

KOMENAR Publishing and Community, Part 2

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Robert Gray

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Charlotte Cook portrays her efforts to launch and sustain [KOMENAR Publishing](#) as "my ironwoman experience," drawing upon "a huge catalogue of experience and expectations." She is also inspired by her favorite bookseller, husband Richard, owner of Sunrise Bookshop & Metaphysical Center in Berkeley, Calif. She describes him as a "cosmic bartender . . . people come in and tell him stories about their life, then instead of a drink he gives them a book. Sounds like a community bookseller to me."

Perhaps we're all in the cosmic bartender game, but how can one new, small publisher translate her particular experience, vision, and desire for community into national success?

It ain't easy.

"The book industry is an injured enterprise," says Charlotte. "Just the fact that so much is consignment business startles me. The bolstering cry that 'you can always return it' means that product choices can be only for the moment. And of course discounts to readers mean little room to cover costs and therefore stay in business . . . and suggest that a book's content or long-term value isn't worth full price."

Concerned that she will sound like "another whiny publisher," Charlotte insists that she is just "trying to figure this out. The alternative or small publisher is held suspect. I don't know why. I can say that our experience has led to the following joke: Why did the chicken cross the road? To get away from a small publisher. Now when you laugh--and it isn't an 'if,' is it?--it's because you identify with the chicken. But I don't. That reaction doesn't make sense to me."

Charlotte cites her experience with *My Half of the Sky* by Jan McBurney-Lin, which garnered an [August 2006 Book Sense Pick](#), as symptomatic. "We rejoiced at our good fortune, then everything sort of stopped there. Instead of books going onto shelves and through the hands of booksellers into the grip of readers, we saw digital images of the art work show up as if books were within reach of a reader. But the title was only available by special order. The outcome: an increase of maybe 800 books with a quick set of sales. Nice, but booksellers within the Book Sense community were more passive than active, leaving us with a profound sense of disappointment, not only in sales but for all the work we have done to be part of the non-chain bookseller renaissance."

What had her expectations been? "We thought each Book Sense bookseller would carry a copy or two of the title and place the book in a prominent display. We thought that each bookseller would at least acquaint him- or herself with the title and why it received attention. We thought that books getting Book Sense attention would give us a bit of buzz. We thought more booksellers from outside the regional areas we targeted at trade shows would discover our book(s). Our smallest expectation also met with disappointment--that we had ended the need to prove we were not a subsidy publisher."

Building credibility one bookshop at a time is a hard road. One strategy KOMENAR employs is a Starter Kit, sending at least one complimentary copy of each title to booksellers. According to Charlotte, "The string attached is that, when those books sell, the bookseller places an order to replace them. We use the honor system, and it's a great deal for all. We've had good performance from this."

Charlotte believes that community building for small publishers must be multi-tiered. She calls the work of ABA and Book Sense "valuable and necessary," and is quick to point out "how grateful we are to these wonderful people," but stresses the absolutely critical role of regional associations, which "tackle issues of community all the time. They push and shove--in the nicest ways--issues of business practices, relationship, and competition out into the open. KOMENAR's staff has been critiqued and introduced, teased and soothed, and much more by some of those people and always with an eye for this publishing house and that bookseller to do better. We have never felt injured or patronized."

According to Charlotte, KOMENAR's strategy is to "push ahead, focusing on people who share our passion: reading compelling fiction." Following that path, she will continue to look the industry in the eye: "I question what I see. What I choose to question and how has often been taken as hard opinion. Not so. People who know me know that my expressions of frustration are me on my way to a solution or some humor." The stuff, perhaps, of dreams *and* community.

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