



D.C. Spotlight: A Capital Book Business

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All Washington, D.C.–area publishers agree: in the years since the American Library Association conference was last in the city in 2019, there have been “challenging moments, particularly those first few weeks when we all went home and wondered, now what?” says Al Bertrand, editorial director of Georgetown University Press.

“The first thing we learned is that we had to pivot our businesses,” says Tony Lutkus, president of Diamond Book Distributors. Robin Noonan, director of public relations and marketing at U.S. Naval Institute Press (NIP), notes, “We’re not going back to the ways we did things before.” Below are some of the challenges, pivots, and new ways of doing business described by some members of the D.C. publishing scene.

Slack-ing off

Georgetown’s Bertrand wasn’t the only person who talked about hybrid working environments, but he was the first one to mention using Slack, the online project-management tool. “It’s increased transparency and communication for us at a time when we couldn’t be face-to-face in our office,” he says.

Julie Kirsch, senior v-p and publisher of Rowman & Littlefield, echoes Bertrand’s sentiments about the “positive development” that hybrid offices can be, especially when it comes to hiring the best people for the job, regardless of geographic location. And while American Psychological Association’s publisher Rose Sokol doesn’t encourage actual slacking off by her colleagues, she notes that the APA’s mission and publications add workplace emphasis to staff maintaining their own mental wellness: “Like everyone else, we had to flip overnight, and we were able to do it because we have a really strong team, and a really good work culture that allows for different situations.”

On the download

Many publishers learned a big lesson during the pandemic about digital assets, books, and other types of content. At the National Endowment for the Humanities, Office of Communications deputy director Paula Wasley notes that when an exhibition in partnership between the ALA and

the 9/11 Museum to commemorate the 20th anniversary of September 11 had to change due to the pandemic, the posters that had been meant to travel between libraries were digitized and made into print-on-demand files.

At National Geographic Kids Books, v-p and editorial director Rebecca Baines says that the company's extensive and varied backlist allowed it to quickly pull together learning assets, including worksheets and puzzles, to aid parents, teachers and librarians during school closures. But Linda Kean Griffin, chief of the publishing division at the International Monetary Fund, had a more dramatic response: "We just put an end to all of our print because we didn't have a warehousing and fulfillment operation in place," she says.

Off-pitch

Rowman & Littlefield's Kirsch mentioned, along with several of her colleagues, that even when things worked inside the office, there were glitches with authors, including fewer pitches coming in from journalists, academics and creatives. "Everyone has been affected in some way by the pandemic, whether that means illness, caregiving, or burnout," APA's Sokol says. "Authors are no exception."

Gary Thompson, editorial director of the Dead Reckoning graphic novel imprint at NIP, agrees that getting good pitches has been tough, noting that he's hoping to see more as people adapt to a new stage of pandemic life and work.

David Boaz, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, adds, "When we're trying to make our products look as good as possible in the face of restricted resources, mitigating author expectations can be tough." He notes that everything has been slower during the pandemic, ranging from supply chain concerns to distribution challenges, and even for him personally, in learning to edit online instead of with a red pencil.

A little help from our friends

Speaking of distribution, quite a few of the publishers sang the praises of independent bookstores. Shahid Khan, publisher of Arc Manor and its imprints, says bookstores have continued to champion science fiction.

Diamond's Lutkus says that booksellers have had to "learn to reach out to their customers beyond their previous comfort zone, and they rose to the occasion." He adds that this will serve bookstores well in the future, because "now they can integrate what they've had to learn about the digital world into their everyday business."

However, an even greater number of the publishers sang the praises of libraries and librarians, both in general and in terms of keeping the flames of book discoverability alive during isolation. David Miller, president and publisher at Island Press, says, "One thing we started during Covid was lifting the limit on licenses for our books at academic libraries, making these resources more accessible to students."

The new normal

Lutkus attended the 2022 London Book Fair. “It was heaven!” he says. “I was one of about 12 Americans there, and it was great to reconnect with colleagues and meet new ones, and so getting together at ALA is going to be really nice.”

The Cato Institute’s Boaz says that everyone recognizes “some conversations go better in person, and we missed the serendipitous exchange of ideas during breaks and in the hallways. We’re coming back to more of that and it’s a good thing.”

Meanwhile, Sokol of the APA says, “For the most part, we were able to go completely virtual and still are. We’re still following the science about how to move slowly back to in-person gatherings. And when you can get your book content to 500 people who signed up for a webinar, you’re reaching so many more than you normally might. So we’re seeing new opportunities.”

There may be other material gains—or one might say losses? Baines of NG Kids specifically mentions the relief she feels in not finding “piles and piles of unnecessary printouts” on her desk, because now it’s so much easier to view book layouts online. “We’re National Geographic. We’re concerned about the earth, and I used to have a stack of paper about three feet high on my desk. I’m glad those days are gone.” The importance of postpandemic attention to sustainability is something everyone in the D.C. publishing scene can agree upon.