionaries, his spellers, his rules of grammar were not bound by rules in the UK. They were bound by how it was spoken.

So, it occurs to me that he was having a conversation, or at least he was very much listening to what was going on around him. He wasn't kind of decreeing from on high. So, while it's a new idea in the context of the web for your company, at least, it's a well established practice.

A: Well, that's right. I think a lot of people, I think, have a vision of Noah Webster as sort of the elderly Noah Webster, and he looks a little stern and a little sour. But in fact, throughout his career, he was a very dynamic thinker. As you allude to, Noah Webster was one of the forces actually behind the adoption of the US Constitution, he was there at the Constitution Convention, very involved with that. But also very involved with educational publishing. The author of the *Blue Backed Speller*, that probably is the best selling book of all times, probably well over 100 million copies of the *Blue Backed Speller* were sold at a time when this nation was much smaller than it is today.

But you are absolutely right, certainly as a young man he had some very progressive ideas about language and about dictionaries and about how language should be taught, and about how language should be recorded. And he did very much believe that if the majority of people using the language were using it in a particular way, there must be some wisdom to that. And it's up to lexicographer really to understand the wisdom of people as they use their languages. And that's an interesting and progressive idea.

Also very much interested in seeing everyone in the United States be able to speak English. And at his particular time, that was far from the case. Many, many languages were spoken in this country, and he really believed that in order to be a united country we had to find ways to teach everybody English. And was very involved with that.

Q: The other thought that I had is that we're here essentially at a book business conference. And yet, what business are people in these days? It's not only the book business, talk about that. And how does that work as a challenge for you?

A: Well, I think it's true that someone like at Merriam-Webster, we are no longer purely in the book business in the sense that we are very much an online publisher as well. And one of the interesting things is, as we become an online publisher, we as a book publisher, have to start learning things that magazine publishers knew a long time ago. We have to learn how to sell advertising. And as I've told people, if you had asked me 20 years ago, what was the one part of publishing I would never have to master as a dictionary publisher, I would have told you advertising. Clearly there will not be advertisements scattered throughout a dictionary. Well, maybe not a print dictionary, but there are advertisements all over a dictionary website. So we have to begin to learn new things we haven't learned before.

But beyond that, what I really think is sort of interesting and exciting is that we start becoming I think, not just publishers, but we really are in the communication business. We are – we begin to be building the kinds of communities we were talking about a little while ago. We begin to foster communication back and forth amongst our readers, and not just to our readers.

And, one of the most interesting things for us is our readers start giving us information. One of the most fascinating parts about being in the dictionary business is right now that we know something that nobody ever knew before. Which is what are the words that people look up most frequently in the dictionary? Now dictionary publishers have long known what words are most frequently used, but we haven't known what words are most frequently looked up. Now we do know. And it's very interesting to be able to get that kind of feedback from your users telling you what are the kinds of information they're interested in. To say nothing of the ease, of course, with which they can send you e-mails and tell you about your product, tell you what you ought to be doing better, tell you what they like, tell you what they want, tell you what they're interested in. We really are developing, I think, a much more rich kind of environment in which information producers and information consumers can interact back and forth, and switch roles with one another.

Q: And certainly this whole notion of learning, it strikes me that if you know what people are looking up, and you're a publisher of all sorts of dictionaries, not just the Merriam-Webster main dictionary, but a variety of them, it may suggest to you other products.

A: Absolutely. And I think that one of the things we knew was that lots of people were asking for Spanish-English dictionaries. They're coming and they're asking for that. And we were able to fulfill that.

One of the nice things that actually turned out is that the kinds of information it seems pretty clear people want from their dictionaries is exactly, in fact, the kind of information I think we do a pretty good job of providing. They don't seem to be coming because they can't spell well. What's interesting is really how well people spell when they come to our website. So that may just be as simple as spellchecking has really met that need. But what they seem to need is more information about abstract nouns and adjectives that have multiple meanings. And particularly if there's a little shifting going on in the meaning. If it's word like ironic or paradigm or conundrum where we're using it frequently, but maybe the meanings are shifting a little. That seems to be what drives people to the website. And interestingly, that over the years that has been the aspect of the language that I think Merriam-Webster has put the most emphasis on in its own editorial program. So, it was very reassuring and encouraging that as that information came back from our users, what we found was we're pretty much on the right track.

Q: And what strikes me, and this is the final question for you, John, is that your users, your readers, your market today is no longer just the American market. Clearly if you're on the web, your market is the world. How global is the subject matter for the conference this year? And is it more global? I would assume it is, but just tell me in what aspects you think the business is more international, more global, than in the past?

A: Well, you're absolutely right in your initial premise there. The business has become much more global. And again, I think the web has helped publishers like Merriam-Webster do that. We've been able to take our content to international markets via the web in many ways much more effectively than we were able to do with – in print markets. So that great potential is there, and I think we are beginning to talk about that at this conference. I think it was interesting, for instance, our key note speaker this morning came from Canada. We're certainly opening up the North American English speaking world. But there's a lot more yet to be done yet in that area. So, there really are whole vistas of more and more interesting things we can be doing in coming years.

Q: Maybe you can get the Canadians to drop the U in favour as well. John Morse, thank you very much for joining me. My name is Chris Kenneally, Director of Author Relations for Copyright Clearance Center, and host of *Beyond the Book*. Hope you'll join us again very soon. Thank you, John.

A: Thank you.

____: Great. I think I may have run out of tape. But that's OK. I can just –

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