



Darin and Goliath

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With the wave of digital technology that has hit the book trade, the past couple of years have been a testing time for the industry's largest sharks, let alone its smallest fish. Up until now, with less revenue to play around with and fewer books in their arsenal, smaller publishers have for the most part been left out in the digital cold, lacking the infrastructure to compete with the big boys. Darin Brockman, m.d. of BCL NuMedia, is hoping to change that.

Brockman represents a new breed coming into publishing: the technology professional. BCL, based in Newbury, Berkshire's "M4 Corridor", roughly the UK's equivalent to Silicon Valley, is an e-commerce and website development company that has been up and running since 1998.

Brockman first decided to enter fully into the e-publishing arena three years ago, based largely on personal experience. He had published a guide for companies to improve their online presence called [The Website Workout](#) with tiny indie Words at Work and discovered, somewhat ironically given the subject matter, that it was difficult getting his book converted to an e-book. He says: "I tried to convert my book and I found it astonishing; if you had one book, or just a few books, no one wanted to convert them."

The experience led him to decide that somebody needed to level out publishing's digital playing field and stick up for the little guy, so in 2007, he launched [FirstyWork, an e-book conversion service](#), and in a few months time he will launch [FirstyFish, an accompanying e-book store](#). He says: "Larger publishers can take their conversion work overseas, but we are working within a core marketplace of publishers that have between 20 and 200 books. I think there are around 8,000 companies with fewer than 20 books, so for them going digital is very difficult and that is where we fit. We want to offer small publishers everything other publishers were getting, it was just wrong that they were not getting the same chances."

It's also a business opportunity of course: FirstyWork has signed up indies such as Profile Books, Tindal Street Press, Amber Books, Pengridion and Garnet Publishing. For the past three years it has done a lot of back-office e-book consultancy taking publishers from conversion to distribution, provides branded micro-sites which link back to the publishers own websites and a dedicated account manager who oversees everything. FirstyFish will launch to the end user—the reader—in the autumn, by which time it will have 12,000 epub files uploaded on to it.

Brockman says his aim is to empower small publishers, so that they can compete with the industry's bigger players: "I don't want this to be a hate campaign against Amazon, but I come from a digital background rather than a publishing one and we are just trying to level out the playing field. In the digital world there are fewer boundaries in place and one of the first things we did was to reverse the economic model so that from our distribution platform we will be selling directly to end users with a 30%/70% split in favour of the publisher."

He jokingly adds: "We thought Amazon might have heard what we were doing and copied us, because we announced the 30%/70% split, and a week later we found out Amazon were going to be doing the same thing with some of their clients."

Massive hike

Of course, one of the biggest debates in the digital arena is digital rights management (DRM), with some in the trade favouring it to protect content from pirates, while others claim that non-DRM is the key to expanding the e-books market. FirstyWork pays for all DRM costs out of its 30% revenue share, but personally Brockman is DRM agnostic, saying it does not offer total protection. Policing, he believes, may be more of a deterrent, so the company works closely on the enforcement side with LinkBusters, a firm which scans digital media daily, alerting site owners to any illegal links that it finds.

The next few months are going to be busy for Brockman as he has plans for increased links with social networking sites, author blogs and in-house app production. He is excited about the future and what the next 18 months will see and predicts that FirstyWork will be inundated with conversion requests as the market becomes flooded. He believes that as more companies release devices and prices drop there will be a massive uptake of readers: "The next year or so will be very busy and then it will level out, and then the next stage will be all about revenue generation. We are where the music industry was in 2002/03 and I do think that in a few years the revenue that could be generated could be as much as 50% of all book industry revenue. It will be a massive hike from the 4% that it is now. Some people are doing a really good job, but I think there is still an education process going on."