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Tips for Success at Writing & Selling Ebooks

By Robert G. Yetman, Jr.

This month's edition of the newsletter is the second part of our look at how to get off the ground in the matter of writing ebooks. In the November newsletter, we took a good look at how to create your first ebook, principally from the standpoint of mechanics and functionality. This month we want to examine some of the more "open-ended" aspects of ebook creation, like some of the finer points of contents, as well as some ideas regarding the marketing and sales of your ebook product. What I thought we would do is basically divide up this month's issue into several, different tips or guidelines, and address each of those as we go, in order to make the material more easily digestible.

Write the ebook to *provide* knowledge, rather than to show off your knowledge.

An ebook should be written for the purpose of educating your reader. If you've not written an ebook previously, and your writing up to this point has been on behalf of a blog, it's important to distinguish, right away, the differences in purpose between the two. You don't want to finish your ebook and end up with what amounts to a lengthier version of your typical blog piece.

As a non-fiction writer, when you write an ebook, you are generally doing so in order to show your audience how to do something or to teach them some information they don't have but that you know they want very badly

to possess (more about that later); when you write a blog, you're usually doing so largely to position yourself as an expert.

That said, you don't have to get too dogmatic about that distinction; a blog will oftentimes be instructional, while ebooks will usually do a good job establishing your expert credentials and reflecting your opinions on sundry matters. What you want to make sure of, however, is that your ebook retains, as its first priority, the utility that a blog piece may not always offer to readers. I can tell you that the ebook, first and foremost, is looked to by the prospective buyer as a tool that will provide him with the ability to do something on his own, be it making money, saving money, managing his family, relationships, fixing his car, whatever....so you need to be sure, when you review your manuscript draft, that you have met that objective.

Make sure that your ebook subject is something about which your audience really wants to know.

This might seem like sort of a no-brainer, but allow me clarify about what I am speaking here.

Ask your audience, in any of a variety of ways, what they want to read about. One great way to do this is through social media networks. How about Twitter, for example? Ask your Twitter followers about what topic

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they would like to know more. That's just one way to go, of course. Pay attention to the comments you get on your blog; what are people saying? What questions are they asking (either directly or indirectly)? Take a look at your blog traffic analytics, as well; are some keywords trending as obviously more popular than others? Of course, you can also send out a general email query and simply ask people if there is any subject related to your general theme about which they would like to know more. The point is that you should absolutely do some research into the information that may be the most sought-after by your audience, and deliver that information to them; not only will you be meeting demand, but in doing so, will ensure that your ebook sales are as high as they can be.

Jim and I are always kicking around ideas for ebooks. The result of that effort is that sometimes we'll decide to actually put something out, while many other times, we'll decide against a lot of our ideas. The most frequent reason we cite when we decide against following through with an ebook idea is that we determine, one way or another, that there is not the apparent level of interest that we think is reasonable to justify writing one.

Don't dash headlong into writing your ebook before you write a "test" post.

OK...you think you might have a valuable topic for an ebook, but you don't know, for sure. One way to clarify that is to sort of "test market" your ebook idea by first writing a post on it. This is not necessarily a scientific process; if you don't get a lot of feedback, that doesn't always mean that there's not a paying audience for your ebook; that said, it's reasonable to assume that if you DO get a lot of feedback, there's definitely some



Build up a store of your own ebooks, and put situations like this in your rearview mirror for good.

"legs" to your idea. When you write your test blog, look to see if you get any feedback, and what the nature of that feedback is. Are you getting a lot of private emails, outside of your blog comments, from people who want more information about your test blog subject? Are you seeing things like Retweets and other guideposts to which you can point that suggest your blog post is enjoying some broad interest?

The bottom line is that if you get a good, solid response to your post on a particular subject that you're purposely testing as a prospective ebook topic, that may be all the evidence you need to decide it's worth the effort to create the ebook.

By the way, your response levels will be relative to the current size of your following, and the general level of feedback you normally get; for example, if you have a current, estimated following of around 300 people at present, it's unlikely that you'll receive as

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many as 40 or 50 response comments. If your current audience is small, your ebook audience may be small, but that's also another reason to write the ebook...to grow your audience; we'll discuss that more in a bit.

Make sure your ebook cover is well-made and looks sharp.

People do judge books by their covers, absolutely, and ebooks are no different than regular books in that way. Studies show time and again that most people decide to buy a book based on the appeal of the cover. If anything, this is more important to the ebook writer than the writer of a traditional book, because the ebook format deprives the prospective buyer of having quite as much to go on when considering an actual purchase. Accordingly, it's important that the graphic representations of your book really stand out.

What makes a quality ebook cover is no different than what makes for a good cover to a "regular" book. Covers are the "pictures of 1,000 words" that are designed to evoke your emotional desire for the material (as opposed to your intellectual desire). Beyond that, a cheap and/or boring cover reinforces the worst stereotypes about ebooks; that you're just a small-time player and/or the contents are worthless. While that won't be the case (hopefully), the impression generated by a poor cover will telegraph that message.

Unless you're especially good at graphics, which I am not, go the extra mile and hire someone to design the cover. It's pretty inexpensive. Jim has good info on this, and this topic was discussed in last month's edition of the newsletter. I can tell you that when we have someone else design a cover

for us, we go through Elance (www.elance.com), where you can easily post a job you're needing to have completed and let contractors from around the world bid on it. As Jim mentioned in last month's *Insider*, you can have professionally-crafted ebook covers made for as little as \$100 or so.

Some of you may balk at that and want to try creating your own; fine. Microsoft Office is an example of a program you can use for the cover creation process, but when it comes to the cover, I would heavily advise against being penny wise and pound foolish. Spending \$50, \$100, or even \$200 on an ebook cover in order to ensure you have a visually-appealing and highly-salable product is, in my opinion, less an "expense" and more an investment.

Give your draft to a cross-section of sample readers (experts as well as non-experts) for useful feedback.

When you have completed a clean, first draft of your ebook manuscript, do your best to find a few people who are willing to review it for you. I'm not speaking in terms of editorial quality, necessarily, although that is important; what I'm getting at here is the quality in terms of the information you're seeking to provide to the audience. The best way to ensure you have all of your bases covered is to try to have at least one expert (in your field) and one non-expert each review your draft. From the expert, you want to be sure that he agrees with the integrity and accuracy of the information you're providing; quality control, as it were. From the non-expert, you want to find out if the material, and the way in which it is presented, makes sense and can be followed. In other words, can a person with no previous experi-

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ence in the subject area learn and apply the information?

If you can't find any experts, which will be more difficult to do, remember that getting feedback from non-experts is usually more important, anyway – they are the ones who will be the best candidates to buy your ebook. When you *can* get it, though, expert feedback is very useful, to help ensure that your information is appropriately correct.

Make sure you are *selling* the ebooks you should be selling, and *giving away* the ebooks you should be giving away.

You want to get your ebook into the hands of readers. Question is, do you sell it, or give it away?

That may seem like an odd consideration, but think this through for a moment; if you're still in the mode of building an audience, you might find it much more useful to use your first ebooks as giveaways, rather than attaching price tags to them. Going that route is not likely what you had in mind when you first considered the idea of writing an ebook, but it can be just as, if not more, useful to your bottom line as creating an ebook for explicit sale.

Ultimately, what you are seeking is as large a base of loyal audience members as possible who will be receptive to the products you make available for sale. While the task of growing that audience will never end, the size of that audience during the earliest stages of your business growth will likely be very small. Assuming that is the case, your primary consideration at that point is not creating products for sale, but simply doing whatever you can to increase the size of the

audience. To worry about selling ebooks to an audience of, say, 300 or 400 people, is far less important than getting the number of regular visitors to your site up to the tens of thousands. Now, I'm not saying that you shouldn't sell any ebooks until you have 30,000 visitors a month to your site or anything like that; the threshold will surely be far lower, and you'll have to decide what that is. All I'm saying is that if you can tell that you have relatively few visitors to your site each month, there's probably more benefit to using your first ebooks as momentum-building tools (for example, to encourage people to sign up for your weekly email newsletter) than as overt sales products.

Once you're satisfied with the size of your audience, at least in terms of having a minimum that's worthwhile enough for you to be able to effectively sell an ebook, *then* you can think of your ebooks as products.

All of this said, it's important to recognize that selling vs. giving away need not always be an "either/or" proposition. At Christian Money.com and Christian Internet Income, we have a long history of giving away products in addition to selling others. What I would suggest is that if you have a new and/or small audience at present, that you plan to use your first one or two ebooks as giveaways, and then as you create additional ebooks, you can use those as sales products. At what point you make the transition is up to you, and if you intend to continue to use ebooks as giveaways, you can generally get to that point sooner rather than later.

Be sure to price your ebook correctly.

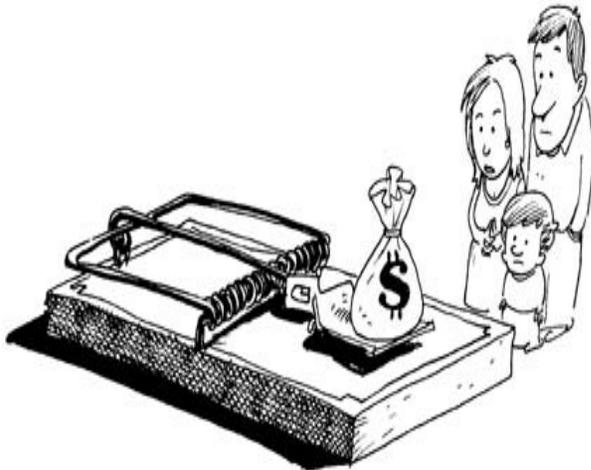
You've decided you want to *sell* your ebook. Good enough. Now...how in the world do

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you price it?

Pricing an ebook that you bring to market isn't always a simple matter, and the fact is that underpricing your creation can be as bad as overpricing it. We all know that if you overprice something, prospective buyers will be hesitant to fork over their money if they are confident they can get a similar product for less, but if you charge too *little* for the product, a different kind of hesitation can take over. Charging too modest a sum of money runs the risk of telegraphing to your potential customers that the product simply isn't very good. I think whenever we are in the market for any good or service, we are all usually cognizant of this issue. Speaking for myself, it is rare that I will ever opt for any version of a product that has affixed to it the lowest price. I always ask myself the same question about products priced on the low end: "How good can it really be?" While there is never anything wrong with achieving substantial value in a transaction or otherwise getting a bargain, *price* and *perception of quality* have been shown to be inextricably entwined in the minds of most shoppers.

Realizing a strong measure of financial security need not be difficult or fraught with risk; it can be achieved with a consistent effort made on behalf of your Internet marketing activities.



One mistake that a lot of neophyte ebook creators make is to decide that an ebook should "suffer" from a diminished price because it is less than a "real" book. That is not true, and it should not be priced that way. Ebooks should be priced comparably to traditional books. The price of an ebook should be determined on the value that it offers to the buyer, not on its format. If a product provides the means by which someone can earn many thousands of dollars if they learn and apply the information it offers, what should the price of that product be, and should that price be compromised simply because the information is transmitted electronically as opposed to on paper that's bound inside a front and back cover?

That said, it's not unlikely that a neophyte ebook *buyer* might expect to pay less for the information than it's worth out of deference to that reasoning. The way you deal with this, and by enhancing the perception of value, in general, is by having a terrific marketing campaign, to include a sharp *sales page*, for your product. It is incumbent upon you to do a good job pitching your ebook, pointing out all of the great features and advantages that it offers to the buyer. An effective sales page can go a long way to convincing those buyers who fear they might be getting less of a product when they buy your book that they're misguided and that the information they will receive is simply too valuable to pass up.

Now, one outside consideration of ebook pricing that may be applied by a buyer and which I don't think is wholly unfair has to do with the *credibility of the author*. Again, as long as your ebook imparts good, useful information, and provides enough of it to be competitive with other, similar offerings, that

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should be enough to have your book looked at favorably. However, if you are, in fact, writing your first ebook, and your credentials as an expert in your field and/or as an author are presently more limited, it's not entirely unreasonable for the prospective buyer to consider that both in terms of the book's price, as well as in terms of buying it at all. Remember, we've discussed before the idea that creating ebooks in and of itself is a great credibility-enhancer, but the downside to that is that if you *are* relying on ebook authorship for that purpose, then you will have an extra challenge when it comes to selling your first creations against competition that may have stronger resumes at that point.

It's nothing about which you should be discouraged, because it's a natural part of the process in getting from Point A to Point Z, but you have to recognize that you're going to be dealing with it. When Jim Paris wrote his first ebook, he already had a long and significant resume in the field of personal finance and entrepreneurship, a resume which included the authorship of many traditional books through a variety of publishers. For Jim, he not only came to the ebook "table" without facing the challenge of having to establish his credibility, but he represented the stiff competition for *other* ebook creators who were looking to write on the subjects about which *he* was writing.

The problem is, few among us are writing our first ebook with that built-in advantage. So, how does the fact that you may still be in the credibility-building phase affect how you price your ebook?

Before you slap a price on to your ebook, you will want to do some research on those that are available currently within your gen-

eral area of expertise and see how they're priced. What you want to try to do here is come up with an appropriate average price for an ebook in this realm, based on a general comparison, and then make adjustments to your ebook price based on variables like length of ebook, your credibility as an author, whether you want to offer a competitive price advantage to encourage sales, and any other appropriate considerations.

(Note: In last month's issue, Jim talked about the idea of adding a video to your ebook to create more of a digital "package," that is an excellent idea, but for purposes of this discussion, we will leave that alone and focus simply on the process of pricing an ebook.)

When you start evaluating ebook prices, it's not unusual to see them priced all over the place...from under \$10, to over \$100. I sometimes wonder if the people who are pricing some of these products just have no idea how to do it.

Again, consider the price of a traditional book. How much is a useful, hard-bound, how-to book these days? Do you find many for over \$100? Do you find many for under \$10? Generally, the price of a quality book like that is somewhere in the range of \$20 to \$50...and that's probably the same general range you should look to when considering a price for your ebook. Of course, your effort at looking at other ebooks that are similar to yours and already on the market will help clarify the precise point for you, but that's likely the range in which you'll end up.

Let's say you've decided that, before considering any other factors, your examination of other ebooks reveals you should start at a price of \$35. Good enough. Now, it's time

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to consider adjustments based on the factors we've previously discussed. If your ebook is shorter or otherwise has less information than others, you may consider adjusting the price downward appropriately; if it is longer or seems to contain more information, it might make sense to bump up the considered price a bit.

If you feel like you have well-established credentials as the author of your product and feel those credentials are useful selling points, then you would be justified in factoring in a premium on that basis, as well. Conversely, if you feel that your credentials at this point are not as impressive as those of other ebook authors who are also writing in your subject area, you might consider a discount for that.

Moreover, if you want to try to establish a competitive selling advantage via price, you can take that into consideration, too. If you like the idea, all other things being equal, of offering a lower price to encourage better sales, then do so, but be careful not to go *too* low. Remember what we discussed earlier about having a price that's so low that it suggests a poorer-quality product (even if it's a *great* product in reality). If you want to offer a lower price from another popular product that's selling for around \$35, knocking off \$5 to encourage a price advantage should be enough. If you want to account for *multiple* diminishing factors (lower author credibility, less information, *and* a wish to jump-start sales), you can offer an even bigger discount, but be careful about ever offering anything more than 20% off of your competition's price. From our \$35 example, a discount of 20 percent gets you to \$28. Anything more than that, and you risk having your ebook perceived as something not worth having.

By the way, you can apply the same rule in reverse; if you decide that there is a combination of factors that supports the idea of charging *more* for your ebook, I would still keep to that 20 percent figure as a guideline. For example, if you believe your product offers more information and that your credibility as an author is excellent, there is no reason you cannot charge a little more than your competition. However, remember that if you decide to be one of the higher-priced offerings on the market, you will have to go the extra mile on your sales page and in your other marketing efforts to demonstrate why your ebook is worth the extra money.

There is no precise formula for establishing an ebook price, and it is by no means an exact science. You will have to make your best guess at the outset as to what your product should cost, and just see how things go. Remember, too, that nothing prevents you from adjusting the price in the future. That is, just because you go to market with a particular price doesn't mean you cannot change that price...up or down...to better reflect the potential of your creation—finding the best price point is oftentimes a work in progress.

Honestly, achieving success at creating and selling your own ebooks is not that difficult at all.



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Unless you have a compelling reason for doing so, avoid writing an ebook that is too time-sensitive.

One of the issues that writers of non-fiction, how-to books of all kinds face is the matter of timeliness of information. That is, the concern of for just how long the information that their books provide to the general public will remain relevant, interesting, and useful. All writers have to deal with this. I can tell you that when you're planning a traditional book with a large, well-known publisher, part of the consideration process involves an analysis by the publisher regarding for how long your suggested material will be relevant, and how the final contents and format of the book may need to be modified as a result of that consideration.

The basis for this examination is the issue of salability; that is, will your subject and the supporting material be relevant long enough so that you can make the book available for sale for at least a year or longer? If the area about which you write is not subject to frequent changes or evolutions, then you will likely be able to create a product that will remain timely for years. If, however, you are writing in an area where material changes occur more often, you might want to consider that as you map out the project in advance and account for as many of those changes as possible. While it is unlikely that your ebook will have the ability to remain new and "fresh" for many years (but certainly possible, depending on the subject), you don't want to write about something that will become outdated in a month or two. The bottom line is that when you write an ebook, you want to have created a quality, useful product that you can sell for as long as possible.

Do not write an ebook of your own until you have purchased and consumed other ebooks.

When I have spoken and written about the issue of creating press releases, I have always emphasized the importance of getting in front of many different press releases both before and after you gain experience writing your own. It's certainly more important before you've created the first one, but it's also important to keep reviewing what others are doing, to note any changes or improvements that you can incorporate in your own creations.

The same idea applies to ebooks. You should not write an ebook if you've yet to purchase and thoroughly review several of them. This will ideally also be a part of the process associated with your effort at properly pricing your ebook, but that aside, it's chiefly important that you see, through and through, just how a variety of ebooks "look." Be sure to buy them at different price points. Doing so will allow you the opportunity to get an overall look at what seems to work in terms of format and content for an ebook, relative to the price being charged.

We hope, between last month's issue as well as this one, that you have enough information to get you started in creating your first ebook (or, if you've already written a few, that you've been able to pick up some helpful information you didn't know beforehand). Like with everything new, the most important thing is to do *something*. Don't be too concerned that your first ebook won't be masterpiece, or that you don't know if you are "expert" enough to be writing one, and allow those concerns to keep you from taking the first step; just dig in...and good luck!