

## Implement like hell

Alison Jones

Opinion - Publishing Monday, 30th November 2020

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*The disciplines we've learned during the pandemic will serve us well in the years to come, writes Alison Jones*



Small publishers, along with independent booksellers, have felt the brunt of the pandemic's impact on the book trade. Luckily, they've also led the way in demonstrating the enduring truth of Goethe's famous observation: "Fresh activity is the only means of overcoming adversity."

This was particularly in evidence at the recent Independent Publishers' Guild (IPG) Autumn Conference, where I gave a session in conversation with James Woollam (MD, David & Charles) about staying agile in the face of this year's many and varied challenges. The IPG's research revealed that more than 70% of independent publishers reported a decrease in print sales over the crisis, but over half saw an increase in digital sales and nearly all reported substantial changes - in many cases improvements - to working practices and to sales and marketing, changes that will benefit them long after a vaccine has returned us to something approaching normal.

This has been our experience at Practical Inspiration Publishing, and while the details of our response will be different to other publishers in different sectors or with different priorities, I believe the principles underpinning them are true for any business.

Our philosophy can be summed up simply as this: know who you are; start from what you have; focus on what you can do.

### **Know yourself**

Knowing who you are is at the core of any strategy, of course. But in a moment of crisis, your core values and your defining purpose become the touchstone of your improvisation. Just as every piece of improv begins with a "handle", or premise, every business's response to crisis begins with its fundamental purpose. At Practical Inspiration, it's "supporting authors and championing the value of books for businesses", and our defining values are connection, curiosity and creativity. That clarity proved a helpful starting point for evaluating our options.

Along with knowing who you are, you need a clear-eyed view of what you have to work with. This is when the investments you've made in infrastructure, training and social capital in the good times really start to pay their way. For us, our key assets included our systems and processes (already robust and designed for remote working), our community (both authors and business book enthusiasts) and routes to reach it



(podcast, newsletter and Facebook groups), our D2C capability, and our e-learning platform. (Luckily for us, our wonderful distributors NBNI turned out to be a great asset too, keeping that D2C channel working right through the pandemic.)

And plugging those two variables - who you are and what you have - into the great equation of this year's crisis generates a finite range of possible solutions - what you can do. Your job is then, as Jack Welch put it, to pick one or two and "implement like hell". For us, the route forward proved to be three key initiatives: one to engage our readership directly (a virtual writing retreat based on our elearning platform), one that showcased and supported our authors (a series of webinars focused on helping businesses manage the disruption); and one that allowed us to sell ebooks in bulk to support authors giving virtual talks (integrating Glassboxx into our website).

Nobody would have chosen to go through what we've gone through in 2020. But for us and for many publishers, the changes we've made in response will serve us well for years to come, and have given us a new awareness of our own distinctiveness, resilience and agility. And maybe that's the most enduring legacy of all.

**Alison Jones is founder and director of Practical Inspiration Publishing.**

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