



## Seminar 2 The Publishing of Children Books in Malaysia

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### **Speaker Biodata:**

A seasoned publishing professional with nineteen years of experience in sales, marketing and publishing. Major strengths in managing new operations, formulate strategies, planning, product and business development and sales force management. Established an extension network of contacts throughout South-East Asia, East Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle –East throughout the years in international trade.

## **GEARING MALAYSIAN CHILDREN'S BOOK PUBLISHERS TOWARDS EXPORT EXCELLENCE**

Sometime ago certain people were convinced that e-books or digitisation of books will one day replace traditional books. So how far is this true? Is the future of publishing shrouded in a cloud of uncertainty or will books ceased to exist?

Well, it has been more than a decade since the World Wide Web came into the picture. The online bookstore, Amazon.com, too has been around for more than 10 years now and books, especially children's books are still growing strong. J.K. Rowling's seven Harry Potter books have sold nearly 400 million copies and have been translated into 64 languages including Bahasa Malaysia and Chinese. Of late, Asian publications like Mr. Midnight by James Lee (Jim Aitchison) are a tremendous success, outselling the Harry Potter books in Malaysia and Singapore. The series has sold more than one million copies and is doing well in China, Indonesia and Thailand, too. Its success has prompted the author to write a new series called Mr. Mystery. These are just a few of the many success stories in publishing. It seems that many readers still prefer to read in the same old way – through books.

Bookstore chains are growing strong, too. One good example would be Popular Book Stores and they have expanded to more than 50 outlets compare to 20 odd stores a decade ago. All these are indications that books still have a good demand and even Popular has gone into publishing children's books themselves. This lucrative market supported by a low entry barrier in children's book publishing has attracted a lot of new players from other sectors like stationers, printers, not to mention the ex-employees of various publishers. Together they are shaping the industry in a not so favourable manner with low prices, high discounts, long credit periods for booksellers as it has become increasingly competitive as these new publishers jostle for market share thus spoiling the market in return.

So we know now the children's book market is very attractive but it seems that it is not easy for local publishers to succeed. Too many publishers are churning out a lot of 'me too' or copycat products and most of them are not investing enough in research, training, marketing, good writers, producing quality and innovative publications to add value in order to stand out from others. Publishers need to do well locally in order to excel abroad and too few Malaysian publishers are actually selling successfully overseas. To sell abroad means to compete with publishers from all over the world and the challenge is up a hundred fold and the odds are unimaginable. So far there are less than five Malaysian companies who are actually progressing in children's book export.

What do Malaysian publishers need to do in order to sell abroad successfully? In reality there are no surefire ways or absolute formulas that would ensure success. Publishers need to understand their strengths and weaknesses, the market, where to focus and it varies from company to company. The management and their

staff play a key role as they must be committed to changes and improvements if they want to succeed. At present most local publishers are focusing on academic publishing as Malaysian parents tend to strive for their children's academic excellence rather than an all-rounded education. However, these are the publishers most likely to succeed in children's publishing if they plan to divert or expand to children's book publishing as they have the necessary means and resources compare to new players.

In my opinion, the following are some of the initial steps local children's book publishers should take if they intend to venture abroad:

1) Participate in international book fairs as visitors or exhibitors like Frankfurt, Bologna, London and regional fairs like Singapore, Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila to gain exposure and experience as well as to network. Companies should send and entrust their relevant staff like editors, writers, sales managers and set objectives and assign missions before and after the book fairs.

2) Focus – Publishers should stay focus on a specific category or genre they intend to publish depending on their strengths and the resources at their disposal. Some of the areas worth exploring would be:

(a) ELT – Readers and activity books with teachers' guides and these can be packaged as a set or programme to give additional value. Publishers can also focus on books on grammar, vocabulary, reading and comprehension etc.

(b) Preschool text and activity books – The main focus should be on English, mathematics and science. Private preschools are booming in SE Asia and so is the consumers' perception on quality English based preschool education. There are many publishers in this category so there is a need to focus on quality.

(c) Comics and graphic novels – Comics should be projected as an alternative language learning tool to instill reading habits as the visuals are both engaging and entertaining and they are perfect too for reluctant and slow readers. Publishers can stay focus on classic stories or popular characters by using the manga or cool Japanese comic style to illustrate since this is the current craze.

(d) Novelty books and dictionaries – Novelty and gift books are still contributing to a big chunk of the children's book market but many local publishers are not venturing into this as sales in the local market is slow mainly due to the higher selling prices as the print quantities are low. Furthermore, not many printers and binders in Malaysia can provide the service. Board books, bath books, puzzle books, gift sets are all examples of novelty publications. Children's picture dictionary takes time to produce as it involves multiple illustrations and pictures. It is time consuming and can be a big investment depending on the number of pages but once published it has a longer lifespan. Publishers should allow some additional spacing for bilingual foreign editions later.

(e) Novels – the most crucial factor would be the writer and the marketing budget. Many foreign publishers like those in the US and UK have huge promotion budgets for a successful launch. It would help tremendously if regional media is able to give a good coverage or write-up for a good book. Invest on a good cover design is also vital. Not all writers can be good children's book writers and novels should be graded in terms of difficulty or reading levels and the number of words if they are written for a specific age group.

(f) Illustrated story or picture books – They are the main focus of publishers so it is crucial focus should be given to the illustrations, storyline and cover design as this is a highly competitive field.

3) Securing rights from foreign publishers for a collective regional market – It's a good way to start if publishers lack in-house talent, time and a good publishing agenda. Publishers can select a good series and buy-in first not only for the Malaysian market but for a number of South-East Asian markets as well provided if the original licensor is willing to grant regional rights. Look up the main distributors or booksellers in the assigned territories and start selling abroad. Publishers can also sell their existing titles along the way.

4) Form strategic alliances with foreign partners – One recent example would be Singapore Asian Publications(SAP) teaming up with Gramedia Bookstore who took up a 20 per cent minority stake in the company. Gramedia bookstores is part of the Kompas Gramedia Group and they are the biggest media company in Indonesia. Through this tie-up SAP’s entry into Indonesia is assured or at least in Gramedia’s chain of bookstores.

5) Training – Publishers should also invest by giving their key personnel regular training. Not many institutions of higher learning offer publishing courses though. Stanford University in California, US, offers Professional Publishing Courses and workshops to working professionals. It is also worth noting that focus is given to business management including marketing strategies, strategic partnerships, industry overview etc rather than technical book publishing matters to give an insight to the courses’ contents.

6) Identifying foreign bases as gateways or launch pads to expand globally – Some Greek publishers like Express Publishing, MM Publishing have done it by setting up their offices in the UK to sell ELT titles thus projecting themselves as British publishers and sell English books. Some Koreans are doing it too by registering their publishing office in the US as the East Asian markets like Korea, Japan and Taiwan have a penchant for American English books. It is a good tactical decision to set up a foreign office or use a foreign address depending on the intended market. This would serve as a confidence booster for local publishers as this will help project a certain level of image or perceived value for their publications.

7) Appointing agents to handle overseas markets – This is not new as many foreign publishers engage agents for selected markets where they do not have a presence or a foreign sales office. Agents usually have a good knowledge or relationships with their clients and they know their market well. Agents can link or introduce the best possible working partner be it ex-works, co-edition or rights. This would save the publisher a lot of time and they should consider agents as their freelance sales person and they can pay them a fee or a percentage of sales.

The steps or suggestions mentioned above are based on some of the issues publishers face currently and are being tackled from a macro point of view. So publishers would still have to address and manage the micro issues like business management, resources like manpower, finance etc. The government aspect has not been taken into consideration as there is still much for the Malaysia National Book Council (MBKM) and Matrade can do to assist the industry to excel abroad besides organising and subsidising one or two book fairs abroad annually. A lot of emphasis or initiatives are given to promote reading and education through the latest technologies on the domestic front but a lot more needs to be done to support and boost the local publishing industry especially children’s book publishing as this is the category most likely to succeed abroad.

Malaysian children’s book publishers need to gear up now as globalisation is making ours as well as overseas markets easily accessible to others. Chinese and Indian publishers too are catching up fast and they will soon learn to master the trade and take over. There is no stopping them from operating their publishing offices in this region and there is no doubt in their ability as well. It can be observed that Chinese and Indian publishers are getting more aggressive at the book fairs. They are expected to advance at a faster pace and be equally good in producing English and foreign language books and their prices will be lower as they have the economy of scale thanks to their large domestic market base and huge pools of talent. Digitisation will not be expected to pose a major threat for the next decade as it currently takes up only 1% of major publishers’ sales but certain level of digitisation is necessary as technologies evolve. The more obvious threat would be from regional publishers so Malaysian children’s book publishers need to shape up now or they will become irrelevant at the onslaught of competition.