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Book Publishers: Learn From Digg, Yelp—Even Gawker

Book publishing could keep itself vital by taking a page from Web 2.0 technologies, but it has a long way to go. Here are some lessons

by [Sarah Lacy](#)

Amazon.com's Kindle electronic reader has come a long way since its late 2007 debut was met with mixed reviews, some derisive. Who could forget the moment at last year's Le Web Conference in Paris, when [legendary designer Philippe Starck sniffed](#) (BusinessWeek.com, 12/20/07), "It's a pity. It's almost modern." The audience erupted into laughter.

Amazon ([AMZN](#)) is laughing now. The Kindle, a device that lets people download, store, and of course read books in a digital format, could become a \$1.1 billion business for the company next year, accounting for 4% of sales, according to a widely read Aug. 11 note by Citigroup ([C](#)) analyst [Mark Mahaney](#).

Trailblazer that it is, Amazon knows well the benefit of applying a little technology to the stodgy business of publishing. Its flagship e-commerce business is one of the big success stories of the Internet, having revolutionized how people browse, shop for, and review books. Through Kindle, Amazon could do the same for how people read books.

Publishing is a subject near and dear to me—and not only because for the past two years I have been writing my first book. One of my parents was a philosophy professor and the other taught high school literature. Books were everywhere in my upbringing.

I want to keep it that way. A way to do that is to ensure that publishing learns how to exploit the full benefits of the social media tools now taking hold of the Web. Newspapers dragged their heels and look what's happening to them. As great as the Kindle is, publishing has a long way to go.

Herewith, five lessons that book publishers should take from the new Web.

Make it social.

Reading a book is an incredibly solitary experience. That's both a blessing and a curse. Like most busy professionals, I don't have a lot of downtime. What little free time I have could easily be filled by other pursuits—chiefly, time with a husband I rarely see. When I do commit to a book I love, I want to talk about it. This impulse explains why book clubs were all the rage in the 1990s.

There has to be a way for Web 2.0—a movement whose *raison d'être* is to connect people—to meet the ongoing need for building community around books. Every publisher should at a minimum build a Facebook app. around its titles. The limitation with book clubs is time- and space-related. Not everyone can get their schedules (and geography) to mesh, and not everyone can read a book in the same time frame. But social networking could do for book clubs what Scrabulous did for fans of Scrabble—it let them play games together online, whenever they want

[Yelp](#) has mastered the art of making the most of online excitement in an offline world. The business review site

became a force in San Francisco because of the real-world scene that grew up around it. Yelp events became raucous parties. It made the site stickier because it became an integral part of many people's social life. Suddenly, sitting alone at a computer penning a 1,000-word essay on why you love your dry cleaner became a social experience.

Take book tours out of the stores.

The conventional wisdom in publishing is that book tours no longer work. I agree, insofar as tours are confined to bookstores. The sad truth is that bookstores are declining in relevance. There are exceptions, of course, but even stores that draw big crowds for an author will struggle to reach the wide community of people interested in a particular author.

I'm learning this firsthand through what I'm calling my User Generated Book Tour, announced on my blog on a whim. My only rule: I'd go to 10 cities (not including San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York) based on response and enthusiasm. With few exceptions, I've held no bookstore events.

And while I give huge props to my publisher Gotham for funding a very unconventional book promo, this approach hardly breaks the bank. Blogs and other social media tools including [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), MySpace ([NWS](#)), and [LinkedIn](#) almost surgically pinpoint a writer's fan base in any city, rendering marketing easy and cost-effective. Any writer who's been savvy about social networking has at the same time been mapping a fan base and contacts throughout the country.

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