The cyber marketplace for children is new and thriving, but book publishers are notably absent from the throng. The hurdles to web marketing for children face all industries equally, but book publishers are hanging back. In this article, I explore how the industry has responded to this challenge to date and conclude with practical suggestions on how to embrace and improve web marketing for children.

Befriending the beast: web challenges universal to all industries

All industries are struggling with how best to use the internet, an unwieldy tool with seemingly limitless scope. This emerging, mutating medium has, to date, few strictly defined features. Topical issues include:

- the ramifications of supplying information for free
- finding the optimal format for posting information on-line
- identifying the most favorable marketing application of the internet
- the internet’s power in promoting brand recognition and the impact of this on sales
- evaluating one’s on-line presence
- the impact of chat forums or discussion sites on the public view of products
- gathering customers’ data without infringing their rights

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Locating customers in the cyberspace marketplace

Customers in cyberspace are unimaginably numerous, with the high-profile Disney site reporting 20 million hits per month\(^2\). The email address book of the cyberworld joined forces with the low-cost access to customers, resulting in the proliferation of spam (cyber junk mail). In order to endear itself customers, web marketing needs rather to be sensitively targeted, aimed at particular customers with specific interests. A careful balance needs to be sustained between an exciting, interactive site and the bandwidth required to run it. The technology of web surfers varies in sophistication and those users on the lower end will be less inclined to visit slow, graphically-intense, multimedia sites. At the same time, users want engaging content and aesthetically pleasing packaging. A stagnant site, however attractive, will not sustain a high turnover of users. The costs of developing a site need to be weighed up against the benefits those developments bring\(^3\) and publishers need to avoid the temptation to create unnecessarily busy sites.

For all cybernauts, evaluating the impact of their on-line marketing is tricky. On what grounds is it quantified? Numbers of hits is the current criterion, but a more meaningful measure might be number of minutes spent per hit. Equally imprecise are the run-on repercussions of those hits. How many customers view a product on-line and purchase it later in a store? How many clicks sow the seed that ultimately lead to the purchase? How does brand promotion on-line influence sales? As for assessing the audience they reach, on-line marketers need to identify ways to record pertinent data, (such as the age of their visitors), without infringing on their rights. The quantitative component of marketing, based on researched, collected consumer data, is threatened by a fuzzy fragmentation of on-line and off-line customers. Industries need to explore which medium reaches customers most effectively and how to conduct marketing, bricks and clicks and mortar, in a mutually enhancing way.

Publishers hanging back in cyberspace

Publishers have responded to the internet with predictable caution, suspicion and reluctance to venture into cross-promotional marketing. Internet issues rock the foundation of the industry. Publishers are concerned about what the free dissemination of information, their very stock, will do to their industry. With the decline of print media and the increase of authors posting their books directly on the internet, publishers need to reposition themselves and re-examine their roles. The industry’s tendency to watch cautiously and passively has resulted in related industries (such as on-line booksellers and entertainment companies) taking the lead. Publishers are following where they should be leading, and children’s websites are no exception to this.

The publishing industry has embraced certain developments that directly promote it: the increased demand of on-line shoppers for backlist, slower-moving titles (which are often poorly stocked in bookshops); the global reach