

How a skiing book found a groove

The author of a book of funny stories from ski instructors learned to market his title on a shoestring budget

By Allen R. Smith

WHETHER YOU'RE an established author or a new one, chances are you're both facing the same challenges when it comes to selling your books: getting the word out. You may have written the novel of the century, but if no one knows about it, your book will languish in the back of a distributor's warehouse. So, how can you generate excitement for your work when you have a limited marketing budget and no experience? It's simple. By using your imagination and sticking to a plan.

In the fall of 2004, I was working as a ski instructor at the largest ski resort in the country, Vail Mountain in Vail, Colo. While waiting for our annual pre-season kick-off meeting to begin, one of the instructors at the table regaled us with a story about teaching a 7-foot-tall basketball star how to get down the mountain on 3-foot-long skis.

"Oh yeah?" objected one of the other instructors. "If you think that's funny, let me tell you what happened to *me* last year."

Within minutes, instructors began trying to one-up the others, each story better than the last. Voilà! *Ski Instructors Confidential: The Stories Ski Instructors Swap Back at the Lodge* was born.

A helping hand

After teaching skiing for seven years, I knew there had to be thousands of great stories about ski instructors that recreational skiers would enjoy reading. Given, however, that winter lasts but six months and there is a large but limited number of skiers in the United States, selling enough copies of this niche-genre book to pay for its production wasn't going to be easy.

Although I had been writing for over 20 years, I was humbled by the prospect of publishing a book. I knew little about it, but what I did know is that I needed help. After an intensive search on the Internet for book-publishing consultants, I found Elliott Wolf at Peanut Butter Publishing in Seattle.

I pitched my idea to him about putting together a collection of entertaining stories from the most experienced ski instructors in the business—from horrendous crashes to wardrobe mishaps to children who "say the darndest things." At first, he was reluctant to take on a self-publishing client, but he recognized how successful the book could be and agreed to help guide me.

My original idea was to put together a small collection of stories that were exclusive to our resort. Elliott suggested that, allowing for the rejects and the salty stories I'd be unable to print, we'd need several hundred short stories to pick from in order to fill a book. And,

instead of being one big clump of stories, the book would be more appealing if divided into seven themed chapters.

Going 'global' for stories

I decided to interview ski instructors from resorts across the western U.S. The initial plan was to market the book to newspapers, bookstores and retailers at the resorts where those contributors taught skiing. Our sales plan was already taking the direction we'd use once the book was published—an *advance-planning* strategy I'd advise for anyone self-publishing a nonfiction-niche book.

As the winter of 2004 progressed, I interviewed ski instructors (by phone, by e-mail or in person) from dozens of well-known ski resorts that had large enough markets to sustain book sales. I soon realized that finding great ski stories was going to be more difficult than I thought. By the end of January 2005 it was clear that if I hoped to meet my goal of several hundred stories before the end of ski season, when instructors bolted for the beach, I was going to need more material. A lot more.

We decided to go "global" and interview instructors all across the country. As I collected stories from Alaska to Vermont, our proposed market increased exponentially, too. I discovered that most ski instructors don't live in the mountains year round but return to their homes in Iowa, Louisiana, Ohio

and Florida for the off-season. These places may be miles from ski resorts but are still fertile ground for book sales.

By the end of the 2004 ski season, I had selected 164 great stories, and we were able to group them into chapters. One chapter, titled “Cool Kids and Cranky Parents,” was designed to appeal to parents with small kids learning to ski. Another, “Slides, Crashes and Other Feats of Gravity,” described the effects of gravity on new skiers as they careened down a mountain on their backsides.

The marketing challenge

With the help of a writer for Jay Leno who improved my stories’ comedic flow, we spent the summer editing the stories, designing the cover, and working with the printer. But the biggest challenge still loomed—marketing and selling. The initial order was for 3,000 copies. Depending on who bought the books and the types of discounts I extended, it was starting to look like my revenue might not cover the cost of the book. If I was going to break even (let alone turn a profit), I’d need a second printing.

During my interviews, I kept meticulous records of the instructors’ contact info. I asked every contributor to the book to suggest the name of one or two neighborhood retailers who might be interested in my book. I searched www.booksense.com for a list of smaller, independent bookstores and convinced most of them to place a modest order. Each time I took an order from them, I jotted down the store’s contact info and number of copies purchased. After the book was released, I used a marketing subscription service from Constant Contact to send these stores monthly reminders that it was time to re-order.

Several months before the book was published, I called a number of newspapers in the Vail area to ask if they would be interested in serializing excerpts from my book. Newspaper editors are always looking for ways to fill small spaces in their paper with interesting stories. I offered them unfettered access to my manuscript and gave them permission to run any stories they wished, as long as they published a short blurb about the local retailers who carried my

book and a link to my Web site, where out-of-town readers could buy copies.

The stories ran seven days a week for two winters in the *Vail Daily* and periodically in *The Aspen Times* and the *Tahoe Daily Tribune*, with several results: free marketing for my book, free advertising for local retailers, and increased circulation for the newspaper. The editors were ecstatic, local stores sold books, and the readers couldn’t wait to read the next day’s paper to see what those crazy ski instructors were up to next.

At the same time the stories ran in the newspaper, I contacted a dozen well-known retailers in town and made them an offer they couldn’t refuse. If they agreed to buy at least one case of books, I’d feature their store every day in the retail blurbs in the *Vail Daily* free of charge. I extended the same offer for two other newspapers.

Today, even the smallest newspapers generally have their publications online. The newspapers’ Web editions sent links from my stories to thousands of other Web sites—everything from ski clubs to wedding-planner sites. Businesses are always “borrowing” links from other sites to draw customers to theirs.

Also, every column that ran in the *Vail Daily*’s online edition supplied a link to my Web site that improved my standings in organic search-engine results. At the height of my marketing campaign, search phrases related to my book title and associated keywords represented over 40 percent of the first four pages of Google results—all for free.

Once the book was out, I created a Marketplace account on Amazon.com and uploaded my manuscript and a cover image to Google Books. Google Books scanned the book into its site for free. Customers interested in perusing my book can check out the cover, contents and index and read limited selections as if browsing in a bookstore. Google Books also displays links to Barnes & Noble, Books-A-Million, BookSense.com and other sites where my book is sold. It even lists libraries



that carry it.

During the first winter of its publication, I personally serviced all of my local accounts. These local retailers would normally work through book distributors, which take as much as 55 percent of every sale, but I offered same-day delivery at competitive prices and autographed every copy purchased. By introducing myself to local retailers and conducting book-signing events, I sold 1,000 copies in less than two months.

During the 2006 season, two of the largest U.S. book distributors picked up my book after I pitched them. While I took care of local sales, they sold my book to retailers I couldn’t get to.

I also called all of the local television news stations. My appearances included being a lead-in story to the Winter Olympics on the Denver NBC-affiliate.

Three years after publication, my book is in its second printing and still selling all over the world. The stories are timeless, and people continue to laugh at those crazy skiing students and the instructors who put up with their antics.

The key to marketing a special genre book on a shoestring budget is to have your sales plan in place *before* the first draft is written. By matching the book’s content and appeal with specific market sectors, you can save thousands of dollars and insure higher volume sales.

Allen R. Smith

Allen R. Smith lives in Vail, Colo., and writes about health, fitness and the humorous side of life. His articles have appeared in print and at livestrong.com. Web: www.snowwriter.com.