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ATG Interviews Mitchell Davis

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ATG Interviews Mitchell Davis

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“Inventing a New Approach to Publishing and Bookselling — ‘Our Model is the Quintessential Use of Today’s Technology’”

by Robyn A Dudley, MLIS, BA Ed (Librarian and Technology Consultant, P.O. Box 42682, Charleston, SC 29423; Phone: 843-860-9644)
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Column Editor’s Note: Jeff Schweaner, of Broken Umbrella Press and one of the founders of BookSurge, also contributed to this article as did John Sinclair, University Press consultant. They no longer work at BookSurge. — RD

Who Is BookSurge?

BookSurge has built the world’s first true one book at a time book global distribution and bookelling facility with a 48 hour turnaround guarantee. They have partnered with the leading companies in the bookelling world including Amazon.com, R.R. Bowker and other leading online bookellers.

The company began in May 2000 and currently prints and distributes books for over 500 publishers and 1,500 authors from around the world. In addition to operating several of their own printing plants through the Website, GreatUnpublished.com and ImprintBooks.com. They also offer other publishers their Print-On-Demand and Distribution services to thousands of libraries and bookstores. They also sell books to retail and wholesale customers through their own bookelling hardcover publications and sites, GlobalBookPeddler.com, BookSurge.com and a host of bookelling partners.

They have written custom software, built a proprietary book production process and opened offices worldwide that are being used by publishers all over the world to provide inventory free distribution to bookstores, libraries and retail book customers.

ATG: I saw a quote on your Website “The best way to predict the future is to invent it” by Alan Key. BookSurge certainly seems to be inventing a new approach to publishing and bookelling. BookSurge will be celebrating its fourth anniversary in late May 2004. Tell us how you came to be. What qualifications did the founders have that made the creation of BookSurge possible?

BOOKSURGE: BookSurge was created in late 1999 and “born” on May 25, 2000 with the production of eleven books as its first order. There were four of us who lived in the same town and we found that each had works of their own waiting to be published. We wanted to create a resource for individual authors who were looking for publishers to publish their works. We looked around for companies that we could use as vendors to print one book at a time and there were none in existence. So, we got together and started BookSurge with all the facilities and services to give individual authors the ability to go to print with their works. The print system we have built is totally unique and was built to profitably do one book at a time. We have added the machinery to print larger orders as volume increased. With a 48 hour or free print and distribution guarantee, it did not take long for publishers to ask us who was printing our books. After we saw a pent-up demand, we launched a business-to-business service.

The talents of the founders, in addition to all being writers and having other writers in their families, included editorial expertise, Web development, law, and the digital printing business — the right combinations for what we wanted to offer with BookSurge.

ATG: BookSurge is the parent company for several other companies. It appears that you have three divisions: Publishing, printing, and bookelling. Why did you decide to take on this full service approach?

BOOKSURGE: We were the only ones that could provide a seamless service for our authors and our publishers so therefore we wanted to create a proprietary computer system that had the same capabilities a large and staid publisher would offer its authors. By doing this, an author only has to deal with BookSurge and no other vendors. We publish a book, we provide templates for covers and content design, we print the book and we distribute the book for our authors and our publishers worldwide using our Zero Inventory Distribution Process. This is known as our “Turnkey” approach for authors and for publishers.

ATG: How does an alternative press like BookSurge differ from other small presses and from the larger, more traditional publishing houses?

BOOKSURGE: We have attempted to accommodate whatever services and products will help get the most out of our investment by offering various “a la carte” options for our customers. We provide an “end to end” solution for an author or publisher looking to reach global markets with any book — in print — or out of print.

ATG: How has the digital revolution changed the culture of publishing and bookelling?

BOOKSURGE: In general it has compressed the production time of any book. At the continued on page 50
same time, it speeds up the delivery of the book to the general market. Those two factors have intensified the normal publishing model that has been in existence for a hundred years. A publisher has inventory one place and demand in another. By the time the logistical wheels have turned, the demand is gone and the inventory is in a new place. The publisher racks up shipping and warehousing bills, but no sales. Now the demand of us little as one book, anywhere in the world, does not present a problem. The purpose and model we see now, born from the technology, is to deliver more of the wanted titles to a larger and larger and ever expanding marketplace. By shortening the production time at BookSurge, our model is the quintessential use of today’s technology. We can upload the content of a book and the cover of a book into our international database and have it print ready immediately. We can then sell that book for our publishing and author clients by printing the book and shipping the book locally within 48 hours around the world. Therefore, an individual can order a book in England, we’ll print the book in London within 48 hours, and we’ll ship it locally to the individual who wanted to purchase that book.

AGT: Many libraries today are offering Virtual Library services. Through what means does BookSurge facilitate electronic book distribution and usage in libraries?

BOOKSURGE: BookSurge delivers eBooks in Adobe PDF format, which seems to have established itself as the standard for simple eBook delivery. We currently do not have a dedicated system for providing the delivery of these books to libraries. The needs of a library are unique and as the demand for eBooks increases we will spend more energy trying to make our eBooks delivery mechanisms more sophisticated. BookSurge also works with publishers so that once a book is digitized we can satisfy Out of Print, Out of Stock, Foreign Language Collections for Libraries and Completion of Collections and Journals to libraries.

For publishers, on-demand printing offers the same distribution scope and economies as eBooks, so along with the eBook is a print product for a title that still enjoys high demand in print.

AGT: Do you think the eBook has caught on for the general public? If not, what will it take for eBooks to be used by the masses on a daily basis? Certainly initiatives for a national digital library such as TeleRead could benefit companies such as BookSurge. (For more about TeleRead see www.telered.org)

BOOKSURGE: No, eBooks have not caught on for the general public, but there will be some uses no doubt. We see some non-fiction sales for eBooks (technical manuals, etc.), but little else. We think what it will take to satisfy libraries with this very efficient means of distribution of content is a delivery process to the libraries that is standardized and that makes sense. That’s a crucial step. By utilizing the existing print book channels, the industry may be getting close to incorporating eBooks into it. However, because the book industry has a lot of players who glean profit from the sale of every print book to a library, those individuals and those entities have to be satisfied. The publisher has to be able to gain a fair profit. The library distributor and wholesaler has to gain a fair profit, the library itself has to obtain a value discount for their purchase. It’s a double-edged sword. The library then has to purchase an electronic book as if it were a print book on a shelf, and that is counter-intuitive. It is going to take some imagination and some thinking outside the box on the part of library system players to come up with a system that treats atoms like atoms (books) and bits like bits (eBooks). We have not seen a system that does that yet.

AGT: Efficient and timely ways of locating and purchasing out of print materials continue to be problematic for libraries. Can BookSurge help with this and if so, how? How do you work with other sources and handle copyright considerations?

BOOKSURGE: Yes, we can help. If BookSurge is aware that a particular book is needed, we can go to publishers and explain to the publishers that there is a need out there for perhaps an out of print title. We then offer our services to the publisher and satisfy the order in the volume of the demand of the library. It may be only one library that’s requested the title that’s out of print. We contact the publisher and print that one book as demanded by the library. Everyone wins in the transaction. The publisher gains revenue from the book, the library obtains the wanted text, and BookSurge makes a profit. One of the examples I can give you is Emery Pratt. Emery Pratt is extremely dedicated to customer service. They attempt to fulfill 90% of all book orders in 90 days. Emery Pratt does not want to go out to the used book market to satisfy their library clients. Emery Pratt will come to BookSurge and we will contact the publisher in an effort to get the new book published by BookSurge in the hands of librarians who need it. BookSurge takes care of making sure royalties are paid to the publishers.

When we consider collections in foreign languages such as the seemingly growing needs of acquisitions librarians, and texts written in Spanish, we can act as a great source for them and their acquisitions with our partnership with Publicis. They have over 200 Spanish publishers uploading upwards of over 1,000 files into our system which can be ordered by librarians here in the States. We have thousands of titles coming from Dutch publishers and we are in talks with a number of other foreign language publishers which will increase the availability of titles to libraries.

AGT: I read of a library recently going into the retailing business to increase its operating revenues by opening a cafe and selling books and videos. Do you see this as a trend? How could BookSurge help a library wishing to offer these types of services?

BOOKSURGE: If one thing has become clear to us over the past two years, it is that the government is telling libraries to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. There is a crisis and it requires some different thinking. We have a vision of a library kiosk bookselling system that will allow libraries to offer their patrons an easy way to order and buy books for home delivery or library pick up and have them make money doing it. They have the book experts, they have the ambiance and I think they can play a more active role in making sure people can get the books they want. A kiosk system is operational today through R.R. Bowker’s Books In Print, but has not been promoted to the libraries with much energy. We want to make sure we have the system right and are talking with several groups about a more aggressive and complementary approach that will work for libraries. For each title that is ordered through BookSurge, the library receives a percentage of its cost to be used for literacy programs, funding, etc.

AGT: Speaking of services, you’ve just announced a super educational outreach program for K-12 to encourage publishing projects in the classroom. What is the goal of this program? Is there a Website where educators can find resource materials?

BOOKSURGE: The goal simply is to promote new models of learning that are based more on engagement and less on instruction. We think we can do this and help schools with fund raising projects. We’re incorporating this project into our Website and we’re gaining partnerships in our education community including representation from the National Education Association (www.nea.org) for the sole purpose of promoting literacy here in the States and elsewhere. The Website is http://classroompublishing.org which contains information and links to resources.

AGT: Tell us more about these grants. Who are some of your grant recipients and why did they receive the award?

BOOKSURGE: A goal of the program is to bring the digital age into the classrooms, thus enabling students to experience the success of being published authors. Print-On-Demand technology needs to be viewed as a necessary teaching tool for exposing our students to global connectivity. Our classroom publishing projects are a fun and engaging way to give meaning to students’ writings by providing them a wider audience. Their books are available through the Internet all over the world, on sites like Amazon.com, BN.com and BookSurge.com and can also be ordered through bookstores and libraries throughout the world.

Jenny Hunter, a SC National Board Certified Teacher, was our first grant recipient. We read a newspaper article featuring Jenny as a SC State Finalist in the Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics and Science, and learned her goal was to publish a book of counting stories, which would be written and illustrated by her kindergarten students. We contacted Jenny and asked her to be our model teacher for our grant program. She agreed, and “Counting Counters” is now featured on our grant Website, www.classroompublishing.org. Jenny’s classroom publishing project takes new teaching tools and ideas and blends them perfectly with math and writing standards instruc-
the titles that get overlooked because no one can find them.

**EBSCO's A-to-Z service** collects your titles into one easy-to-browse gateway listing. No more wasted time searching through dozens of databases, catalogs or e-journal access sites to find what your patrons are looking for. All your library's resources are at their fingertips.

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We're proud that it is being emulated in other classrooms around the country with similar positive results.

**ATG:** Let's go back to the subject of the various services that the BookSurge companies offer. Your companies offer an array of services for the author at such a nominal cost — how do you keep your costs so reasonable? Do all authors have to pay the same types of fees to be published?

**BOOKSURGE:** We think an essential ingredient in our business model is to keep the costs as low as possible. I believe we are the only company in existence that can deliver one book at a time, a quality product, on three different continents within 48 hours. So, how do you price such a service and how do you price such a needed commodity? You leverage whatever technology and imagination you have at your disposal, figure out how much it costs you to deliver and then price for the long term. We intend to continue raising the bar and staying out front, but we also want everyone who does business with us to feel like the relationship is fair and equitable.

**ATG:** Who owns the rights to the author's work? Do you help the author copyright their work if the author wants to do this? Does the author have to obtain his or her own ISBN?

**BOOKSURGE:** We get a publisher's permission for the digital version and follow the reprint and distribution policies of the publisher. BookSurge offers a range of services to our authors which include copyright assistance and we obtain ISBN numbers for each title if needed. Authors keep the rights to their books. In fact, several have used our service to secure traditional publishing contracts with publishers like Random House, Simon & Schuster, and Kensington. If an author gets picked up we don’t say “give us a cut,” we say “congratulations.”

**ATG:** Once a book is submitted, how easy is it to get revisions or additions done?

**BOOKSURGE:** If additions are to be made or covers are to be changed, then we require a whole separate file to be uploaded to the system with the corrections. We drop the old file and upload the new one. The costs apply right across the board. So if an individual author pays for his book to be uploaded into the system and then changes it, we upload it again and he pays another fee. But that’s a one time fee. As long as the book does not change, the author and the publisher are never charged another uploading fee again. What a great benefit though, to get a great review, update your cover and have the next book printed include the new review quote. Got a new chapter? Just add it and upload the file. The next book will include the changes.

**ATG:** Most Print on Demand companies offer just black and white printing. You claim to be one of the first companies to offer color printing. How difficult was this to put into place and has it affected your guarantee of 48 hour turnaround time? What types of bindings do you offer that are especially suited for libraries?

**BOOKSURGE:** Since we invented the black and white process from scratch, we did the same with color. The process is exactly the same. We are offering perfect bound paperbacks, laminated case bound, cloth, cloth with dust jacket, and spiral/comb. All books are still produced one at a time.

**ATG:** BookSurge touts its own online bookstore, BookSurge.com, but usually an author wants as much visibility as possible. What bookstores besides BookSurge.com currently carry the author’s title if published through GreatUnpublished or Imprintbooks.com?

**BOOKSURGE:** Many of the traditional bookstores and some of the chain bookstores carry our authors’ products as well as our publishers’ content products. The bookstores, when there’s an author’s signing, have us supply their books 25 to 50 at a time. So we work very well with the independent bookstores and the chain bookstores. We also partner with online bookstores such as Alibris, Amazon.com, half.com and others that wish to link to the BookSurge Website. Since we are not beholden to any one channel, we can spread our distribution net wide. We recently partnered with the largest retail bookselling site in Spain, Fetchbooks.com, and Central Bookhouse of the Netherlands to name a few. As we expand our network so do our publishers.

**ATG:** I noticed on your office front that

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international flags have been added recently. What is the significance of this? Will this help bring more foreign language titles to the U.S. market? Where are your international offices and where will BookSurge offices be opening in the next year or so?

BOOKSURGE: BookSurge has a significant international effort in progress. We now handle over 25 languages. We have over 200 Spanish language publishers. We have a partnership arrangement and a mirrored facility in the U.K., Spain, Canada, Australia, Netherlands, and our headquarters here in the U.S. so our flags have increased on our letterhead and outside on our building on our Charleston facility. The significance of these flags is that a publisher or an author can be assured that the same high quality of print for their works is delivered to end customers in the U.K., in Europe, on the Iberian peninsula, in Australia and New Zealand, satisfied within 48 hours and shipped locally as quickly and as easily as a book order placed here in Chicago, South Carolina, New York, or L.A.

BookSurge expects to open offices in Singapore and Japan in 2004.

ATG: I heard that good things were mentioned about BookSurge at the recent "Future of the Book" Conference in Cairns Australia, and I saw in the press that author Paul Evans, who has published with BookSurge, received an IPPY award for his work at the 2003 Book Expo. Now the Frankfurt Book Fair and other events are coming up. Will we see increased visibility from BookSurge?

The Frankfurt Book Fair is the premiere book event in the world of publishing. This year we had our first booth there. I think we had about 50 appointments with international publishers to explain our products and to increase the number of titles within our global distribution system. At the Frankfurt Book Fair we are supported by all of our organizations, so not only will there be a contingency from Charleston but from our partner relationships from BookSurge in Spain, the U.K., and the Netherlands. We were there in force to bring our services to the world of publishing through this historic event. We led two educational seminars at the Frankfurt Fair on global, inventory-free distribution and we held an educational seminar at ALA Midwinter in San Diego on a Sunday afternoon.

To promote our Spanish titles, we attended the Guadalajara Book Fair and will continue to participate globally and are planning more events now for 2004.

ATG: You have come a very long way in a very short time since May 2000. Any plans for staff expansion? Like many young Internet companies, BookSurge relies on venture capital. Since you are privately held, who are your investors? How much money did you raise to get started? Do you plan to sell or go public in the near future?

BOOKSURGE: BookSurge is internally funded. Our growth has been due to the company's success in creating an ongoing revenue stream. We are profitable because we live within our means. Because of the increase in our business to business market and addition of new products and services, we are increasing our B2B Sales operations.

The company is growing quickly because it is well managed and we have no loss leading products. In the world of global business, our type of company is often attractive to larger conglomerates but our mission from day to day is always to provide affordable cutting edge services to authors and publishers wherever we can and so that's our mission and we are sticking to it.

ATG: Thank you.