

THE Bookseller

Steps in the right direction

FEATURE: INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING

Transatlantic children's publisher **Barefoot Books** avoids frontlist promotions and 'sale or return' deals. Instead, it gets its ethically sound books to readers through gift outlets, own-brand shops, and a new community website. **Caroline Horn** reports

It is unusual for a publisher to present itself as a lifestyle brand, but transatlantic children's publisher Barefoot Books has been doing just that. It is positioning itself as a socially responsible company that takes the environment and children's education seriously.

Barefoot produces illustrated multicultural books, often with audio CDs attached, as well as puppets, games, DVDs and stationery. It is united by a strong environmental and educational mission statement: "We celebrate art and story that opens the hearts and minds of children from all walks of life, inspiring them to read deeper, search further, and explore their own creative gifts."

These marketing efforts will soon be rewarded, with a new deal for a Barefoot-branded concession in the famous FAO Schwarz toy store on New York's Fifth Avenue. That's evidence that a publisher can turn itself into a brand, says Barefoot's US-based co-founder and m.d. Nancy Traversy. "People say you can't brand a publisher, but we have—and FAO Schwarz was intrigued by our offer." Now she would like to see similar concessions granted to Barefoot by UK retailers (not necessarily traditional booksellers).

Barefoot has taken a number of bold decisions on how to retail its products for ethical as well as business reasons. In 2005 the company decided to pull out of frontlist promotions in the major US chains, because of the high costs involved and the environmental impact the returns generated. "We were putting an enormous amount of energy into a couple of customers and weren't getting the payback," Traversy says. "Instead, we would see about 50% to 60% of our stock returned because it was only being displayed spine-out." It has also been shying away from "sale or return" deals, instead offering "retrospective discounts" to booksellers. Returns from US retailers and distributors have been reduced to between 1% and 2% of stock.

In the UK, too, Barefoot has been avoiding multibuy promotions with the major chains, which "devalue" books. Instead, Traversy is seeking a more collaborative approach. "Too much of the publishing industry is pushing books from warehouse to warehouse and back

again. Often they never even get into stores." By contrast Barefoot has not remaindered any titles for 12 years.

Instead the publisher has been wooing independents and the gift market, helping grow its total sales to £4m last year, 20% up on 2006. "We have to work in a more grassroots way because particular types of books will sell according to the community you are in," Traversy says. Barefoot's books appeal to the upper end of the market, as well as the educational and libraries sectors.

The company is unusual in not having a sales rep force in the UK, relying instead on a variety of other channels, including the internet, to reach readers. "Unlike the usual publisher model, pushing product out the door, we are looking for communities that are interested in our books," Traversy says. Barefoot has just relaunched its website with web 2.0 technology, including podcasts, blogs and interactive forums, encouraging families to join the Barefoot "community". There are facilities for UK bookshops to buy direct, supported by special offers each month.

The new site will also be instrumental in developing Barefoot's home-based sales operation, the Stallholders programme, where individuals sign up to sell its titles. Barefoot now has more than 1,000 "Stallholders" in the UK and US and expects the total to grow to 1,800 by the end of this year.

The company also has plans to open a London-based shop that will showcase its products in a similar way to the store it runs in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That shop reflects Barefoot's publishing approach—slightly quirky with an emphasis on quality storytelling.

Its output will stay at 20 titles a year, overseen by UK-based co-founder and editorial director Tessa Strickland. "We focus on maximising the potential of each of our books in print and producing titles that have a long life." Barefoot is, though, broadening its sights: a young fiction list launches in July, specialising in translated work, and there will be a range of activity books.

The company has come a long way from its London launch in 1993. It has survived near disasters including the collapse of its UK distributor, Traversy's move to the US just before 9/11, and the anthrax scare that disrupted a massive direct mail campaign. At times the team has been sustained by the enduring belief that their books need to be seen, Traversy says—but she quickly adds that the revolution in its approach to retailing is what has really kept the doors open.



Barefoot's store in Cambridge, Massachusetts

THE BEST OF BAREFOOT

Barefoot's global bestsellers

The Animal Boogie by S Blackstone & D Harter

Whole World by C Corr & F Penner

We All Went on Safari by L Krebs & J Cairns

Key Spring 2008 titles

Baby's First Book by C Beaton

Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush by F Penner & S Fatus

Little Leap Forward by C Farrow & H Cann

Key autumn 2008 titles

Port Side Pirates! by O Seaworthy & D Harter

Arthur of Albion by J Matthews & P Tatarnikov

Shopping with Dad by M Harvey & M Latimer