

Confessions Of A Board Game Publisher

26 Life Lessons After The First 18 Months

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Introduction – And An Apology

First, thank you for downloading this free eBook. I got the idea to make it on a whim, realizing that I have learned much as a result of the first 18 months of being a board game publisher. In that time frame, I have numerous difficult decisions to make and many hardships relating to the company.

Since I desire to be as sincere as possible with these lessons that I learned, this eBook will be mostly free thinking. Don't worry though, I did read back through it and edited so things made sense. I did the editing with a very light hand, and tried to keep as much of the free thought as possible. I personally feel that it will help you with understanding the situation and opinions.

I hope that you enjoy the eBook, and feel free to share it with others in any way that you see fit. I hereby not only give you permission to, but also request that you:

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Lesson 1- Blogs Are Good

If you are reading this eBook, then I probably do not need to explain to you about the benefits of building a community, interacting with that community, responding to feedback, etc. I also probably do not need to explain to you how blogs enable all of this, while being very easy and cost effective to start and maintain.

That being noted, I have found a handful of additional benefits of having a blog...

You will see increased deal flow. Since I started blogging about my experience publishing games on michaelmindes.com, I have had numerous people contact me for advice about how to publish and/or market games. Often, they would be willing to turn over large portions of their potential operation for me to manage. While, I have not taken anybody up on this advice, I have been able to point people in the right directions, and the long-term benefits will surely come back to me.

Some of my partners have been able to benefit directly through increased business, in particular Panda Game Manufacturing, who I will be using for all future manufacturing and Publisher Services, Inc who handles the fulfillment for Tasty Minstrel Games. Both do a great job and I highly recommend them, just make sure you let them know that Michael Mindes sent you...

Blogging turns you into a celebrity. At my level, that is a micro celebrity. No, micro would be too large, a pico-celebrity. Nevertheless, people have searched me out at conventions to say hello and to thank me for what I write. This is a great feeling, and it doesn't hurt to have more people that you can ask for help in the future when/if you need it.

Blogging has helped me personally solidify my decisions. As I make a blog post, I have to think more thoroughly about my topic and make definitive decisions. This enables me to make better decisions. Of course, when this thought process is made public on a blog, I get the benefit of comments to see problems with my thought process and improve the idea without having to find AS MANY MISTAKES LATER!

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Lesson 2 - Branding Is Important

Branding is essential. I have said it before, and I will say it again. Branding is essential. There is a reason why Nike, McDonald's, and Apple sell so much stuff. It is not because their products are vastly superior to the competition (I do not want any Apple fan flame wars)... It is because they have amazing branding. A McDonald's hamburger is not fundamentally different than a Burger King hamburger, yet the sales differences are huge.

So, how do you brand a board game publisher? Thankfully with Tasty Minstrel Games, I hit a number of things right. Which is surprising, since it was my first branding effort. Seeing the relative success of the Tasty Minstrel Games brand, I can speak to some different aspects which are important, starting with the name:

- Have a name that speaks to the emotions of your ideal market.
- Have a name which is hard to misspell (I failed here, because Minstrel is misspelled more than I would have imagined).
- Have a name which can be an inside joke with your ideal market. If you are within my ideal market, then you have probably see Monty Python's Search For The Holy Grail many times.

Important logo aspects:

- Have a logo which ties into your name.
- Have a logo with personality. Especially if that personality is fun and playful (great for a game publisher). People will think, hey if the logo is so much fun, then the game MUST be fun too.
- Have a logo which contains both a mascot and a wordmark. This is my favorite thing about the Tasty Minstrel logo. We have a dragon which can easily be incorporated into other places, which will continually tie into our branding. Yes we have made stuffed dragons, he could appear in different games, or be doing different things on a variety of T-Shirts. The logo also has a wordmark, which is just a stylized version of some words which can be used in place of a logo. This wordmark allows us to put a portion of our logo onto a game box without conflicting with that game's own branding. As a result, the Train of Thought box looks amazing and has no conflicting components.
- Give people an opportunity to put everything together. For example, the logo for Tasty Minstrel Games has a dragon that is picking his teeth with a feather after a meal, a broken lute, a minstrel hat (missing its feather...).
- Don't show violence or grotesque stuff, you will turn away some customers. While eating a minstrel is violent, it is only implied in the logo and not shown in and of itself.

A brand does not consist only of a name and logo. The name and logo might be what is seen most often, but it is not the end of your branding. Your branding includes:

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- All of your products.
- Your communications with customer and vendors.
- Your response to a crisis.
- What you do to support customers and vendors.
- And more that I cannot think of...

It takes a long time to develop a great brand. To get people to trust in your brand to the point that they will buy a new release regardless of what it is. For people to know that if it comes from your company, then they can count on a number of different things.

Destroying or significantly damaging a brand only takes a moment. And with the speed of communication available via the Internet the damage can spread quickly. So be careful to protect your brand and stay true to the vision that you have for your brand.

Speaking of which, it would probably be helpful to have a clearly defined definition of what your vision for your brand is. Fill that vision with words with actual meanings rather than corporate warm-fuzzy feeling talk. Once the vision is well defined, post it on your company's websites on the about us page or at least linking from the about us page. Review the vision of the brand and stay true to the actions required to make it happen.

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Lesson 3 - Networking Can Be Essential To Success

Most people know a guy who knows a guy who can get/do anything you might imagine. Being the guy that knows a guy is valuable for a handful of reasons:

1. If you need something done, then you should know somebody that can get it done.
2. The more people that you know, the more often you will be asked about how to get something done. When you provide answers by referring new customers to people that you know, you will build a lot of friendships.
3. As you build your network of people that can actively help in various tasks, then more people will seek you out to get to know you.

As I wrote that, it seemed confusing because of all of the “know a guy who knows a guy who can do that thing” and “people come to you and you send them to people you know”... Unfortunately I do not know better how to express it. However know this:

Actively networking and figuring out how you can help the people you network with will lead to increased influence, and prosperity.

Individuals are significantly more likely to cut you some slack, get things done faster and better, or promote you if you are actively helping them. Find out how you can help those that you are in business relationships with or how to help those that you are networking with and the benefits will pour down on your like an avalanche.

Without some of the preliminary networking that I did, Tasty Minstrel Games would have likely failed due to improper fulfillment, not having distributors, not having decent access to news outlets, or any number of items that could have plagued s at the outset.

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Lesson 4 - Trade Shows ARE Important

I admit that I did not know what I would get out of a trade show. Mainly because I felt that most board game publishers were doing things in a sub-optimal way. Additionally, the first trade show that we attended, we did not really have a product to show to retailers.

Despite this, the show was incredibly successful and important thanks to meeting a handful of very key individuals. If you go to a trade show and have a booth, then make sure that you bring at least 3 people (including yourself). It can be essential to your sanity to have a companion at your booth, and the opportunity to get away from the booth and network with other attendees.

This is how we met some of the most essential people that we met at the trade show. If you are attending a trade show as a regular attendee/learner/visitor, then make sure you break out of your scheduled learning opportunities and meet other people. Some of them will prove to be good friends or valuable acquaintances.

If you are anything like me, then you are at least a little shy and enjoy listening people talk about their passions. This can be the perfect combination for networking with people, because most people LOVE to talk about themselves. All you need to do is go up to somebody, introduce yourself, ask them some open-ended questions, and listen to what they have to say.

If you say nothing else, then they will see you as one of the smartest and most personable people they met at the show. Shutting your mouth and listening is a rare skill, if you have it, then I highly suggest developing it.

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Lesson 5 - Transparency Will Increase Customer Loyalty

People love to know what is going on at their FAVORITE companies. They want to know about the inner dealings, what is coming up, how different things are performing, what is being considered, etc. I personally feel that right now, there is room to be different and lovable just as a function of being TRANSPARENT.

Not only will people want to know, because they like and/or love your company. They will be drawn in by that transparency in and of itself. What companies share their financial results? Sure public companies share those results as a function of being public, but the real results are hidden in an avalanche of numbers and accounting.

What companies let their fans know exactly what is going on when a crisis hits? What companies turn to their fans to help determine the course of action? What companies turn to their fans for honest feedback... with the intention of acting on it?

Not many do, and if you increase your transparency, then people will love you for it. I read a PLETHORA of blogs in the online marketing and productivity arena. Many of them say the same or similar things. The ones that are transparent with their traffic numbers and/or their earnings have larger fan bases and more loyal followers.

Everybody wants to see behind the curtain, especially if behind the curtain are people just like them. They want to know they can be successful in their endeavors, despite making mistakes. Let them see in and build their hopes, and you will be rewarded. If you asked me, then I would say that taking action always moves you forward (unless you abandon and ruin your brand). Making mistakes is a chance to learn what not to do, which is often more important than knowing what to do.

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Lesson 6 - Field Of Dreams Is Wrong (if you build it, they will NOT necessarily come)

Years ago, there may have been so few players, publishers, and creators that if you built it, then they did come. People would find you somehow, and then they would share with their friends and you would be found.

In today's world, there is a heavy saturation of incredibly talented people all trying to be recognized in their creative field of choice. My creative field of choice happens to be witting about marketing and general business practices. Sure, I publish board games through Tasty Minstrel Games, but I take little creative control over the games that are published.

I know that I have surrounded myself with people that are smarter than me about how to create appealing games. That is enough of a tangent... Where was I?

Right, your market of choice is likely to be saturated. Do not worry, if you recognize that it is saturated and still have sufficient passion, chutzpah, or insufficient sense, then you have the capability to succeed in your chosen creative market. Remember everybody with lots of experience started as a newbie. Also remember that you must actively promote yourself.

This is difficult for many people, because they feel slimy or dirty as a result of self-promotion. Let me set out some facts for you:

- If you are actively helping people, then there is no shame in promoting your own stuff.
- If you continuously provide high value, then there is no shame in promoting your own stuff.
- If you find people coming to you for advice, then there is no shame in promoting your own stuff.

Make it easy for others to share, and ask that they do so. If you have provided sufficient value (as measured by the audience), then sharing will happen now and will continue into the future. You will probably need to get the ball rolling though, and the more people that you can thoroughly help... The faster the ball will roll once it gets moving.

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Lesson 7 - Building A Cult Of Personality Is Easier Than You Think

If you are actively doing something that other wish they could be doing, then you will find it easy to build a cult of personality. You do not even need to be very personable yourself... There are easy ways to do it. I have had some small success with doing this, and here are the steps that I recommend:

1. Actively do something that a decently large group of people wish they could be doing. For me, this was publishing board games. Even non-gamers are fascinated by the process of doing this.
2. Be aware of the typical methods and conventional wisdom associated with your desired activity. Then proceed to operate in a fashion that is opposed to the conventional wisdom. Become at least somewhat successful without following the conventions.
3. Make sure people are aware that you disagree with the conventional wisdom, and give them good reasons why. Make them re-think the positioning of the conventions and large industry institutions.
4. Show your audience and market that great things come from the unnoticed or **NON-EXPERTS**. The majority of people that are actively (or desire to be) in any industry or market are not experts, and they are unlikely to view themselves as such. This may be despite having multiple years of experience as an **"AMATEUR"** in that market. They are craving for validation that the work that they are doing is high quality, despite not being recognized for it.
5. Embrace your mistakes. When you make a mistake or some sort of crisis hits, you need to discuss it openly with your market. Tell people exactly how it happened, how much it sucks, and what you are doing to fix it. If your mistake has financial losses or decreased sales associated with it, then let people know exactly how much it sucks in a physical dollar amount. People will **LOVE YOU** for your mistakes. Don't be stupid and make the same mistakes just to get more love, or do things poorly in an effort to generate this confessional goodwill. Regardless of how hard you try, there will be enough mistakes to discuss.
6. Borrow authority. Due to the open nature in which I discuss the inner-working of Tasty Minstrel Games, I have gotten several references from Board Game News. Board Game News has immense authority in the market, and their validation of me personally and Tasty Minstrel Games increase the cult of personality.
7. Don't be boring! I suffer from the boringness complex, but the less boring you are, then the easier it will be to build an audience.
8. Actively connect with and seek to help those that come to you for help.

I certainly am not at the level of certain people with cults of personality, but within the relatively small pond that I am in, I have built up a reasonable cult of personality. Much of that is based on being the underdog in an industry that many desire to be in. Much of that is based on the upcoming accession to the upper echelon of that industry.

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I did not actively seek out to accomplish this, but as I have noticed it coming I have decided to help it move along and increase.

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Lesson 8 - Having Great Prices To Begin With Makes Discounts Less Appealing

When I started Tasty Minstrel Games, I had been disgusted with the prices that are charged on board games for a long time. In the tight niche hobby market, a ridiculous premium is placed on a number of games.

As a result, I desired to have the games published by Tasty Minstrel to be very well priced when compared to the competitors. Part of my theory is that when people spend money on games, they will do so within a certain band.

Let us suppose that somebody wants to buy a very popular title that costs \$35. I believe that the shopper's decisions may change within \$5 up or down. So, a \$35 and \$40 game are within the same competitive band. After identifying popular titles that are similar to a game that we are releasing, we want to find a way to be within \$5 of the price.

That way we might be able to poach a sale here and there. For example, Race for the Galaxy is a very popular title which has a similar theme to Terra Prime. If Terra Prime was priced to be \$50-60 instead of \$40, then I think we would be hard pressed to sell a copy when actively compared to Race for the Galaxy (RftG).

In this example, while RftG might be known to be a good game and popular, Terra Prime is only \$5 more, has so much more stuff in the box, similar theme, and more approachable artwork. Somebody could be inclined to spend \$5 more, but certainly not \$15 more.

The problem with having great pricing to begin with, is that it gives you less room to have **"AMAZING DISCOUNTS"**. It is hard to put a 50% discount on a game with lower but respectable margins to begin with. And since you will be hard pressed to put a big discount on it, it will be harder to get people to psychologically feel like they got a **GREAT DEAL**.

In the end, I personally am in favor of having good prices and high value to start with. That way a game will sell well based on its typical price, and will not require such a large discount.

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Lesson 9 - Businesses Are Based On People

Ultimately, businesses are about getting people to buy your stuff. This proves to be MUCH easier if they trust you. Remembering this will go a LONG way to treating people the way that they should be treated.

If people do not like you, then it will be almost impossible to get them to do what you want. This is the best quote I have ever seen about leadership:

“Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.” - Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander Of The Allied Force In Europe During WWII and 34th President of the United States of America

Showing respect to others, helping them, and expressing your praise when you have it are great steps in the right direction. Of course, money or some sort of financial incentive doesn't hurt either.

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Lesson 10 - Every Relationship Is Important

In many different areas of this confession about what I have learned, I have discussed the importance of relationships, networking, and helping others. Sometimes when I say that, I find it to be very cliché sounding, “Do good and help others, and you will be heavily rewarded”.

Despite this... Let me tell you that it is true. And you do not know who you will have vitally important relationships with before you have those relationships. You can identify some of the obvious people that you want to have good relationships with. However, you will not know who the people with less influence are that will propel you forward in success.

So, let me say this. It is important to treat everybody with respect. Help them if you can, point them in the right direction to get specific help. You can do this without dragging heavily on your own personal productive time. Aggregate all of the questions you consistently get and create resources to answer them. Create an email auto-response that directs people to those answers.

If somebody asks you for an interview, then you should do the interview. Treat people well and with respect, and you will find great rewards.

Yes I sound like a fortune cookie, but I personally find it to be true.

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Lesson 11 - The Internet Is A GREAT Place To Complain

I do not mean that you should go around complaining. If you want to be seen as exemplary (which has numerous benefits including increased sales), then you need to resist all urges to complain.

I mean that the Internet is seen as a great place to complain, so other people will complain as some of the slightest infractions against them. If you actively time listening to and responding to those silly complaints, then you will possibly go mad... Think that the world is out to get you, nobody appreciates what you are doing, and close up shop.

I almost did. There are so many times that it would have been easy to call it quits and concentrate on my career as a financial professional. To spare my wife and children the pain of having me work hard toward the success of Tasty Minstrel Games rather than spend time with them.

Because this is such a real scenario, I want to let you in on some not-so secrets:

- Complainers have the most reason to voice their complaints. Thus their voices seem amplified.
- Those that are satisfied typically do not go around yelling and cheering about their satisfaction. Especially if they are not paid to do so.
- If the complaints are irrational and most sensible people will take your side, then do not respond. Responding gives additional credit to the complaint. Wait a couple of days and see what the mood is like. If you have built a good community, then it is likely that your community member friends will show up to defend your position.

It is still difficult to see, read, or hear those complaints. Seth and I have heard tons about Tasty Minstrel's initial production problems. For me at least, every complaint felt like a personal attack on me, because I could have stopped the production problems through better choices.

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Lesson 12 - No Success, No Matter How Great, Will Compensate For Failure In The Home

I attempt to make no secret that I am both a spiritual and religious man. I have been spiritual all my life, and religious since I was 20 years old. So as I would spend a full day at work, come home and check email or do some Tasty Minstrel work, have dinner, play with the kids for 1 hour, then go back to work on Tasty Minstrel stuff... As I did that it pained me to know what I was doing to my wife and my children.

Therefore, I plead with you that you do what you can to spend time with your family that you may or may not have. There are numerous people out there that would like to be able to come home to 4 (I currently have 3 children) people that are excited to see you. Do not waste that away in pursuit of a dream.

You can pursue your dream, have great relationships with your family, and maintain a full-time job at the same time. It is just a question of what you need to sacrifice. For me, ironically one of those sacrifices includes playing video games, along with some television, and wasteful email checking.

It might surprise you how much you can get done when instead of worrying about what you are doing to those that you love by working so hard to build success... Instead of worrying, that you spend the time required to no longer worry.

Rest assured, no emergency will come across via email. There will be nothing that cannot wait 3 hours or even 3 days. Build systems that will allow problems to solve themselves. Design and utilize models to help with decision making, FAQ's to reduce questions, and eliminate the unnecessary. If you reduce your involvement in the system, then you will find that many things solve themselves.

My family is more important, and I am sure yours is too!

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Lesson 13 - Don't Whine, Complain, or Beg On The Internet

People are watching you and will make quick judgments about your character as a result of what you post. If something goes wrong, then feel free to tell people how much it sucks. However, avoid making excuses and actively explain how you will correct the mistake and proceed to do it.

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Lesson 14 - Stay Away From Forum Flame Wars

If you are publishing board games in your extra time after working full time and spending time with your family, then you do not have a lot of extra time. On that note, let lay out some facts about Forum Flame Wars that may convince you to stay away from them:

- Flame wars accomplish nothing of value, even if you win the argument, which is unlikely, because most flammers have too much time on their hands and you have little.
- Participating in a flame war often makes you look bad (at least to a portion of your potential customers).
- Participating in a flame war gives additional validity to the initial flamer, which is what they want. This will in turn encourage them to continue to FLAME ON!
- I participated in one flame war, and wasted about 4 days worth of extra time (about 2 hours per day) with reading, checking, re-checking, and responding to flames.

Stay away, trust me. You probably have the good sense to stay away, but I felt a warning was still necessary.

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Lesson 15 - Meetings: While I Detest Them (Coming From A VERY Corporate Environment) They Can Bring About Good

Anybody that works in a VERY corporate environment like I do, will recognize that meetings can be a vast waste of time and resources. Gathering large groups of people to discuss different policies should be the definition of wasted time.

However, having a meeting with defined goals to achieve and actions sets to be accomplished by various people at the meeting brings forth what needs to be done. While it might look to be difficult to setup a system under which a board game publisher might attract and support demoers, the individual action steps to be taken are amazingly simple. For example:

1. Identify what minimal information is needed to take applications.
2. Create an online survey to capture the information determined above.
3. Promote the opportunity to become a demoer.
4. Go through the applications and see who you want to start with.
5. Get further information.
6. Send out demo packets.
7. Get feedback from demoers and continuously improve the system.

So, for your meetings to go well, you need defined goals prior to assembling the meeting. I also recommend that you distribute those defined goals for the meeting to all participants ahead of time and set a start and end time for the meeting. This will enable all participants to keep the meeting focused on accomplishing what needs to be accomplished.

Assign one person to take notes about what needs to be done and the individual actions steps to be taken. Assign those action steps to various people within the organization (even if there are only 3 of you). Have the note-taker email all of the individuals with their assigned action steps.

Following these steps for holding a meeting will keep you far away from the problems associated with the corporate bore-a-thons that many managers like to call meetings.

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Lesson 16 - Box Design Is For Selling Games In Your Absence

Unfortunately when a retail store picks up your game to sell it to consumers, they do not get a miniature version of you to sell the game for them. You also get into a catch-22 situation with a retailer, considering they quite possibly will not put in the effort to learn how to sell you game without existing sales as proof that it will sell.

Therefore, you need a box that helps the game sell itself. A quality box design has all of the following characteristics:

- It is a portrait rather than landscape. So games get away with the opposite, such as Descent, Twilight Imperium 3, Candyland, or Shoots and Ladders. In these cases, the games are either so expensive that if a store carries them, they will not mind the horizontal shelf space that they take up. OR... They are perennial sellers which may or may not have purchased shelf space at retailers like Target or Wal-Mart. Remember, retailers consider their horizontal shelf space at a premium.
- Intriguing cover designed to not only grab attention on the shelf, but also to draw people into the box. Obviously, you want your box to appeal to your target audience which is more likely to convert (i.e. purchase the game). The more interesting components to the design that there are, the more likely you are to draw people in, because different aspects will appeal to different people. Be wary of having so much going on that is distracting though! The goal of the box cover is to get people to look at the back of the box.
- The back of the box is designed to convince your target market to buy the game. Make sure you cater to your target market, because if you try to cast to wide of a net with your targeting, then you will not sufficiently appeal to your ideal market. You should count on your ideal market becoming evangelists for the game. The back of the box should explain the top bullet points for not only how, but also why you should play the game. If the back of the box convinces a potential purchaser that they want to play the game, then they are moving down the path of buying the game.
- The box clearly indicates the minimum age, expected play time, and number of players.
- The box is branded for one thing only. I personally want the box to be branded for the game itself. While Tasty Minstrel Games is an important brand for me to develop, each individual game needs to have its own brand. If I were to have the exact Tasty Minstrel logo plastered on the front and sides of the box, then it would conflict with the brand of the game. One exact logo (proper coloration and everything) is sufficient on the back of the box, along with the wordmark on the front and sides (with colors that are consistent with the game's brand).
- The box is intriguing if it is shelved with the cover showing or with the spine showing. Special tip: people have the quickest response and have positive feelings when there is a smiling

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person. If it would not be appropriate to have the person smiling, then having a person is still superior to some sort of symbol or abstract identification of the game.

- The box will NOT get lost on the shelf among the other games. Special tip: Orange stands out the most of all of the colors. However, if there was a sea of orange, then purple would stand out well as the contrasting color.
- If there are rules explanations on YouTube, then indicate that on the back of the box.

Box design is essential! Make sure your game has the capacity to sell itself. It is probably the second most important aspect of selling a game, only behind having a game that is fun and worth playing.

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Lesson 17 - Sell Sheets (For Retailers and Distributors) Are Essential

I publish games in an effort to sell those games. Without sales and revenues, then there will be a VERY limited number of games that I can afford to publish. Especially with artwork cost being what it is for a great design that will sell itself. While direct sales will bring in more revenue per sale, and get your games into the hands of people that are most likely to be evangelists... Revenues and sales through distribution will be significantly higher over time with a successful game.

In an effort to allow the game to sell better through retail channels, a sell sheet designed to appeal to retailers and distributors is essential. While most hobby game stores are owned by gamers themselves, at some level they ONLY need to know how to sell your game and why they should stock your game. They do not need to know how to play, or know too much about the theme of the game.

Keep the sell sheet punchy. Take advantage of the fact that MANY (read probably most) will be sent to distributors who will forward them to their retailers DIGITALLY. This means that your sell sheets can take advantage of links, videos, etc. Use the sell sheet to tell them why to carry your game and how to sell it. Provide them links and URLs (for print distribution) for further information. A good sell sheet will contain the following:

- 3d graphic of the game box. This will help the retailer see different ways they can put the game on the shelf, which is an essential part of their thinking.
- Game stats: minimum age, number of players, play time, game style (Euro Strategy, Party, Word, Wargame, Adventure, etc)
- Product stats: MSRP, Box Size, ISBN/UPC Code, Weight (if known), expected release date.
- Contact information: email address and phone number of the main contact for further questions.
- Information about any support programs that exist for the game
- Is their further information about the game online? Rules on YouTube? Facebook pages for the game or the publisher?
- What promotions are being done? Do you have a list of previous customers that you will be promoting to? Will there be review and or news coverage of the game? The more that you can show... the better. If you can say on your sell sheet that the game will be submitted to 100 different reviewers, podcasters, board game news centers; then the retailers will not worry so much about the game sitting on the shelf due to lack of exposure.
- Is there an opportunity for retailers to get demos of the game done in their stores?
- If a store carries your games, then will that information be available on your website?

Try to think in the shoes of a retail operation. The sell sheet needs to show them how to sell a game, why to sell a game, and what support from you as the publisher they have available. The more lead

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time you can get on the sell sheets, the better. If you can maintain a list of retailers that want to receive information about your products, then that is awesome! The more eyes that see things like this, the more games you will sell.

Businesses are built upon relationships. Remember that and try to help retailers sell your games, and they will thank you by carrying your games and ordering your new releases.

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Lesson 18 - Online Social Networking Might Be Great For Keeping Customers Engaged, But It Does Not Create Sales

Networking, networking, networking. It can bring such fruitful rewards over the long-term, but it will not bring sales in the short term. If you want your business to succeed, then you need to create sales not find new friends.

"But you keep talking about the importance of relationships and networking... Now you contradict yourself," thinks the reader.

I know, welcome to my world and real life... Which is full of seemingly contradictory statements. Networking is amazingly important for having the important relationships with the right people. You want to be able to call the head of purchasing at the big distributors to find out why a game is not being ordered.

Failing capabilities like that, you will want to hire people that have those capabilities.

You also want to have ways for your fans to build a community surrounding your brand and products. This will help turn first time customers into repeat customers. However, you need to be careful of the time spent doing this.

Without sales, all of these efforts will amount to very little. Doing all of this networking is like putting the cart in front of the horse. Both the horse and the cart are important to the entire operation, but the horse comes first and makes the cart useful. Without a horse, you might as well not have a cart.

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Lesson 19 - Trust People That Are Smarter Than You To Do What They Are Good At

I certainly suffer from the “**I am so smart, I am so smart, S-M-R-T**” syndrome from time to time. Thinking that I can do anything better than anybody. I suppose that kind of attitude is somewhat healthy in that you have sufficient self-confidence to give anything a try, learning and growing along the way.

However, there is a much better and easier way to go through life. Surround yourself with people that are smarter than you, recognize their best skill sets, and get them working with you within the realm of their best skill sets. **BUT I DO NOT HAVE MONEY TO HIRE PEOPLE!**

I know, it is frustrating... There is so much to do and improve and move forward with, but there is no money to hire people. Things are still going in a negative cash flow, and you are glad that you still have your day job. Otherwise, you would be in perilous times.

There is good news though, there are people that you can work with that are smarter than you and will either request little pay, no pay, or only pay on performance. A great example in the Board Game Industry is Publisher Services, Inc. PSI is a fulfillment company that warehouses and sells board games to distributors all over the world. If you can get with them (they choose how and with whom to expand), then they will have all of that and take a small fee 6% to handle everything.

Without them, Tasty Minstrel Games would have certainly failed. I do not have the capacity to do warehousing or shipping, and now I realize I have no desire or need to develop that capacity.

One time when I didn't look to people smarter than me, was when Tasty Minstrel did its initial print run of games. 2,000 copies of Homesteaders and Terra Prime. We worked so hard, and here came the fruits of our labors. We found, collation problems, missing pieces, and our product did not match what was quoted.

In addition we found one additional problem... Moisture. Moisture + Cardboard is not a good combination. I recommend avoiding it. Lesson learned. If you can afford the premium of using somebody more skilled than yourself in an area, then you should probably use them. If you cannot afford the premium, then you should reconsider the **WHOLE** project or company.

Such errors have the capability of ruining everything. Without consistent and difficult personal efforts by me, Seth, and members of our community... Well, those efforts were there, so let us rejoice in the survival of Tasty Minstrel Games. Let us also remember the lessons learned.

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Lesson 20 - Be Helpful To Others

After Tasty Minstrel Games had been around for about 4 months, I started to blog about my experiences publishing board games. I figured, since I was actively going through the process of learning how to publish board games, I would tell others about it.

At the time, I thought that such a resource would have been helpful to me while I was figuring out exactly how to publish board games. I pieced together the pieces from different websites, forums, my existing knowledge, my theories, and conversations I had with numerous people. My only goals for the blog were to be able to formulate and organize my own thoughts about the subject, and MAYBE sell an extra game or two.

Despite having a relatively small following of people that were interested in what I was saying, many good things have come from my blogging. I was able to help numerous people to be able to get off the fence about publishing a game. Board game designers gained an additional window into the psyche of a board game publisher. I have also been able to develop relationships with people that I consider to be friends and that I have enormous respect for.

Prior to the experience of blogging in such a small niche, I confess that I had some contempt for certain groups of people. I had feelings and opinions about people that I did not know that I am not proud of. While I do not pretend to think that others do not hold such opinions, I was disgusted with myself for holding some of those opinions. EVERY person has the capability to bring improvement to their own life or the lives of others. EVERY person deserves to be treated with respect, at least until they prove otherwise.

This is important if you are running a business that you want to succeed. Especially if you want that business to have enormous viral word of mouth marketing. Every person that you deal with and help is not only a potential customer, but is a potential evangelist for your products and your company.

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Lesson 21 - Nurture And Care For A Community That Will Build Up Around Your Brand

Regardless of how small a company may seem, there is a community surrounding that company. If you want success, then one way to that success is to develop a strong community. This may be more difficult and more work intense than throwing your product out there, advertising, and improving conversion rates (purchases per ad). Regardless of the extra work, it is worth it.

With a community, you will have a base of customers that you can go to for numerous reasons:

- Surveys about upcoming products.
- Surveys about what products they want to see.
- Editorial review of different aspects of your product. (for Tasty Minstrel Games, this entails play testing our games and rules editing)
- You have a core group of people that if you ask them to tell their friends, then they will.
- To sell new products, and have them evangelized

Apple has an amazing community surrounding their products. They can sell millions of iPods, iPhones, and iPads at the drop of a hat, because they have nurtured and cared for this community for years. The community is so large and tech savvy, that if Apple even registers a domain name, then it will be a BIG STORY. Imagine this:

“Apple recently registered the domain name, www.islap.com. I have no idea what sort of product the iSlap could be, but we are looking into this. Please speculate as to the nature of the iSlap in the comments section below.”

Nurture your community and watch it grow both in numbers and in strength. Ask the community what they would like to see. Give them input into your products or marketing methods. Allow them to get involved. Not only will your products improve, but you will have a community with a vested interest in seeing your company succeed.

After one time interacting with the board gaming community as a whole, asking what Tasty Minstrel Games could do to support the movement... Seth (Head of Development @ Tasty Minstrel) emailed back and forth a couple of times with one fan. She asked about doing demos for Tasty Minstrel. We had been considering supporting a demo crew, but had not yet figured out how to go about it.

She essentially went to one local store, and asked them if they carried Homesteaders. The store did not carry it, but decided to get 2 or 3 copies on her recommendation. The games sold out the day that they arrived at the store. If you multiply this effect by 20, 50, or 100, then you could be looking at an avalanche of incoming sales.

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Lesson 22 - Money, Money, Money... You Need More Than You Think

Make your conservative estimates of how much money you will need, and then double it. There will be bumps in the road and opportunities to learn from your mistakes (which cost money). Regardless of how awesome your games might be, you will have slow sales at first. It is inevitable because you do not have a built up infrastructure through which to sell games.

One of the advantages of outsourcing fulfillment (PSI is the best here) is that you get to tap into an existing sales infrastructure. PSI actively works with distributors all over the world of various sizes. They have shipping and warehousing solutions which are effective. It takes significant work and money to build up these resources. If you tap into an existing structure, then you will not need as much investment capital (money) to make it.

As your games see success, you will start to build momentum for not only those games but also for your company in general. This is fantastic, and means that you are off to a great start. There is only one major problem. You need to spend revenues and often profits printing more of your successful games, and will find it difficult to release additional new titles. There is a trade off between printing more of your successful titles, and releasing new titles which can also benefit from the momentum created.

The answer of course is having more investment capital. With additional money, you will be able to do both. The benefit of doing both is that the new titles will benefit from your existing momentum, and give new potential customers a new outlet through which to find out about your first releases.

You need to be able to push on what has already been successful and experiment with new titles and measure how successful they might become. The answer is money.

You really will need to find a decent amount of money and have the capability to release several games if you want to become a member of the upper echelon. In my opinion, if this is not something that you are striving for, then you should not be publishing board games. It would be better to find somebody else to publish your design and take the royalties.

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Lesson 23 - Great Product Is Step Number 1

Without great product, there is no point in moving forward. NONE. It might seem harsh, but it is true. Tasty Minstrel Games came under extreme early pressure as a result of production problems of our initial releases.

Thankfully, a combination of great game play and great artwork has allowed our games to continue selling despite the problems. These sales would not exist if the product was mediocre. While not every game will hit the sweet spot and become a hit, there are things that you can do to help it get close:

- Have shorter game play.
- Have concise and thorough rules which require no additional explanation (i.e. errata).
- Have a depth of game play despite easy to learn rules.
- Have a game which will lend itself to a fantastic initial game experience.
- Have a game which new players can recognize different strategies they could have taken.
- Have a community that you can sell the game to that cannot wait to play the game.
- Have a dedicated team of demoers which can actively explain the game at stores and conventions.
- Provide convention support in the form of free games.
- Have additional online resources to help sell the game.
- Provide copies of the game to reviewers.
- Have great artwork which ties into the game play.
- Streamline game play and remove unnecessary rules. If something does not positively add to the experience, then is it something which can be abstracted out of the game?
- Provide retailers and distributors with quality sell sheets so that they know about your games.

Most of these things are actively done by Tasty Minstrel Games, but some of them we need to work on. There are ways to help a game become a hit.

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Lesson 24 - Keep Your Day Job

As a successful financial advisor, I make a very good income. In fact, many people question why I would want to publish board games when I already have such great employment. If you are reading this, then you probably understand the draw and appeal of publishing board games.

A board game publishing company is unlikely to support you for quite awhile. That is a fact. I do not want to be a downer, but it is the truth. Additionally, if your company could support you, then remember that every dollar you distribute as income to you is one less dollar the company has to grow and continually build momentum.

Keeping your day job and funding the operation from savings will help you succeed.

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Lesson 25 - Bootstrap For As Long As Possible

I know that many people reading this might be thinking about how they need very little income to live off of, or about how long it would be until they could save enough money to start such a company. I understand the difficulty... I wanted to start publishing right out of college, but waited 4 years to sufficiently build up my career and savings to support and start the dream.

You could take on partners, or create a limited partnership. If you do this, then you will need to seek legal and investment council. This can be a good method to raise the money, and could provide you will the capital necessary to make a HUGE splash. If you do this, then think about this advice that I feel is appropriate... (this advice is not based 100% on my experience, but I do agree with it)

- Raise the minimum money required so that you keep as much of the company in your possession as possible.
- Give up ownership in the company in exchange for having amazing advisors to your company. If you can find somebody that can help you avoid costly mistakes and market your products, then their help will be worth the fraction of the company you give to them.
- Get revenues coming in NOW! Revenues will be a basis upon which to raise more money in the future and at better valuations.
- Look for partnerships instead of paying people to do work. For example, Tasty Minstrel Games is currently in the process of exploring a partnership to bring our games to the iPhone and iPad. This would be a revenue sharing partnership, where we provide intellectual property and they build the applications. No money will be spent up front. We both get to specialize in what we do and increase our revenues without spending our needed investment capital.
- Be careful of who you partner with in both partnerships and who you allow to invest.
- Give yourself a way out of all partnership contracts to prevent you and your company from being screwed.

Do as much as you can to prove yourself before seeking outside monetary investment. If you do this, then you will find that outside investment easier to obtain and you will need to give up less of your company to get that investment.

While I do provide financial advice for a living, I am unable to raise outside money for Tasty Minstrel Games. This is part of my employment agreement. So I have experience on the investor side of the equation through providing advice, but not on the capital raising side of the equation.

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Lesson 26 - Cross-Promote! Take Advantage Of All Of Your Free Ad Space

Some people find it annoying, some people find it helpful, most people find it at least remotely interesting. Everything that you do or publish brings a chance to cross-promote your products...

Do it, it amounts to free ad space, and free ad space cannot be bad. Utilize the sides of box bottoms, if you make an eBook for distribution put some discrete ads in the footer, whatever it may be...

Leverage the success that you currently have a push everything forward. If you have a Facebook page and a YouTube channel, direct people to there from inside a rulebook, or the back of a box.

Some people might have difficulty doing this, because they feel that it is too sales-y... If you have good products and are proud of what you produce, then you should have no shame in cross promoting them. Just make sure the message matches the market. You obviously should not promote a blog about catching big trout on the inside of your board game box (unless that game is about fishing)...

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