

Creating Series & Brands That Keep Selling

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Creating successful series and brands is an important endeavor and a big responsibility for authors and publishers. Once a series catches on, you have the opportunity to influence a wide audience as well as sell hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of books that will stay in print and be cherished for many years to come. In addition, if you do it right, you're making a significant contribution to the publishing industry. Authors can spread their words to a wider audience. Booksellers sell more books. Consumers benefit from an experience they can trust, repeat, and enjoy every time.

It all starts with ONE book

It's important to note that not every series and brand in publishing stems from a comprehensive plan. In fact, many publishers and booksellers can tell you of a series that worked which started by accident with the publication of just one title. The plans came later, after that title became a success.

Leonardo da Vinci for Kids, the book that started a successful series from Chicago Review Press, has a unique cover design. The publisher has utilized this striking cover concept in the other books in the series.

As an example, Curt Matthews of Chicago Review Press published *Leonardo da Vinci for Kids* and built on the success of that book by launching his very successful ...for Kids series, which now includes *The Civil War for Kids* and *Frank Lloyd Wright for Kids*, with more to come.

Before Matthews decided to launch this series, he thought about his next steps. When you have a successful title that might spawn a series, you should ask yourself these 10 questions before you proceed:

1. Can you extrapolate the success of one book to other books?
2. Will the subject matter work in one or many categories?
3. What is your niche?
4. Have you done the appropriate research?
5. Who will your authors be?

6. What makes a strong series or brand?
7. How many books will you publish?
8. Do you have the right elements already in place for success?
9. Can you invest the necessary time and money?
10. Will booksellers and consumers find the series compelling?

The following insights from publishers, authors, and booksellers will help steer you along the right path to creating successful series and brands.

How do you know when you have a good series or brand on your hands?

Consider the ... *For Dummies* Series: Intuition combined with grass-roots PR, mass merchandising, and unusual customer promotions helped make this series a sustainable success and ultimately a global brand. More than 600 ... *For Dummies* titles and close to 100 million *Dummies* books are now in print in 39 languages.

John Kilcullen, founding member and Chairman/CEO of Hungry Minds, believes that the best way to know whether you have a hit on your hands is to continue to follow your “intuition.” In addition, he advises monitoring actual sell-through results, anecdotal conversations, and media clippings to determine if your concept is catching on. Tenacity helps too, he believes. The *For Dummies* series now covers a diverse range of topics from computers to investing to cooking. Brand extensions include videos, CDs, audiobooks, calendars, board games, office supplies, web applications, and an upcoming TV program. The series celebrates its 10th anniversary this fall.

Kilcullen offers publishers the following guidelines for developing a single title into a global, multimedia brand:

- Make sure you have a fire in the belly to revolutionize something customers often find frustrating.
- Be proactive in evaluating your concept to see if it has established traction and velocity with a relevant and differentiated set of promises. Understand how reader “psychographics” can be addressed in your marketing programs.
- Monitor sell-through and buzz to validate your intuition about growing your franchise beyond an initial set of titles and, ideally, beyond the book category.

- Listen to your customers but remember that sometimes you just know better than the armchair quarterbacks who will do their level best to destroy your enthusiasm. Waldenbooks rejected the first Dummies book due to a variety of soft reasons, so the publisher used grass-roots selling and marketing to establish and grow this brand.

The Dummies concept could be expanded, Kilcullen explains, because the core brand promise—making confusing and jargon-filled topics fun and easy to understand and apply—had a ready market beyond computers. Whether it be technical, financial, or sexual literacy, the brand fulfilled its contract with its customers: offering a time-efficient path to success for professional development and personal enrichment.

Similarly, Jack Canfield of Chicken Soup fame stresses meeting the needs of readers with quality books that make a difference, “in our case, stories that uplift, rejoice, and motivate one to live a more loving, joyful, and successful life.”

How to keep a good thing going

Besides identifying and meeting or exceeding the needs of a clear, growing market, Kilcullen says execution is vitally important. His rules for “consistently delivering on the brand promise” are: (1) Choose a champion or brand steward whose responsibilities include managing the process and enforcing the branding program; (2) Establish a clear and consistent set of brand/editorial guidelines and don’t back down when crucial decisions need to be made; and (3) “Mind share precedes market share”—create a formidable set of unconventional marketing and promotional campaigns to keep your idea in the public eye and in the minds of your customers.

Authors as well as publishers can use branding. Jack Covert, President and Founder of 800-CEO-READ, encourages many business authors to become brand names in their area of expertise. “And you don’t have to be a Tom Peters or be published by a large publisher to be a brand name,” he believes. Witness the success of Patrick M. Lencioni, the author of *The Five Temptations of a CEO* (Jossey-Bass) and a rabid marketer. Covert’s advice to authors who want to be brand names: “Pick a niche and work your tail off!”

Dominant brands are built with time and money. Do you have the ingredients for success?

Many ingredients are necessary for creating a great series. Commonly called “look

& feel,” the most important elements are:

Quality

Be aware of the temptation to take the series too far or too deep in one category. Take the time to develop the best product you can. You will probably want to publish one or two new titles per year. If you do many more, booksellers are likely to ask you what are your best two titles and then cherry-pick your list.

The Right Research

Research for series and brands can be either relatively simple or complex, ranging from collecting observations to conducting focus groups. I prefer the simpler (and less expensive!) route of listening to my colleagues and customers. Some of the most successful books I have published grew from ideas generated in conversations, especially conversations with sales and marketing colleagues and customers.

When we launched the For Dummies brand into non-computer categories, we collected ideas from a variety of sources—authors, staff, Post-it notes from John Kilcullen’s sales calls, memos from sales reps’ bookstore visits, and comments from readers about topics that interested them. Research of this sort went into the first few year’s publications and those books were all winners!

Design

You should have a consistent look on your cover as well as consistent titling. Using the same artist and artistic technique will help make your covers look familiar. Curt Matthews cautions that you should clearly differentiate between the book’s title and the name of the series if it has one. Not doing so can cause great confusion as customers wonder what the title really is.

Like the cover elements, the interior design elements should remain consistent and have a familiar look. With the publication of new editions in a series, though, you can update the look of both interiors and covers.

Editorial consistency

If you decide to take the series plunge, I recommend that you create author and editor guidelines and even a template of elements so that you can control the consistency of the content. The editorial department at Hungry Minds did just that early on in the creation of all series they developed and it has paid off.

One of your first decisions will be whether to use the same author for successive books in the series. You can't argue with success, but there are reasons to use the same author and reasons to look elsewhere. I am in favor of using the same author for niche topics in a category.

As an example, I decided to have Eric Tyson write all the financial books in the For Dummies series because he would maintain a consistent philosophy and, more important, because he is a dependable writer and understands his audience. His books have more than 3 million copies in print and get excellent reviews.

According to Larry Vincent, author of the forthcoming book *Heroic Brands*, successful brands tell a compelling story. If a book is to deliver on its brand promise, the content cannot be in conflict with what you would expect from the brand. As an example, the logo of the Harvard Business School Press is a shield. Every shield on a book conveys credibility. Since the Press has a rich, storied, academic tradition, consumers expect its books to provide that sort of experience.

Series in some categories work better than series in others. According to Roberta Rubin, owner of The Book Stall bookstore in Winnetka, Illinois, categories that work especially well in bookstores are:

- Business
- Children's
- Computers
- Personal Growth
- Self-Help
- Sports
- Travel

Making it happen!

Congratulations to those of you who are already producing and selling excellent series and brands. I encourage anyone who is contemplating this endeavor to ask the right questions, conduct the appropriate research, and approach your activities with a vision and a passion. You will create something wonderful that will make a lasting difference to millions of readers!

Kathleen A. Welton is a 22-year veteran of the publishing industry and a PMA board member. She has been fortunate to work with many talented authors and colleagues on numerous series and brands from "Kits" and "The 100 Best..." to "...For Dummies."