

# What Does "Bestseller" Really Mean?

By Peter Bowerman

**Book publishers rely on (or at least dream about) the economic boost of a title achieving popularity. However, the means by which books are declared successful can be anything but scientific. Author and self-publishing advocate Peter Bowerman explores the world of dubious bestseller lists, manufactured rankings and unreal reviews.**

**W**riter David Blum was perplexed. It was the late 1980s and Blum was researching the inner workings of *The New York Times* bestseller list. He took particular notice of Allan Bloom's 1988 book, "The Closing of the American Mind," which had just been positively reviewed in the *Times*. Although a large percentage of the modest first printing of 10,000 copies hadn't even arrived in bookstores when the review hit, the book suddenly showed up on *The New York Times* bestseller list. The only logical explanation Blum could find was that the book had done "incredibly well at a few bookstores that *The New York Times* weights heavily in its survey...These would be the stores to start with if you were thinking of outfoxing the *Times* bestseller system." It was not exactly how most people imagine a "bestseller" earns its designation.

A bestselling book is the stuff of authors' fondest dreams. It is also what readers look for when deciding where to spend their book dollars. However, given stories like the above, it is reasonable to ask, "Can the 'bestseller' designation always be trusted?" Unfortunately, thanks to less-than-honorable tactics on the part of publishers, booksellers and authors, the answer is no.

## The List

The gold standard list, of course, is the *Times*' list, which debuted in 1942, and whose creation is purportedly classified as a trade secret. According to Edwin Diamond in his 1995 book *Behind the Times*, "the survey encompasses over 3,000 bookstores as well as representative wholesalers with more than 28,000 other retail outlets, including variety stores and supermarkets." The bookstore list is reportedly now over 4,000.

A 2007 *Los Angeles Times* article about the *Times*' list wrote: "For years, skeptics have questioned the soundness of the way it is compiled, typically by having merchants across the nation fill out questionnaires about which books are selling. *Times* staffers then 'weight' these results according to whether they are from chain or independent bookstores or other outlets; beyond that, the paper has declined to reveal the precise methodology."

In the case of Blum's book, there was clearly some

intriguing "weighting" going on for a book with a healthy share of its 10,000-unit first printing still en route to bookstores when the "bestseller" mantle was quietly dropped on its shoulders.

## "List Inflation"

Over the years, the number of "bestseller" lists has grown: *USA Today*, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and plenty of sub-lists within the *Times*' list itself. For authors, this proliferation of new lists has meant many more opportunities to earn the coveted "bestseller" label. But, like inflation devaluing currency, "list inflation" has similarly reduced the true value of the "bestseller" designation.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that each list relies on widely varying sets of inputs. While the *Times*' list reportedly draws on its 4,000 bookstores, others rely on far different sources: some track only independent bookstore sales, others only the top indies, others exclusively from big chain stores, and still other include the online booksellers. The online booksellers themselves track only their own sales.

While such haphazard, shifting definitions of "bestseller" may strike many as a sloppy, indecipherable system, some think there's a method to the madness. As *Slate* opined in a 1998 piece, "Book industry people don't want a single compilation of what's really selling best throughout the country; they want a variety of lists that break down sales figures in ways beneficial to them."

## Growing Doubts

Nearly 20 years after Blum was scratching his head, the same doubts are alive and well. Marketing guru Seth Godin is painfully unambiguous in his assessment. In an October 2007 blog post, he wrote: "The *Times*' list is completely fictional. Made up. Divorced from reality. The stated goal of the list is to find (and promote) books that *Times* editors want people to read, not books that are actually selling a lot. (The editor of the *Book Review* told this to me years ago)."

However, human nature suggests that if create a system that offers opportunities to manipulate the sys-

tem, plenty will try. Godin acknowledges as much: “[T]he list is easier to manipulate than ever before. The identity of reporting stores is becoming easier to find and the leverage of being on the list is high enough that authors can profit just by buying their own books in enough quantity.” (emphasis added)

### Buying a High Ranking

Diamond shares one such story in *Behind the Times* about Al Neuharth, the former chairman of the Gannett newspaper family. Neuharth’s autobiography, *Confessions of an S.O.B.*, ended up on the *Times* Bestseller list for seven weeks in 1990. Diamond wrote, “According to the [Washington] *Post*, the Gannett Foundation, a nonprofit education fund headed by Neuharth... spent \$40,000 to purchase two thousand copies of the book...”

In *Book History, Volume 3* (2000), Ezra Greenspan and Jonathan Rose offer up a few similar “authors-buying-up-their-own-books” stories, citing, in addition to Al Neuharth, Jacqueline Susann (*Valley of the Dolls*) and Wayne Dyer (*Your Erroneous Zones*). Plus this one: “A consulting firm connected to authors Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema reportedly spent more than \$200,000 to buy about ten thousand copies of their book, *The Discipline of Market Leaders*... The book made the *Times* list for fifteen weeks.”

But booksellers are playing their own little games as well. As Greenspan and Rose observe, “...[T]here is little to prevent retailers and wholesalers from deliberately or inadvertently misrepresenting sales, something that appears to happen with some regularity. As one former bookseller told me in an interview, ‘We were reporting to several bestseller lists, and if we had an awful lot of books to sell, we’d tend to put that one on there in hopes that people would see it, and [say], ‘oh boy, gotta have that.’”

### Unlisted Bestsellers

Alan Sorenson, who teaches economics at Stanford Business School, has studied the effect of bestseller lists on sales of hardcover fiction. Sorenson used Nielsen BookScan to examine strong-selling books that *hadn’t* made the list. BookScan uses reports from 6,500 retail outlets to track most actual retail book sales nationwide — as opposed to the *New York Times*, which samples sales from just a small number of stores.

In an article in a 2005 issue of *Stanford Business*, writer Marina Krakovsky reported on a surprising discovery: “...in the two years he studied, Sorenson found 109 different books that failed to make the *Times* list even though Nielsen reported they sold more copies than other titles on the *Times*’ list.” (emphasis added)

On NPR’s “All Things Considered” in October 2007, Sam Tanenhaus, editor of the Sunday *New York Times Book Review*, and home of the *Times*’ bestseller list, commented on the *truly* — though unacknowledged — bestseller, “Middlesex” by Jeffrey Eugenides: “Hundreds of thousands had been sold — well over

## Ready-to-Go Reviews?

To illustrate the magnitude of the problem, note the following email sent by an acquaintance of this writer:

*A good friend of mine, \_\_\_\_\_, has written a book, and Amazon is currently running a contest to determine the winner in its category. It would really help him out if you could go over to Amazon and write a good review of the book. The more good reviews he gets, the better his chances of winning. I know he’d really appreciate it.*

The ethically challenged request was for a gushing review of the book, minus the inconvenience of actually having to *read* it.

An even more outrageous recent request included the message, “Would you be willing to give five stars and post a review for a friend’s book? The review is written below, so you can just cut/paste.” Above the review was the reminder “[Five stars please].” Words fail. **TSR**

half a million; not once had it appeared on our bestseller list. Whereas other titles that one couldn’t even remember — because they would bob up to the surface of the list for a week, disappear, sink and be replaced by another one — were hogging the list.”

### More Skeptics

Book promotion guru John Kremer, author of *1001 Ways to Market Your Books*, and founder of a popular site for independent publishers ([www.bookmarket.com](http://www.bookmarket.com)), is equally pointed in his criticism of the list, writing, “The New York Times bestseller list is essentially a work of fiction. As a result, it can be — and is — manipulated by those who know how the list is compiled. Publishers do it all the time.”

Several years ago, Kremer, known as a strong champion of little “David” independent publishers up against big “Goliath” publishing houses, began offering a course to authors hungering for that ultimate literary accolade entitled, “How to Create a New York Times or Amazon.com Bestseller.” He markets it for \$497. Similar courses offering success with Amazon now abound in the publishing world, sporting price tags of \$2000 and up.

With the “Make Your Book an Amazon #1 Best Seller!” campaigns, the formula is similar across the board: Offering prospective buyers a pile of freebies — ebooks, reports, etc. — authors try to maximize their book’s sales on one specific day in order to drive it to #1 (or at least the Top 10) — even for a few minutes — and earn promotionally valuable bragging rights. Authors will attempt to harness the power of “viral marketing” via mass emails, urging recipients to forward the appeal to as many lists as possible.

### Instant “Better Book”

In the minds of many publishing industry purists, what these authors are attempting to do is delude themselves and others into believing they’ve written better books than in fact they have. After all, even a Top 10 bestseller *must* be a good book, right? Of course, it doesn’t work that way, any more than giving a kid an A for C or D schoolwork will make the kid truly believe it’s deserved.

Not surprisingly, Kremer, found himself on the defensive after a blog post where he justified his system,

offering up such snippets as, "I know these lists can be manipulated. I've worked with several authors who have done it..." and "Such campaigns are simply working within the system as it is set..." One reader, referring specifically to the Amazon bestseller component, accused him of being little more than a "flim-flam artist" offering "fake Amazon ratings."

Circling the wagons, Kremer wrote: "If the NYT bestseller list could be worked the same way, with very little cost in money and time, more people would be doing that as well. But right now, the NYT list manipulation does cost a lot more money and time, which the New York publishers do all the time. Both lists, you can say have been cheated, spammed, and manipulated. But apparently it's okay to do so with the NYT list as long as you spend a lot of money and time. Why is one 'manipulation' worse than the other? Why is one ignored where the other [Amazon] scandalizes people?"

### How DOES Amazon Work?

Amazon is remarkably cryptic about the inner workings of their rankings system, dedicating just three short paragraphs to the subject in their FAQs. The gist? "The lower the number, the higher the sales for that particular item. The calculation is based on Amazon.com sales and is updated each hour to reflect recent and historical sales of every item sold on Amazon.com." This doesn't tell us much.

Brent Sampson, President and CEO of Outskirts Press Publishing, has studied Amazon more carefully than most, and notes that the process is, "more convoluted than they let on. Only the top 10,000 books are updated every hour [the rest, daily] and the ranking does not depend upon the actual number of books sold, but rather, on a comparison against the sales figures of the other 9,999 books within that same hour... hypothetically, a book that held a ranking of 2,000 at 2 p.m. and 3,000 at 3 p.m., might hold a 4,000 ranking at 4 p.m., even if it actually sold MORE books between 3 and 4 than it did between 2 and 3."

Amazon's system is such, that, according to Sampson, it's "possible for a newly-released book to outrank an older established title, even though the actual sales figures for the latter far exceed the former."

### Few Sales, Big Jump

Sampson uses the example of a book leaping from 900,000 to 200,000. Given how slow or stagnant those other 700,000 books' sales likely are, "one or two orders are sufficient to catapult a ranking." Sampson also discusses "phenomenon" books, defined as titles which leap even more dramatically, from high 100,000's to lower 1000's, in 24 hours or less, adding this clincher, "usually due to some *concentrated marketing initiatives*." (emphasis added)

As Sampson observes, "Since Amazon's sales history for that title doesn't support the leap, the spike occurs and then quickly drops again." However, if it

breaks the Top 10, even for an hour, bragging rights are solidified, resulting in the proliferation of the "Amazon Bestseller" claims.

### Molehills From Mountains

International bestselling (by *some* measures) author, M.J. Rose, in a comment made to Kremer's blog post, underscored the ephemeral nature — and by extension, the relative meaninglessness — of Amazon rankings. She quoted a publisher who'd weighed in on her blog, who wrote: "A publishing colleague shared that one of their authors had appeared on NPR's "Fresh Air" that same week. Before the interview, the book ranked 36,162 [on Amazon]. The day of the interview, it hit 300. The following day, it reached 80 and appeared on the Movers & Shakers list. And, after all that, how many did it sell at Amazon? 47 copies."

"Everyone knows how few books it takes to get a low number in any given hour. You can be number 200 one hour and number 300,000 six hours later. It means you sold 30 books that day because you were on the radio. So what? You can't put 'Amazon Bestseller' in your CV or on the cover of your book. It's an empty claim." It is, but in these times, clearly, it isn't.

Echoing an earlier discussion, Rose, referring to an email she'd received hawking an Amazon bestseller program for \$2000, offered this jokingly serious aside: "...take that same amount of money and buy a whole lot of your own books all at once, in the middle of the night where there's not much book buying going on. You'll get your low Amazon number and you'll get a lot of books for...promotional purposes."

Sadly, we're now living in The Age of Expediency. *How* you get somewhere is far less important than simply getting there, period. Tricks, gimmicks, and cutting corners are all acceptable strategies for achieving commercial success. And once the ethical bar is lowered, it seems anything goes.

### Responsibility to Readers

All this brings us to the crux of the issue: *public perception* and the responsibility to the reader of that bestseller list, "#1 Amazon Best Seller!" designation or book review. If one sees a "bestseller" designation — and knows nothing about how it came about — the assumption is that it's a *really good book*, not the result of smoke and mirrors by an author or bookseller, nor from some tortured short-term process of intense lobbying and outright bribery to create the illusion of bestseller status.

Fortunately, mediocre books, regardless of the games publishers, booksellers and authors play, never have long lifespans. They will never benefit from the invaluable word-of-mouth publicity that accrues to truly solid titles, never earn kudos from those whose words really matter, and never hope to garner serious industry recognition.

As list inflation and economic realities erode the impact of dubious ranking systems, publishers would

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environmental awareness efforts. In 2007, the MPA announced a public awareness campaign aimed at getting more people to recycle magazines.

The MPA also suggested that magazines use more recycled paper. In 2007, Nina Link, then president and CEO of MPA, suggested in a speech at an industry event that magazine publishers should use more certified paper to produce magazines. If more magazine publishers used recycled paper, the net effect would be substantial. The Environmental Defense Fund estimated that each ton of recycled fiber that displaces a ton of virgin fiber used in coated ground wood paper (stock used in magazines) reduces net greenhouse gas emission by 47% and cuts particulate emissions by 28%.

Co-op America, an advocacy group, estimated that if all North American magazine publishers increased their use of recycled paper to 30%, the net result would be a reduction of 1.7 billion pounds of greenhouse gases released into the air, according to their **release**. This is about the same amount of greenhouse gases emitted by 153,894 cars in a year. The group maintains a **Web site** for magazine publishers designed to help them learn more about using recycled paper. On the site is a list of magazines that have made a commitment to use recycled paper.

The PPA has taken a more aggressive stance than the MPA regarding the environmental impact of printing. The PPA has organized events for members on this issue and is working on the first full life-cycle carbon footprint calculator for magazine publishers. So far, publishing companies have relied on outside agencies and consultants for help in such calculations. Having a standard, reliable calculator would help encourage publishers to attempt their own analysis.

### Peering at Product Shadows

Heinz's "Following the Paper Trail" report does not use the term "carbon footprint," preferring instead to use the term "life cycle analysis" (LCA), which it defines as the sum total of the environmental burden of the manufacturing process. One of the major benefits of doing such an analysis, the report points out, is that it can be used to identify and evaluate opportunities to reduce waste and improve efficiencies. Any study or analysis that is not as comprehensive is not, by definition, going to be as effective a tool for these efforts.

The report uses an evocative term for the bottom-line result from such a study: "An LCA should cover the entire life-cycle of the product, including extracting, and processing the raw materials, manufacturing, transportation, and distribution of the final product and recycling and final fate of the product and byproducts. The net emission of waste (i.e. greenhouse gases, solid waste, air pollution, etc.) is referred to as 'product shadow.'"

The product shadow of two magazines published by Time Inc., *Time* and *InStyle*, are similar to those of *Discover* and *Backpacker*. Direct comparisons are difficult to make because all of the details of the *Discover* and *Backpacker* studies have not been made public. Unlike those two studies, however, the Heinz Center report was able to make its calculations based on specifics such as where the trees were harvested and where the paper was manufactured. Other studies rely on industry-wide estimates for these details. The in-depth nature of the Heinz Report is useful in so far as the report is a model for how such studies should be done, but the results are specific to the two publications at that time and are not easily extrapolated for other publications.

Like the other studies, though, the paper manufacturing and transportation portions of the life cycle are the two biggest elements of the overall impact. During the time frame covered by this study (2001), Time Inc. did not use any recycled paper for printing these two magazines. The report concluded that the net product shadow of *Time* magazine is 1.17 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq/ton and for *InStyle* it is 1.11 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq/ton.

The majority of the ink on paper manufactured for the publication of these two magazines was, at the time of the study, ending up in landfills. Such a finding must have provoked serious evaluations and conversations at Time, Inc., and the publishing company has been active in efforts to encourage recycling of magazines. However, it behooves every publisher to examine the print-to-landfill ratio and take steps to reduce the overproduction at the front end of the process. Even taking into consideration the economies of scale involved in offset printing and the brand awareness that newsstand presence supports, it can't make good economic sense to print and transport so many copies that a single reader never touches the majority of copies. Publishers might as well send most of the delivery trucks directly to the landfill.

Examining the environmental impact of what one does every day and from which one derives an income can't be an easy or comfortable process. It must be an especially unappealing given the troubled financial situations that many magazines find themselves in these days. So any magazine publishing company that is willing to attempt a complete analysis should be congratulated; they are setting an example that the rest of the industry should follow. Producing a special Earth Day issue on recycled paper every April or May isn't enough. Magazine publishers need to push forward with real reforms of the manufacturing process and consider how they can offset impacts that cannot be eliminated.

Magazines, in the past, have been reluctant to use recycled paper — saying it's too expensive compared to virgin fiber stocks or that they can't get the quality and selection they require. Yet, they can't afford, in more ways than one, to continue business as usual. Taking a note from *Backpacker's* carbon-neutral playbook, maybe it's time to encourage readers to read electronic versions of the magazine or move sections to the Web. Perhaps it's time to realize that if enough publishers use recycled papers or responsibly sourced virgin fiber stock, the price for both will come down. In the short-term, magazine publishers may have to pay more. In the not-so-long-term and by taking a hard look at what they print and ship, when and how, they can save money, please readers, and help the environment. **TSR**

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do well to consider other strategies for success. Other than the obvious (focusing on truly good books), they must embrace the collaborative nature of Web 2.0, and include their audience as real participants in the review and word-of-mouth process. This will dramatically simplify marketing tasks, and eliminate the need to prop up a title that can't stand on its own. **TSR**

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