

Chicago Tribune PERSPECTIVE

Time for book publishers to take a page from digital media

BY AARON GILBREATH

Last month a fellow bibliophile, someone with whom I work at a bookstore in Portland, Ore., described one of Kindle's newest TV commercials. In it, a woman in red struts past her friend who asks where she's going. "I want to get a book that came out today," she says. When he tells her that he does too, she suggests he join her at the bookstore.

"I'm good," he says, then pushes a button on his Kindle. "Get it."
"It made me want to run out and buy one," my co-worker said, "and then want to cry." I know exactly what she meant: Even to a devout bibliophile, the ad is so effective that it arouses conflicting urges to own a Kindle and resist it on principle.

Another issue the commercial raises is one so obvious that I am shocked I haven't heard it before. Why hasn't America's publishing industry launched an ad campaign as seductive and aggressive as the Kindle's? Not to market front-list titles or authors, but to market the paper book form itself? In other words, sell consumers on the exclusive pleasures and qualities traditional books offer that e-books cannot. That's exactly what Kindle's TV commercials have been doing, saying here's what we can do that regular books can't.

Kindle ads are ingeniously engineered. Through a string of images (Kindle in your back pocket, Kindle withstanding licks from a dog), Kindle advertises itself as thinner, lighter and more durable than a book. And with a number of memorable taglines like "Books in 60 seconds," Kindle boasts its unique advantages: 900,000 titles available on Amazon; rapid downloads; able to hold an entire library in the space occupied by a single paperback.

How can paper books compete with that? If traditional book publishers want to survive, then their marketing departments better think of a way. And fast.

TV commercials have a successful track record of changing public opinion. To combat pork's reputation as unhealthy, blue-collar food, the National Pork Producers Council launched their memorable "Pork: The Other White Meat" campaign in 1987 and fashioned the meat's image into something lean, versatile and fit for fine dining. Pork sales rose 20 percent by 1991.

Publishers need to take the same tactic. For too long, American trade publishing has taken the path of least resistance. Sure, Harper Perennial, Riverhead and Grove/Atlantic advertise in widely distributed literary magazines. You see indie and university presses in these journals too. But such ads preach to the converted. Because they're up against such powerful deep-pocket competitors as Apple and Amazon, publishers should run funny, visually stimulating ads in less literary venues.

Publishers' marketing budgets have grown tight; staffs cut and commercials aren't cheap. But e-books account for as much as 5 percent of total American book sales, and counting, so if publishers don't find a way to get consumer attention, then their fate is that of a lazy dog snubbing in the street.

Publishers should tantalize consumers by evoking books' sensory pleasures: the smell, the feel in your hands, that crisp, appealing crinkle of a turned page and smooth snap of a dust jacket. Publishers should elicit the joys of "curling up with a book," the satisfaction of seeing your library on a shelf in your bedroom — the years of your life marked by rows of colorful spines, the pages covered with marginalia. In doing this, publishers could borrow vinyl enthusiasts' lines like, "Records have

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a certain smell. You can't smell an MP3," and, "I associate certain records' smells with a certain summer, a particular girlfriend." Audiophiles also discuss fidelity, how records sound undeniably better than MP3s. Surely there's a book analog waiting to be developed.

Another element that record people talk about is album art and inserts. Sorry, but no matter how many pixels it contains, an iTunes "digital booklet" just isn't as appealing as a large booklet printed on shiny, firm card stock with a velvet page inside. Maybe there's a TV adline in there somewhere: "A digital book could never do this..."

Taglines are powerful. Consider all the clever catchphrases that have embedded themselves into popular culture: iPhone's

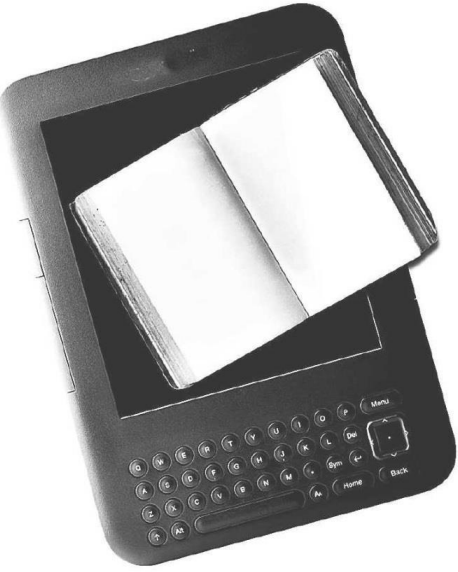
recent "There's an app for everything" slogan; GEICO's — so easy, a cave man can do it; Budweiser's "Whassup?"

I'm not suggesting that commercials are going to save print media. I'm saying that New York publishing's apathetic approach to advertising is not only an indignity to its rich history, it's financial suicide. Maybe fighting a turning techno-cultural tide isn't so easy a cow-man could do it, but if there was a sudden 40 percent drop in taco sales, would taqueria owners simply throw up their hands and grumble, "Geez, we'll have to sell the restaurant"? No, determined owners would enact a campaign that combined increased advertising, better signage, maybe limited-time offers and coupons. This isn't to suggest that publishers have to dress books up in a taco costume and wave to passersby on the street, only that they have to make a stronger effort. This isn't Fitzgerald's or Steinbeck's era. People aren't lining up at bookstores to buy newly released novels.

I have no formal business training. I'm just a guy who reads a lot, works at a bookstore, and knows the power of advertising. I studied evolutionary biology in college, though, so I see this in Darwinian terms.

Meekness and apathy aren't traits evolutionarily selected for in survivors. Physical prowess, problem-solving, risk-taking — these are survivors' traits. Occasionally aggression works too. Meaning, publishers could remind customers that, no matter how much pulpywood paper books require, a book's ecological footprint is far lighter than an e-reader's, which is the literary equivalent of a cellphone. Kindles and iPads will experience the same pattern of upgrades and obsolescence as iPods, computers, cars and iPhones, so expect to see new models continuously replacing last year's model until they themselves end up in the landfill. How you see them of China's smoldering cellphone landfills? Or read about the toxins seeping from them into the soil and water table? Unlike paper pages, how many thousands of years does it take e-readers to decompose, if they ever do at all? Sure, Kindles are convenient, but in environmental terms, they're the cellulose acetate cigarette filler of the reading world.

See? Bookish types can play dirty too. Aaron Gilbreath is a clerk at Powell's Books in Portland, Ore.



GETTY PHOTO

Air guitar and reality

BY JESSE RIFKIN

Some people play drums. Others dance. Many sing.

I play guitar.

Air guitar.

I recently competed in the annual U.S. Air Guitar Contest, temporarily replacing my identity of a mild-mannered, middle-class college sophomore with my doppelgänger, rock god and music legend "Air-Rock Obama." Contest rules are straightforward — a song of each contestant's choosing blares through the speakers, as he or she acts out playing the guitar. Only without an actual guitar.

When I described this event to others, most were perplexed. "There are no instruments, then?" questioned my mother, disbelievingly. "Just you alone on a stage, miming?"

"I considered that for a moment before answering. 'Yeah, pretty much.'"

The parenting book clearly had not prepared her for this.

Her reaction was indicative of most other responses I encountered, revealing an underlying trend: People generally did not consider the contest a legitimate com-

petition, for it was not real. It contained no authenticity, thus rendering the entire affair meaningless — or so the reasoning went. However, this represents not only invalid logic but a hypocritical viewpoint.

A quick glance around demonstrates that the majority of our entertainment is not in fact real, but rather composed of fictional stories or invented narratives. How else to classify "Harry Potter," "Twilight," "Avatar," "Star Wars," "Lord of the Rings," "Transformers" and countless other cultural phenomena? Fantasy and science fiction consistently outsell more "real" fare, such as documentaries or nature programming. Modern popular music reeks of disingenuousness. Britney Spears songs feature vocals digitally pitch-adjusted by studio technicians, pop star Ashlee Simpson was caught during a live performance lip-synching and Lady Gaga launched a career out of seemingly daily image changes. Even so-called "reality" programs dominating the television landscape are partially scripted.

Favoring the fictional over the genuine has real-world ramifications beyond mere entertainment. The Obama administration repeatedly altered information

regarding Osama bin Laden's killing — apparently, bin Laden was armed and unarmed, surrendered and fought to the death, and did and did not use his wife as a human shield. George W. Bush claimed Iraq harbored weapons of mass destruction despite concrete evidence, then later displayed a "Mission Accomplished" banner although combat operations persisted years later. Bill Clinton blatantly lied on national television regarding his personal affairs. Sarah Palin often references Ronald Reagan as a tax-cutting government-downsizer despite his raising taxes and creating a Cabinet-level government agency. All examples occurred to mislead a gullible public and media by connecting a simulated narrative. In the words of Napoleon Bonaparte: "History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon."

And contrary to popular belief, there is strong evidence that Napoleon was not, in fact, short but actually around average height. Seriously.

Natural discomfort with air guitar, rather, lies in its overt falsehood. Pride is taken in the lack of instruments, inherent in the very title of the competition. Tech-

nical musical ability is no prerequisite. And past contestants' legal names were most likely not actually "Romeo Dance Cheetham," "Hot Lixx Hulabam" and "Lietonson Face Meltzer." Yet this very un-

cealed artificiality sparks the genius of the whole endeavor. In a sense, isn't fakery acknowledging itself as much more real than fakery attempting to deceive the susceptible into believing its legitimacy? The house lights dimmed to blackness, and a lone spotlight lit the stage. Taking a deep breath, I strode toward a packed theater of cheering audience members. Next thing I knew, I was rocking out to the guitar solo from "Kick Out the Jams" by the band Presidents of the United States of America. True, I possessed no guitar, nor can I even play one. But at that moment, I was no longer a teenage student from the suburbs. Suddenly, I was a heavy metal superstar, relishing every moment of fame with a horde of adoring fans. My heart was pounding, all eyes were watching and I was having the time of my life. The feeling was as real as any.

Jesse Rifkin is a sophomore at the University of Connecticut.