

## Chapter 6: Marketing

Copyright © 2006 Amarillo Design Bureau, Inc.

Written by Stephen V. Cole, designer of *Star Fleet Battles*.

Revised 15 December 06

Additions since 1 June 06 are in blue.

New items since the 13 Dec 06 post are in green.

The adventure game industry is fairly small, but generates a huge number of highly innovative new gaming products every month. The problem is getting your products noticed.

Every week, dozens of new adventure game products appear, and the wholesalers have time to “pitch” a *FEW* of these to each of their stores. You need to make sure that your product is so great that the wholesalers move it to the top of their “pitch list” or even better that stores ask for it by name. That is, frankly, all but impossible. The wholesalers have so many products to pitch and so little time, they end up pitching whatever is easiest (or whatever they are overstocked on).

There is a lot to marketing, some of which is expensive, some of which is hard, and some of which is kind of fun.

### 6A: GENERAL MARKETING CONCEPTS

#### Definitions of Terms

**Marketing:** The broadest term, includes everything which gets your product into the hands of a consumer, including efforts to get wholesalers to stock it and retailers to carry it and players to buy it. Marketing includes product management, distribution, pricing, and promotion.

**Promotion:** One of the four elements of marketing, it involves spreading information about the product or the company or brand, increasing exposure and awareness and building a positive image of the product, company, or brand. There are four aspects of promotion: advertising, sales promotion, publicity, and public relations.

**Product Management:** One of the four elements of marketing, it involves designing a product line that reinforces success by providing add-ons to successful games. Another aspect of this is making sure your production meets and does not exceed demand (by much). *You also need to be sure that any new product lines you start are in subject areas with customers already there and waiting. A game about early American polka bands is probably going to find no customers.*

**Distribution:** One of the four elements of marketing, it involves getting the product from your factory into the hands of an end-user (gamer, consumer). See discussions in this book regarding distributors and retailers.

**Pricing:** One of the four elements of marketing. Selecting a price for your product is a key step, since you must balance the need for profit against what the market will pay. There are

ways to make your product appear or seem (or be) more valuable, allowing it to be sold at a higher price. However, a higher price and a higher profit are not the same thing. A \$10 profit on a \$75 game is not the same as a \$9 profit on a \$30 game. If you can assume that every customer is going to buy a copy regardless of the price, then it becomes a matter of whether the work involved to get that extra dollar is worth the bother. For a \$20 profit on a \$75 game, maybe it is!

**Advertising:** One of the four elements of Promotion. This usually means paying a magazine to print an advertisement (or series of advertisements) about the product or brand. Advertising is expensive, in fact, it is the most expensive part of promotion and of marketing. Worse, it is almost impossible to determine that advertising did any good at all since it may (or may not) get gamers to go into stores and buy products which will be supplied by wholesalers. You may never know if your low sales mean it's just a bad year for games, if your game is no good, or if your advertising just was not effective. All of this makes people who sell advertising talk about “a leap of faith” and “you have to do it, even if you can't see results” and such. It makes cynics say things like “none of it works, it's just a way to waste money, and people who sell advertising will say anything to get you to buy it except guarantee any kind of result”. There is also the school of thought that “lots of other companies are paying \$650 for full page full color ads in *Game Business Magazine* so obviously I should too!” Many say (with some truth) that advertising is a long-term multi-year battle to keep your brand in the minds of the consumer, and as such is worth doing and you cannot expect to track specific sales to specific ads. Others say that you can accomplish the same thing by free publicity. *We have used very low-cost advertising too good effect. Trading a box of games for an ad in a game convention program puts your games in the hands and eyes of consumers. Banners on game discussion (not game publisher) websites are very cost effective.*

**Sales Promotion:** One of the four elements of Promotion. This is what happens at the actual point that the product enters the hands of the consumer and money from the consumer enters the industry. You will do this at conventions and on your web site as you try to convince a specific customer to buy a specific product. Since you cannot be in every store, you need to provide retailers with “sales tools” to help *them* sell your game (starting with an attractive and well-packaged product that holds good value). Your “demo teams” are part of your sales promotion effort since they are literally trying to get people to buy the game.

**Publicity:** One of the four elements of Promotion. Publicity is often free if you know how to get it, but there are ways to get publicity that cost effort and money.

**Public Relations:** One of the four elements of Promotion. This is the process of making customers willing, comfortable, and eager to do business with you. It includes such things as

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

smiling while in your sales booth, treating customers with respect, keeping irrelevant items (e.g., arguments over religion and politics) out of conversations (and your web site bulletin board system), return and exchange policies, dealing with customers who were unhappy with the product or who got a defective product, etc. This may also include donating money to worthy causes on the theory that this will make people think you are a friendly company who “gives back to the community”.

### Burnside's Law

***“Everything a small game company does is marketing, and marketing never stops!”***

If you have a booth at a convention, that's marketing, so make it the best booth you can. Don't forget to have T-shirts made for yourself and your crew with the covers of your product since you then become a human marketing campaign every time you walk from your booth to lunch or the rest room.

The cover art for your game is part of marketing, so first make sure it's not ugly and then try for something that stands out from the crowd.

The insides of your game are part of marketing. How? They should be colorful and attractive enough that somebody in a game store or convention who happens to walk past a group of people playing your game will stop and say “wow, what's that?”

Your tournament system, your playtest groups, your convention demos, are all part of the marketing team. (Ken Burnside is the son I never had time to have. He spent several years as a playtester for my company and worked as ADB's marketing director for a year.)

### Cole's Law

Three things sell a game.

**1. THE TITLE** (which also covers the general subject material, a punchy title about a subject nobody cares about isn't going to sell, but a punchy title can make you stand out among 50 other companies all doing games on the same genre).

**2. THE COVER.** If the cover art doesn't get the gamer to walk across the store and pull your game out of the bin and turn it over and read the BACK cover (which is the first full-page ad for your game most customers will ever see) then you just aren't going to sell games.

**3. THE LAST GAME** that he bought from your company. If you published a turkey, the gamers are going to remember it and seriously wonder if they should hand you more of their money. If you published an elegant game that was fun to play, those same gamers will give you another shot. This is also known as branding. Expressed another way: “Birds of a feather flock together (people who play WWII games will tend to look first at WWII games) and all of your turkeys will come home to roost (your reputation for publishing that *awful* game Arctic

Tundra is going to stay with you about as long as the unsold copies gather mildew in your warehouse and stink up the place).” (By the way, I'm “Cole” and this is *my* law.)

### Crump's Law

Every product has to help sell every other product. Place a few ads in each product for other products of that line, or other product lines. They don't cost anything and can fill blank corners. Your RPG or tactical lines should help sell your miniatures line. Your magazine should provide new gaming material and tactics and stories for all of your product lines. Scenarios in one expansion should include (as optional additions) ships, monsters, or rules from another expansion. (David Crump was my bridge partner and wargame buddy in college. He got a degree in marketing and taught me a lot about how marketing works.)

### Population Density

Marketing comes in two kinds, general and target. General marketing tells everybody in town (or the country) about your product; targeted marketing tells those most likely to be interested. A huge segment of the general population is interested in (say for example) beer, and beer ads sent to everybody in town will have some effect. Beer ads sent to people who like sports (say, via television) will probably have a greater percentage of “hits” since a higher percentage of sports fans like beer than the general population.

The percentage of the general population who like “adventure games” is miniscule, so advertising in general magazines and other broadcast sources is going to be almost useless. Advertising in gamer magazines, on gamer web sites, in game stores (free posters for stores), and game convention programs will produce a higher response, since everybody seeing the ad is by definition a gamer (at least of some sort).

### Setting a Retail Price For Your Game

This is one of the most arcane, confusing, and misunderstood subjects covered by this book. “Everybody agrees” that the way to do it is to multiply the cost of your game (or other product) by some number and then adjust to the nearest dollar for the retail price. The problem is, nobody agrees on what the “cost” of a game is, and nobody agrees on what the “multiple” is. And the formula is just plain wrong anyway.

Let's take “multiple” first since it's the easiest. Really big game companies that print really big print runs tend to use “ten” as a multiple. Because of their huge print runs (which create lower unit costs), they can afford to. Because of their overhead, office staff, art budgets, advertising budgets, and executive salaries, they pretty much have to use ten as a multiple. Small game companies tend to use “six” as a multiple (if only because the Ancient Designer Jim Dunnigan once mentioned this number during an Origins seminar). Consider a

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

mythical \$10 game, for which the wholesalers will gladly pay you next Tuesday the princely sum of \$4. (You will actually get about \$3.50-\$3.75 by the time you account for shipping, which you pay out of your end.) If you work on “ten times” then your cost is \$1 and your profit is \$2.50. If you work on “six times” then your cost is \$1.60 and your profit is about \$2.00. Of course, your “profit” is not what you get to keep, but what you are allowed to use to pay rent, advertising, utilities, salaries, and so forth.

Now, let's talk about cost. Obviously, the printing cost is the biggest part, but not the only part. Most companies base their retail price on a multiple of the “printing cost” including the freight from the printing company to your dock. Other companies include up to three other costs: Authors (what you pay, either as a fixed fee or a royalty, to get the book written by somebody outside of your company), Artists (the art budget, usually a fixed amount), and the royalties you owe for using somebody's game system or background or whatever else. In the case of an author, you should note that a book written by yourself or a partner or an employee is costing money and so is a book written by an outsider, so whatever version of the formula you use, be sure that all of your products are based on the same theory. If you base pricing on the cost of outside authors, then any book written internally needs a cost added to it to represent payroll. If you base your pricing on the theory that the cost of the author, whatever it is, is part of overhead, that covers your salary as well. [To cut through the clutter and give you something to work for, try to shoot for at least six times the delivered printing cost.]

In the end, some cost vs. some multiple results in some price, which you adjust up or down to the next dollar.

All of which is nonsense.

The proper price has far more to do with the market than with the cost of the product. Walk around Origins, or GenCon, or GTS and look at other products in similar fields. (Try to avoid basing prices for science fiction products on fantasy books and vice versa.) Look at page count, word count, components, art, and binding. Find several games or books that are physically close to your own, and see what those prices are. Compare these prices to the price that your formula came up with. If your formula came up with \$17.95 and there are six very similar products on the market for \$24.95, then what the heck, set your price at the market and bank the extra profit for when you need it. If the reverse is true, your formula says \$24.95 and other companies sell similar books for \$17.95, then either your formula is wrong, or you need to find a better price from another printer, or you don't need to be doing the book since it won't sell, at least not for a profit.

Be sure to compare apples to apples. If your book has more (or less) words (or art) than the comparisons, that may mean you need to adjust your price (or your content). On the other hand, maybe your book is worth a premium price

(because it's a licensed product or because you are using nicer paper and more color). These are decisions you need to make as you design the product, not when it's finished.

One problem. Customers love color, and color is expensive, but customers tend to expect color “for free”. They won't pay more for a book with color; they'll just think that the book without color isn't worth buying.

The author of this book has a reputation among his customers and among the entire industry of including more work, more value, and more work in his products that anyone else for the same money. (The current theory of my friends is that I simply don't know when to shut up and stop typing.) One could make the case that I should be charging more for my books or that I should be putting less into them. Any other company that does a magazine like the one I publish would include 50%-70% as many words for the same price, or would charge 50% more than I charge. (Since customers think in terms of page count, my competitors would use larger type, more art, and wider margins to artificially inflate page count and make the book appear more valuable.) Does this mean that I should quickly raise my prices? Sadly, it does not. The problem is that my customers do not (for the most part) buy other company's books, so they don't even realize what a bargain they are getting. The lesson here is to compare products within your own market, and to avoid training your customers to expect and demand products that are not profitable for you to print.

One last note on pricing. It is virtually universal to price your games a nickel under the even dollar, as in \$17.95 since this (supposedly) looks like a lot less money than \$18. While I have my doubts that it's THAT important, I do it and almost everyone else does. There are tales of one game company that priced at \$17.99 (to make 1.6 cents extra per game sold to a wholesaler) but I suspect that they spent more money calculating their extra profit than the extra profit they made.

Further notes. Rick Loomis says that customers see no difference between \$14 and \$14.95 since both are under \$15.

There is virtually no reason to charge \$7.49 instead of \$7.95.

## 6B: MARKETING YOUR GAME

### The Single Most Important Thing You Can Do

Get complete information about your product (size, price, stock number, selling points, and cover art) to the wholesalers at least 90 and preferably 120 days before the product ships, then ship the product on time with that cover art, price, and stock number.

If you do this, your product will be listed in *Game Trade* (the Alliance buying list that looks like a magazine) and stores will read through that list and order the products (often not from Alliance). If you don't do this, your sales might be seriously

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

reduced from what they could be.

### Building a Brand

You want to create a brand, which may be your entire company (you want players to know that any product from Granola Games is very tasty!) or a product line (you want players who have tried one of your *Arctic Wilderness Adventure* modules to eagerly wait for the next one) or, even better, both the company and product line (so that players who have enjoyed your *Arctic Wilderness Adventure RPG* will pick up your line of polar bear miniatures, not to mention your boardgame *Polar Bear Attack*, and since they respect your design talents and production values, they just might give you a try when you branch out into *Pirates of Zanzibar* or something else that is totally different).

One way to do this is to have a company logo on every product, and perhaps also a universe or product line logo as well. So every product done by your company has the *Granola Games* logo, while every one of your *Arctic* products (whether an RPG, miniatures line, or boardgame) comes with the *Arctic Adventure* logo also on the box. You might want to keep these logos small (maybe one inch across) and on the bottom of the front and back cover, or you could emblazon them right across the top in bold colors. Whenever you get a chance to speak in public to gamers or retailers or wholesalers or anyone else in the adventure game industry (or write articles in magazine), be sure to mention your brand. [Several times.](#)

### Advertising

This is the most expensive part of marketing. You will never be able to say “that thousand dollars I spent on advertising resulted in this fifteen hundred dollars of sales” so just forget it. Take it as an article of faith that you have to do *some* advertising just to let people know you’re in business. It may take a dozen or a hundred times of seeing your product or company name or logo before you get a reluctant customer to give you a try. On the other hand, if you have to spend \$100 in advertising to get one gamer to buy one \$50 game, maybe you should consider alternative marketing ideas (or alternative product ideas or even alternatives to the game business). Of course (and it’s a different subject for a different chapter) one way to make that work is to be sure that your \$50 game is linked to three \$25 expansions and six \$40 packs of miniatures, so that once you have made the initial sale you can get more profit from that customer. (Of course, you will give him value for his money, as this is a two-way street: value for profit, not just profit for you and junk for your consumers.)

Advertising needs to target the level of the market you are sending it to. A retailer wants to know the key sales points and needs to be convinced that your product will sell to customers who *already frequent his store*. You would not send the same ad to a gamer, who wants to know about key game mechanics

and how much fun he’s going to have playing it.

**The Most Effective Advertising** in the adventure games industry is *Game Trade Magazine*, the Alliance house organ. While Alliance thinks this is the way they sell your games to their customers, in fact the stores (and some gamers) use it to keep track of what is coming out soon no matter where they plan to buy it. Stores that only rarely buy from Alliance use GTM to decide what to buy from other wholesalers. A full-page full-color ad in every issue will cost you \$650 per month. If that is too rich for your blood, find another small game company or two and “share” the page. (GTM won’t sell you a partial page, but they don’t care if one company buys a page and includes mini-ads for three other companies. If you can’t afford \$217 or \$163 per month for the most effective advertising, some would say that you don’t need to be in the game publishing business at all. You can judge all other advertising venues by the cost of your GTM page. If somebody claims that his \$2500 page is a bargain, he’s going to have to go a very long way to prove it’s worth more than four months of *Game Trade Magazine*.

NOTE: There is a school of thought (which the author subscribes to) which says that spending even that \$217 is a waste of your money. The free listing you get for each product in two consecutive issues of GTM (which also shows up in Diamond’s *Previews* sales document sent to comic stores) is a very effective advertisement, and many would argue that it is a far better sales effort than paid ads. It could be argued that paying for color ad pages is not increasing your sales at all (beyond what the product listing does) but simply shows that you are willing to spend money on advertising. [Moreover, even \\$217 is the profit on selling a five hundred dollars worth of games to wholesalers, and you seriously have to wonder if you are going to sell that much more.](#)

NOTE: [ACD has a similar publication to Game Trade and if you advertise in both, you are probably hitting every store in the USA and most of them twice. Which is not to say that this is a bad thing, or a good thing.](#)

NOTE: [Both ACD and Alliance will let you pay for your ads in product, but since this is just a “deducted from invoice” thing \(no, you don’t get the retail value\) it is really just a cash flow device \(mostly your cash flowing to them\).](#)

**The second most critical advertisement** is a catalog page in *Games Quarterly Catalog*. You get a product listing for free, but less than \$200 a calendar quarter, you get your own whole page with photos and some advertising copy about how cool your game line is. Now, to be sure, *Games Quarterly Catalog* is a phone book, not a novel. Nobody sits down to read it and happens to notice your ad. But when somebody is looking for your products (usually a store owner with a customer standing in front of him, money in hand), that catalog page makes a stronger impression than a simple listing of the product name and stock number (just like a yellow pages display ad a couple of inches tall with a picture will get a lot

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

more response than the free one-line listing of company name and phone number).

**Game Buyer Magazine:** This publication is produced by Aldo Ghiozzi who can be contacted at Impressions Advertising (aldo@impressionsadv.net). (Aldo sold this magazine to another company and I haven't seen a copy since then, so most of this blue text is probably wrong.) You can get Game Buyer sent to you free just for asking him nicely. Impressions is a consolidator (a company that consolidates many small companies so that wholesalers can conveniently order), but Game Buyer is one of the best and strongest "sales effort driven" publications there are. Every manufacturer is welcome to send info on new releases to Aldo, who will print (for free) whichever ones look the most interesting (to Aldo, who is known to be focused more on some kinds of games than others). Make it a point to go to the effort to send Aldo every month, even if he rarely prints it. The data can be used in your web site product page (see way down there in low-cost ideas).

Probably the greatest thing that Aldo and Game Buyer do for the industry is to list in the new product announcements everything that the manufacturer is doing to promote and support his game. Read these notices carefully and figure out how many of them you can do for your products. The more of them you list in your announcement, the more likely Aldo will print it. But remember that *Game Buyer* lists about 14 new products every month, less than 5% of what is actually released by all the manufacturers.

**Is Advertising Worthwhile?** It's hard to say. Certainly, the people who sell advertising say it is. Certainly, the people who continually buy advertising have been convinced that it is.

Other people remain just as convinced that it's pretty much a waste of time and that whatever small increase in new business you get is going to be consumed by the advertising budget.

It's tough to make either case, but the worst evidence is to say something like "that other company runs ads all the time, so we should too" or "the other company never advertises, so we don't need to." Every situation, every company, every product line is different.

### **Building an AD: Get the customer to say "yes!"**

Ads can be in a magazine, a convention flyer, a flyer sent to a retailer, on the back of a product, or elsewhere. The following steps apply to all of these, but are implemented in different ways.

1. Target the market: Know who you are talking to. An ad for a retailer who knows nothing of your products isn't designed (and can't waste space) to convince a player of your other games to follow you into a new branch of your product line. Deliver specific messages to targeted markets; don't cast generic pearls before masses of swine.

2. Attract Attention: You need a punchy headline. A "back

of the product ad" might have a headline that says "Can you succeed where others failed?" A flyer sent to a retailer might say "Make extra profits with Granola Games!"

3. Appeal to the customer's self interest. Convince a retailer he will make more money; convince a gamer he will have more fun.

4. Stress the benefits that make what you are selling not just worth the price, but something they cannot live without.

5. Determine likely objections and address them.

6. Clearly state the next step. Tell a retailer to "Call your wholesaler" and tell a gamer to "buy the game". A convention flyer should say "come to our booth" and give them clear directions of how to find you. Make it easy for the customer to understand and take the next step.

7. Give them a reason to respond NOW instead of later. Right now when you have their attention with the ad is your best shot to get a response. If they don't respond NOW the odds are that they will not respond at all.

8. Prove your case (that the customer must buy the product or take the action you want) in clear, simple, terms. Sure, you have to toot your horn, but you also have to make people believe that your toot is valid.

9. Give them a way to respond; don't make the customer track you down. Give a phone number or Email address or web site. Include a reply card or coupon. Whatever.

10. Make each marketing piece self-contained with company name, contact info, product description, and copy that tells the reader what to do next. And that something to do is BUY THE PRODUCT not "do more research ... sometime".

11. Break down product features into bullet points.

12. Be personal with a friendly "me to you" tone rather than a stiff, formal presentation.

*I am indebted to Frank Fradella for the 12 steps above. He works for a marketing company and says that they appeared in a memo his company sent its employees to help them focus on building more effective advertising.*

### **Building a Retailer Locator File**

Your web site should have a list of the retail stores that carry your products. This might be a simple list in zip code order or it could be a searchable database or it could be one of those maps where you click on a state to get a list of stores in the state.

The reasons for a retailer locator are many. You help players find your products, you encourage stores to carry your products in stock (make it clear that only stores that stock the product on the shelves get put on the list), the stores love it, and it give you a way to contact stores about new releases. One thing. List only brick and mortar stores. Lots of internet stores, many of which undercut your own sales with discounts, will want links from your site or listings on your site. Refuse politely. Internet mail order sales belong to your company

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

(which can give the best service) not to any discount store that wants to mess up the market.

You build this list over time by many methods, and post an updated list on your site every few months. The methods to collect stores include:

1. Have a place (or method) where players can enter the address of their stores. Be sure to tell the players only to enter stores that stock the game on the shelf; any store will special order it for a customer.

2. Any time you meet a retailer (at GTS, at another convention, because you walked into his store during a vacation) get a business card and write on the back "carries" or "doesn't carry". The ones that carry your products get put on the on-line locator. The ones that don't carry your products get a sales call now and then.

### Sales Materials For Retailers

You should try to help retailers sell your products by providing them with sales materials. This can include posters for the wall, signs for the window, self-talkers for the shelves, and sales sheets giving them information to give to consumers.

You can print small signs or self-talkers on the same sheet of cardstock where you are printing a game cover. Talk to your printer and figure out the best way to print two or three game covers on a large sheet of cardstock and fill the rest of the space with small signs, shelf-talkers, [and even bookmarks and play-aide cards for consumers, but that's another matter].

A shelf-talker is a small piece of color-printed cardstock which has a score across the middle where it folds. One side of the fold goes on the shelf under the products; the other side hangs down to provide players with information. This is a sneaky way to get "front view" presentation for products stocked edge-on by stores with limited space or without the wisdom to realize that your products are so cool they should be displayed face out.

You can get your sales materials to the stores in any number of ways:

- A. Mail them to the list of stores that you know carry your games, perhaps as part of an organized league play system.

- B. When you bundle your books in sixes in the shrinkwrap machine, include some fliers and signs and stuff.

- C. Call each wholesaler and ask them if you can send them some signs to be added to any shipments including your product. For that matter, color flyers sent to wholesalers to be randomly included in outgoing packages cost less and accomplish more than full page full color magazine ads (check with the wholesalers, they do this as a favor and don't want a new flyer every week).

- D. Include a small sign in the game with a note on the back "give this to the retailer where you play this game" and by the way encourage them to give you info on the retailer who carries your game.

- E. Pass them out at GTS. At other cons, always have a few pre-packed envelopes marked "retailer" and if somebody at your booth says "yeah, I own a game store" then whip out the envelope and hand it to them.

## 6C: CONVENTIONS & TRADE SHOWS

### The GAMA Trade Show

This is the premier event for the gaming industry, where you get a chance to show off your new products for the year to the retailers. The show is somewhat controversial, in that while "everybody does it" a growing number of smaller companies are starting to ask "why" they should. We will review the show itself, why to go, why not to go, and how else to go. [There is much more about this show in Chapter 2 and some of this is duplication. Sorry about that.](#)

[My good friend Aldo wants the point made that the show is the "GAMA Trade Show" or "GTS"; it is not "GAMA". Nobody "goes to GAMA" \(unless they are driving to the association headquarters for a meeting\). They "go to the GAMA trade show."](#)

The show is in Las Vegas, and you can expect about 450 of the best and brightest of the retailers to be there. Actually, only about 150 of those retailers will even set foot in the aisle you are in. (The rest will just talk to the top half-dozen companies and then go party, but those retailers aren't going to carry your game anyway.) You will have a 10x10 booth where you can sit, stand, set up displays, show your products, pass out catalogs, and talk to Retailers. You are expected to hand out free products (GAMA tells retailers that the free products they get will pay the cost of the trip), but you don't really have to and it's arguable if it does any good. [Many companies resent being blackmailed into doing this. Some give away old dead inventory which is just a way to convince a new retailer that your product isn't going to sell in his store. Some companies given out clearly-labeled "demo copies" but the store will sell them if they don't have game tables or don't want to keep a couple of thousand sample copies under the counter for people to ask to look at.](#) There are lots of seminars at GTS which are very useful to start-up companies (and some of them are useful to industry veterans).

**Why go?** Because even if it is only 150 retailers, you get to talk to 150 retailers, which is a major part of your marketing plan. Because you can talk to your peers and learn new tricks and secrets. Because it forces you to update and reprint your catalog. Because if you don't go, everybody will think you're out of business. Because you might get a chance to talk to your current wholesalers and to pick up new ones.

**Why not go?** It costs a ton of money, takes you out of the office for a week and a half, and you only get to talk to 150 retailers. You aren't going to get much (if any) more business out of it, although you might find a few new stores. (NOTE:

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

Those nice articles in trade journals about how many new customers and how much new business every single booth at GTS got are written by the guys who own the show and are intended to get people to go to the show. Take them with a lot of salt.)

**Alternatives to going?** Small companies can get their consolidators to go for them. The GPA runs a "showcase" booth where your games can be displayed at a cost of under a hundred bucks (including shipping a box of samples and catalogs). This has its drawbacks as nobody in the GPA booth is being paid to sell *your* products; most of them are small companies there to sell *their own* products. Without a salesman standing beside your products, the chances of capturing new markets is about zero. If you have to pay to fly to and stay in Vegas for the show, you almost might as well have a booth of your own; it's not that much more money. You could fly out to Vegas for one day (no hotel costs) and walk around the show and get 90% of the networking you would get by paying for a booth and standing there for three days.

**A tool for effective GTS marketing:** I am indebted to Ed You and Palabra Games for this trick, which is the most effective marketing plan I have seen for use at GTS. Create some pre-printed half-page forms which say:

"Dear [long blank line to insert name of distributor], I just saw this wonderful game, [Insert name of your product], and am interested in carrying it. Please consider adding it to your catalog. Signed [two long blank lines for name of store and buyer.]"

Every time you show your game to a retailer, you try to get them to fill out the form. You can walk the form to the distributor (if he has a booth) or the store can, or you can hand the forms to the distributor when they come around to say hello, or you can mail the forms to the distributors later.

Also keep a list (a separate list for each distributor) of stores which carry or which want to carry your products. The list becomes a summary of the forms and also covers for any lost forms. Obviously, don't do this unless the store agrees.

The golden prize here is to walk up to a distributor who does not stock your products and say (or casually imply) "the following list of your customers want our game and will get it elsewhere if you don't carry it." If you already have that distributor, you may encourage them to stock your line more deeply.

The point is to create your own buzz (about your new products) and then deliver that buzz to the distributors.

### Making a trade show work for you

-- Marcus King, Titan Games

This talk about GTS, and Expo, has gotten me thinking. Wouldn't it be great if everyone in this business treated it LIKE a business? To that end, here is what I, as a retailer, want,

expect, and think I have every right to receive from a publisher at a trade show.

First, the publisher needs to be dressed for business. I realize retailers may dress like -- well, like fanboys. I have tried to get them to change that, but -- herding cats, that's all I can say. If you want ME to treat YOU like a professional, and to take YOU seriously, you need to dress nicely. No T-shirts. Polo shirts are okay, but a buttoned dress shirt says "Professional". See John Zinser if you want to know what a professional dresses like (IMO). At any rate, go to hell t-shirts are not professional dress. Company T-shirts are barely acceptable. And, uh, shorts? Not in my opinion.

Second: Have some preparation work done. Business cards to hand out, flyers in the welcome bags (uh, guys, this is free!!!!!! you just gotta bring them, and show up and put them in). Have MORE flyers on your table for me to pick up. Have "order forms" for me to fill out and hand to my distributor (Thank you Goodman Games). Have a little post card or tri-fold about EACH game you are promoting at the show -- use these to hook me or to give me walk-away information with.

Be ready for common questions. One of the things we do at every con, is have nightly prep meetings, and go over every question we were not ready for, and find the standard answer, and train on it. SOP (standard operating procedure) is important in business. Standard replies or responses to requests and such help a lot. Being ready with those will save time and frustration for everyone.

Knowing how to sell your product is good. But, while some retailers will want to know some information, others will want to know completely different information. Some will want to know price point, play time, replay value, age appropriateness, number of players, and price point. Some will want to know why it is better than X, or what makes it different than Y. And, it does you no good to talk over someone's head. If I don't know what a "German Style" board game is, be ready to explain it to me without making me feel like you think I am a dumbass for the not knowing.

Be ready to sell at any moment. Recognize selling points, and buying signals. If a person asks you a question like "Hey, I like this -- how many come in a case" or "Do you sell this direct?" have the answer and then ask if they are ready to make a purchase. IF they say not yet, or now -- then be ready to go on to the next key point. Look, this ain't Brian surgery (heh) it is selling. I sold insurance door to door for three years and made wonderful money doing it (yeah, with MY personality, can you imagine it?). So, practice your pitch, perfect it -- be ready to close the sale, be ready to hand the form, be ready to hand out a business card, and be ready to take one.

Things that impressed me:

I asked a publisher for a card, their hand went to their back pocket, and I had a card in 2 seconds. No fumbling

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

around, no "let me find one," no bullshit. I asked, they supplied. It is a small thing, but it says "prepared" to me.

Demo Copies out on the table, and publishers ready to talk me through the game -- who get interrupted by me saying "I don't care how it plays, tell me what the MSRP is, who distributes your game, and tell me the name of another game that if someone liked it, they would likely enjoy YOUR game" getting replied to with "The MSRP is \$49.99, we are distributed by Alliance, ACD and Blackhawk. The game is likely to be enjoyed by gamers who enjoy space movies, SciFi books, or other related stuff -- or who like SciFi RPGs". I bought that game, I was sold right there.

Flyers in the bag that had info about them that I found interesting. Crystal Caste has a flyer that talks about how Michael started his company -- I like that flyer. Scott Palter has a flyer for one of his space games that SELLS the product for me (I have mailed out many, and sold many of that game -- both games actually, Attack Vector being the one I sell the most of).

Good Demos with people who are excited about the product. Publishers who hand out a free copy and punch a badge (this is something I first had happen to me at an Alliance Open House by Gary Gygax). Publishers who came up to the GRD skybox, and talked to the retailers -- and took notes. You want to make a friend of a retailer, ask them a question, and take notes when they answer you.

I can come up with more, but am reluctant to keep going. This seems pretty self evident to me, but maybe not to everyone, don't know. Yet, my point will remain -- you get out of a trade show what you put INTO it.

I see companies set up at GENCON with nice booths, smart looking attire, nice flyers, business cards, ready to sell their games one at a time to gamers. I see "some of" the same ones set up at GTS with a booth, a table, a couple items, and a chair -- and making more use of the chair than the table in many cases.

### Distributor Open Houses

These are very much like GTS, but run by distributors. (Alliance runs two of them and other distributors also run them.) You pay money for a booth, travel, hotel, and meals, and in exchange you get to talk to a couple of hundred retailers who might give you some ideas or maybe even some orders.

Like GTS, it's hard to say that these are actually going to produce results equal to their costs, but then again, one good idea from a retailer can make enough profit to cover the show. Like GTS (even more so) it's a chance to use a herd of retailers as a sounding board for new ideas, trial balloons, or half-baked schemes that you want to run up the flagpole. If you are close enough to drive (even better, close enough to sleep at home) by all means go once and judge the results for yourself. Another option is to get somebody else who is going

to show off some of your products.

### Going to Trade Shows

As shocking as it is to consider, the adventure game industry did not invent trade shows, and you don't have to invent ways to go to trade shows. No end of business supply catalogs have no end of trade show equipment (much of it built in ways it will pack into airline-acceptable "luggage") which you could consider. Consider Beacon SKB Cases (or other types of "roadie" cases) which (while expensive, over \$300 per case for the biggest ones) have a lifetime guarantee and can be checked as luggage. They also have wheels and you can roll them from the baggage claim to the taxi and then into the show.

The fly-or-drive question is central to your planning. Driving will probably take longer (two days from Texas to Origins or GenCon, three days or more from California or New York) but you can take stuff with you in the car, and will have a car to drive around in once you get there. Also, you can easily pay the Origins or GTS exhibition company \$700 to move a pallet of your product and display stuff from the back truck loading dock to your booth. (Before deciding if you will fly or drive, consider all of the costs involved.)

One note on booth design. Pull your tables back three feet inside your booth so that the person who stops to talk to you is not being jostled by the crowd moving down the aisles.

## 6D: Guerrilla Marketing

Here are some ideas for low-cost or zero-cost advertising, marketing, and publicity for your products. These are in no particular order, and they come from many sources. Some are cheaper or easier than others, some work better than others, and there is no particular correlation between cost and result for any of them.

Some will work for you, some will work for others, some will work for everyone, and perhaps the next market shift will mean that some don't work for anybody any more.

### Zero Cost Ideas

**Cross-Overs:** You might want to "swap ads" in your products with other game companies that make similar, or entirely different, products. You could do crossover products, or simply crossover scenarios. Say you do a D20 RPG adventure product and have a particular place for a monster. Listing six monsters, each published by another game company, with instructions on how to get that company's product, would cost you pretty much nothing. And if those six companies each did the same for you (and each other) everybody would get a little extra business.

**Self-Advertising:** Include advertising for your games in your other games. Use blank pages and empty spots in each

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

game to tell people about your other games. This can go farther, and is known as the David Crump Integrated Marketing Concept. Every product must make the gamers wish they had already bought every other product you do. This could mean a rule in one dungeon adventure book to use a monster out of one of your other books (with a note that if they don't have that book they can substitute one of several other monsters, all but one of which are in other books). Your RPGs need to sell your board games, your board games need to sell your miniatures, and your miniatures need to sell your RPGs, and everything needs to sell everything else.

**The Web Crawl:** Establish a list of web sites, news groups, chat rooms, and bulletin boards about games of the type you sell. Go through this list every day (or every few days) to chat up your products.

**Free Publicity:** Some publications exist which will provide free publicity for your games if you send them a nice press release and some usable art (such as a game cover). A list of these sources is in Chapter 9 Annexes.

**Your Loyal Fans:** Ask them (through your web site or in your products) to encourage their stores to carry your products. Get your loyal fans to send you the name and address of any store that carries your games and post these on your web sites.

**Your Internet Newsletter:** Every company should have one. Your web site should have a way to subscribe and to cancel their subscription; you don't want to be a spammer. (I have no clue how to do this but I know how to hire a web design company to do it for me.) Your newsletter should be free, colorful, fun to read, and include at least some cool new stuff. This could be previews of new products, rules fixes for old products, announcements of organized play stores and results, announcements of convention events, and even fan submissions. LOTS of links to files on your web site should also be included.

**Facebook:** I am not sufficiently computer-literate to explain to you how to use these, but one of my employees set one up for us, and it brought in a whole new world of customers we had never seen before. My employ really understood the social networking thing (I do not) and goes to our page on Facebook (they don't want you saying "our facebook page") every day and does *something* that keeps the pot boiling. This worked for us when she needed an expert in a certain RPG system to check something. She posted a note on Facebook and had an expert review of the rule item in question within hours.

### Low Cost Ideas

**Game Reviewers:** There are a lot of these (see the annex) although an annoying percentage are in England (note expensive airmail shipping). A couple of hundred bucks in postage and product costs will get you the best advertising

money can buy, positive game reviews. Of course, if the reviewers tell everyone that your products are junk, you will get what you deserve for publishing junk. **The big problem here is that reviewers may not ever get around to reviewing your game, and you need to keep track of the reviews you are waiting for. Send gentle polite reminders to get the review done, and don't keep sending free games to somebody who never does a review.**

**Local Conventions:** If there is a convention within driving range, go there. Run a tournament, give a seminar, have a sales booth, play in other games, do demos of your game, and most of all get gamers and retailers to talk to you and share their insights into the market and into your products.

Another good thing here is to find people (usually the owners of small game companies) who are always going to conventions in their areas and make a deal with them. You ship them a box of your games which they carry to a convention. If they sell anything (and they usually do), they send you 50% of the price. While this makes a few bucks (imagine five such people each sending you \$50 a month for no real effort on your part) the real point is to "show your flag" at game conventions (where most of your best customers are).

**Convention Program Books:** There are a lot of local conventions in the US every year, and most of them will trade you advertising space for some products. (Some expect cash only and you can ignore those or pay the money, your choice.) You can use up your unsold print runs of previous products this way, and the advertising in the program book means that GAMERS will see your ads. There are few places where 100% of the eyeballs are gamers, and this is one of them. One note, some conventions will offer to trade you a flyer handed to every gamer for product (or money). This is not a productive system as such fliers get tossed right away while the program book is carried around for days. Expensive ads in the Origins and GenCon books are just that — expensive ads. If they work for you, find the money. If they don't work for you, be brave and refuse to spend the money. Just don't spend a ton of money because "everybody else is doing it" since most of them are *not* doing it.

**GAMA Retailer List:** The Game Manufacturers Association has a list of retailers available to any member. Join GAMA, get the list, and use it to mail a postcard to 100 hobby stores asking them to carry your products. You could even take the bold step of telephoning stores to tell them about your products. (Note: This task *must absolutely* be performed by someone who *likes* making sales calls. If the retailer can tell in your voice that you really don't want to be on the phone with him, he will not buy your games.) If you get a few hits out of the 100 stores, try another 100. For that matter, you can find lists of retailers on the web sites of many adventure game manufacturers and quietly copy them for this use. Be sure to return the favor by having a list of retail stores that carry your

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

products on your web site. This benefits your customers, the stores, your peers in the industry, and ultimately you.

**Cable TV Bulletin Board:** Most local cable systems have a channel dedicated to the “community bulletin board”. This is that screen with lots of text on it and messages about lost dogs, church bake sales, the ASPCA wanting somebody to donate a computer to them, and so forth. Most of the ads are for non-profit organizations and they get them free, but they do sell paid advertising on these channels. What you can do is partner with a local store (or a store in another city within driving range). Your game company pays for the ads for a couple of weeks announcing a special “game demonstration day” in the store where “company reps” (that’s you) will show off new games. Sounds “special” and might attract a crowd.

**In-Store Demo Day:** Make a deal with a store (either in your home town, or someplace you can get to in a couple of hours, or some town you’ll be passing through on the way to some other convention). The general idea is you show up with a case of your product, they sell them and pay you the wholesale rate for whatever they sell (and maybe a couple of extra copies if they think your product will move). You spend the day in their gaming area doing demos of your game, answering questions, maybe even looking over game designs that local would-be designers bring in, and generally just schmoozing. Promote this with signs in the store, cable-television bulletin board ads, newspaper ads, and so forth. The good thing is that anybody who picks up your game then knows others in their town who also picked up the same game, allowing you to “build a community” of your loyal customers who will keep the store happy. Be sure to take photos for your web site and encourage loyal customers to hold their own “store demos days” which you won’t be able to attend (too far away) but will support with signs and prizes and other stuff (including photos on the web site).

**Web-Site Banners:** If there is a web site for your kind of game, consider buying ad banners on it. These can be quite inexpensive (\$20 to \$50 a month). Some possible locations include:

For Collectible Card Games:

[www.essentialmagic.com](http://www.essentialmagic.com)

For Board Games:

[www.boardgamegeek.com](http://www.boardgamegeek.com)

For Science Fiction:

[www.star-ranger.com](http://www.star-ranger.com)

For Miniatures:

[www.theminiaturespage.com](http://www.theminiaturespage.com)

[www.realmworx.com](http://www.realmworx.com)

[www.tabletopgamingnews.com](http://www.tabletopgamingnews.com)

For RPGs

[www.rpg.net](http://www.rpg.net)

[www.gamewyrd.com](http://www.gamewyrd.com)

[www.gamingreport.com](http://www.gamingreport.com)

[www.enword.com](http://www.enword.com)

For Any Games:

[www.polymancerstudios.com](http://www.polymancerstudios.com)

**Want-Ad Newspapers:** Everybody has seen these, and every city of any size has one. There are stacks of them by the doors of a lot of restaurants. It’s a little miniature newspaper composed entirely of want-ads. You can buy a want ad for maybe \$25-\$75 in some distant city, leading customers to a web site with more information. Advertising a generic RPG book might work (there are a lot of role players out there and some of them read these things). Advertising a licensed product such as Star Wars or Serenity or Babylon 5 would probably have a better success rate, although if your game is a very complicated one that non-gamers could never figure out, you’re wasting your time.

**School Newspapers:** In theory, advertising in high school and college newspapers might find you some gamers who could become customers. This would work much better if you partner with a local retailer or game club (or game club who plays at a retailer). Pick out a store that you know has on-site gaming and who carries your games. (You met a hundred stores at GTS, and this was one of the things you collected business cards for.) Offer to pay for an ad in the school paper promoting a game event at the store if the store will host the game event and feature your games prominently.

**Google Pay-Per-Click:** Basically you pick a keyword, say “Millennium Falcon”, and you pay Google so much (from a few pennies to a few dollars) to give anybody entering that keyword a ten-word ad leading to your web site. (The more you are willing to pay, the higher you are on the list. Bid enough to get to the top and, if that is too much, bid just enough to get on the first screen.) You can set with Google just how many dollars you will pay per day for these “sales leads” so you control the cost. Warning: If your web site is not “world class” then you are wasting a lot of money paying for people to come by and get “unimpressed” with your graphics and content and products. **WARNING: Google has a thing called “content targeting” which means they charge you four times as much for no more results by sending your ads to people who would never buy your products. They do not explain this or warn you about it. You have to really dig into their documentation to find where it is mentioned, and while there is a check-block to turn it off, you have to really hunt to find that too.**

**Sales Flyers:** Prepare a colorful sales flyer showing the cover (and components) of your new game, along with sales points (why will this thing sell to customers who already frequent the store?) and print a few thousand. Give them to wholesalers and ask them to include them in shipments to retailers. **WARNING: Don’t surprise your wholesaler. Mail him a flyer and ask him how many he wants. There are horror stories of wholesalers feeding these fliers into shredders to create cheap packing material. Those are the fliers that arrived as a surprise (or which, on arrival, proved to be seriously flawed such as just plain ugly or just plain lying about the**

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

product).

**WEB PAGE:** Every new product should have a page on your web site giving players the information they need to decide if they're going to buy that product. These pages should be linked to from the main page (where the covers of the most recent product are displayed), the product line page, the catalog page, your press releases, the data you post on consumer web sites, and the shopping cart page. This page should include the following:

- Photo of cover.
- Photo of product with all contents laid out.
- Close up photos of key components (one of each type)
- Link to shopping cart page for that item.
- Exciting text (about how much fun you're going to have when you buy this product).
- The dry information like a list of components, retail price, stock number, release date, updates.
- How it relates to other products. (e.g., "The polar bear cards in this product match the polar bear miniatures in Polar Bear Box #2.")

While this sounds like gratuitous self-promotion, it is a powerful sales tool allowing people to see what they get, and allowing friends to easily show others (by just sending them the link) why they should consider the product. Make it easy for your friends to help you, and for your customers to see how good a deal you're offering them.

This also (Marcus King of Titan Games advises me) allows retailers to provide their own customers with better information about your products.

**On-line stores:** You of course have your own on-line shopping cart, but you can also set up a store on Amazon and Ebay which puts your products in front of new markets.

**GAMA and Toy Fair:** New York Toy Fair is held every year in February and decides what your children will get for the next Christmas. While 20,000 buyers for toy stores show up at this event, only 500 or so would even consider buying games. Even so, GAMA (bless them!) buys a booth and members can send them a box of 500 fliers which they will pass out to anyone who doesn't look disgusted at the sound of the word "game". This will cost you less than \$50 for black and white fliers and less than \$300 for color fliers (plus shipping to Columbus, Ohio), so you might as well take a shot!

### Other Ideas

**On-Hold Messages:** Distributor salesmen simply don't have time to mention your game to retailer buyers. However, Alliance does have (for a couple of hundred dollars per quarter) a way you can buy a 30-second spot advertising your games which is played in rotation to retailers who are "on hold" waiting for their buyers. While it's kind of hit and miss (few retailers are on hold long enough to hear all of the messages) it is the cheapest way to get Alliance to hawk your wares.

**Distant Conventions:** Unless you just really like driving or have some other reason to go, spending money on two tanks of gas and two nights in a hotel is probably not going to be a worthwhile expense to have a booth at a local (just not local to you) convention. Better to cut a deal with somebody who takes the products of a half-dozen companies to a convention.

**Haunted Houses:** My good friend Mark Simmons reported that he was able to sell RPG books by paying "haunted houses" (which spring up in every town around Halloween) to pass out fliers.

**In-Store Organized Play:** This is hard for a small company to pull off because of the manpower and logistics required (and just getting stores to agree). You might make it work with a fanatically loyal fan base that will sign up stores for you (so you don't have to track them down yourself).

The general idea is to get your game played on a regular basis in as many stores as possible.

You get the stores to sign up (or get players to sign up their stores) through a sign-up form (script) on your web site. Ask for store name, address, phone number, and web site, what date and time the game will be played, and who is the contact person (a store employee or a manager).

You either get players to notice that a store near them is listed or you get players to go list a store. To get players to notice, you need to make the list accessible and advertise it. You need to include new listings and a rotating selection of "featured" listings in your newsletter and web site.

To get stores to agree, you offer them something, sometimes posters or signs or stuff and sometimes free product. To get players to sign up, you make certain prizes (pins, special cards, pieces of upcoming expansions) available.

There is a lot to this and I'm no expert. (I have been doing it about three weeks as of May 06.) Doubtless, somebody who knows a lot more than I do will come up with better information a future edition of this book.

**Incremental Sales:** You sold the gamer a game, now keep selling ad-ons. Miniatures, magazines, tactics guides, play aides, all mean extra profit. If you have your shopping cart done by a professional it can include things like "You just ordered Arctic Madness; 97% of customers who order that order the Arctic Wildlife Expansion within 90 days. Would you like to add it to your order?"

**Free Copies for Sales Reps:** Ali the Game Babe says you might try sending every Sales Rep (the salesmen who work for wholesalers and contact stores) a free copy of your game. This might or might not inspire them to mention your game to retailers who call in their regular orders. Of course, if your game is a piece of crap, you might not want anybody to know this. Key point, however, is that if you do this, don't just do it as a surprise. Contact the wholesaler, ask them nicely if they would allow you to do this, find out how many copies they need and where to ship them to, and mark the box to the

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

attention of some specific person who agreed to take charge of it and pass out the games. Now, sales reps will eventually give the games away, throw them away, or take them home and play them, but the point is to make them familiar with the game at all levels (play value, packaging, and so forth).

**Commission Sales:** Aldo and Steve Cole once hit upon the idea in an Email chat group that somebody, somewhere, could be paid a commission to just sit by a phone, call retailers, and convince them to pick up a new product line. This could have challenges (verifying that the store did order the line and did not previously carry it) but might work. The problem is, nobody wants the job.

### 6E: Things Not Worth Doing

Some types of ads work for some types of companies. Here are a few that won't work for you.

**Yellow pages** advertising. There won't be any local wholesalers (if there is one, you can just walk in his door) and few local stores (and you can go visit them personally). Note particularly a common scam. You receive a bill for your yellow pages ad and don't read the fine print. You write the check and mail it back. Congratulations, you just got scammed into buying a yellow pages ad for some city in some other state.

**Television and Radio:** Generally speaking, these aren't worth doing because the general public doesn't have enough gamers in it. Such ads are expensive, ephemeral (once an ad is shown it will have no further effect unless you pay to run it again), and you're paying to reach a huge audience of which only a tiny few are interested in gaming. One possible exception (check local sources) is ads on local stations with reruns of something related to your product. For example, if you are selling Babylon-5 games and some local station is running B5 reruns on Saturday afternoon, look into buying ads. You might get a cheaper rate on the last ad before the licensed show comes on, and the fans of that show (at least those without Tivo) may tune in early and see your ad. Just don't sign up for a huge contract until you find out if it works.

**General Magazines:** Full page ads in nationally syndicated general interest magazines such as *Newsweek*. There is a legend of a company that did this back about 1975 and got zero responses after paying more money than the rest of the industry combined paid for advertising that year. Rick Loomis has a standing offer to personally talk anybody considering this idea out of this idea.

**Sock puppeting:** Create a phony persona and go around web sites extolling the virtues of your products. Eventually, somebody will figure out who you are and the backlash will be devastating. Same goes for creating a phony game review web site and making sure your games get the top rankings. Another really dumb idea is to pay loyal fans to say nice (but untrue) things about you on other web sites. You'll get caught and it

will hurt, even if what they're saying *is* true.

**School Sports:** The local schools and colleges will call you trying to sell advertising in their sports programs or sports stadiums. There are very few gamers in the general public so such general advertising usually fails. Even worse, people who are actually interested in high school sports aren't gamers. Now, one thing you MIGHT consider is ads for games in high school and college newspapers.

**Sponsored Public Service Announcements:** You will, once or twice a year, get a call from each local radio station. They're calling every business in the phonebook, one after another, but the salesman will make it sound like they are only calling you with a plan that is just right for your company. The pitch is that they're going to run a "Public Service Announcement" about something (missing and exploited children, drug awareness, spouse abuse, diabetes, whatever) and want you to pay for the air time (usually at a slightly lower rate than you would pay for outright advertising). *Never do this.* Just tell them "We don't sponsor PSAs. Do not call us again about this," and hang up. Now, what's so wrong about such sponsored PSAs?

First, you should have an ad budget and unless it includes an unspent reserve you are willing to use for this, you don't have the money anyway.

Second, local radio advertising is not a productive use of your time. Only about one percent of the general population is interested in games of the kind you (and the present author) sell, and you're paying the same ad rates to reach them that people with much broader interest products pay. Most of the advertising benefit will be wasted and you aren't really trying to find customers who will walk into your office to buy games anyway.

Third, the whole "sponsored" thing is a scam that most radio stations do, and apparently they get enough business that they keep trying to do it. If they want to run a public service announcement that *really is a public service announcement*, they can do it without a sponsor. The whole "sponsored public service" scam is a way to get companies that don't normally do radio advertising to pay for advertising.

Finally, if your company really wants to donate to such worthy causes, *then donate to the worthy causes*, not to the *profit margin* of the local radio station! Ask the worthy causes if they would rather have the cash or have you pay to sponsor radio ads and see what they say. By the way, your company should give a few hundred dollars to some charity every year just for good Karma.

**Toy Directory Dot Com:** These people will call you every year or two, wanting you to pay a few hundred dollars to be listed on their web site where (according to them, anyway) tens of thousands of retailers look for new products. Ask other game companies on the GPA or other lists before you pay them money. I did, and was told by other companies that they

## RUNNING A GAME PUBLISHING COMPANY

have gotten no sales, but lots of requests for donations to charity, and lots of solicitations from printers and parts makers, and would pay to be left out but would not pay to be included. You will also get Emails from them now and then offering free listings of your latest products. What the heck, it's free, but other companies have told me that they got zero sales inquiries and lots of request to donate cases of games to charities. I got another call from them on 25 May 07 saying they would send me a media kit.

**Consultants:** I have had several game industry friends of mine call up. They're out of work for some reason (the company they worked for laid them off or went broke, or they used to work for GAMA and got pushed out in the latest power play). They've decided to stay in the game industry by becoming a consultant, and charging me thousands of dollars to show me how to run my company better. Frankly, I know more about this industry than any of them and I do consulting for other companies all the time (and I do it for free). Even so, if you're really new in the business and you have read my entire book, you might consider spending a couple of hundred dollars with one of these guys looking for pointers, but don't sign up to spend thousands of dollars without any idea what they can or cannot do.

### Scam Marketing Companies

If you are in business long enough, you will hear from several of these. For a fee (usually several hundred dollars) they will hook you up with lots of buyers for lots of stores. In this day of internet search engines, it's easy for them to find you and (in 60 seconds) have a robot pull enough information from your web site and insert it into a form letter to make you think that a human being actually studied your product line for entire days before decided to pitch their service to you.

Whenever you get such a solicitation, ask yourself if their deal is too good to be true. Do a Google search of their company name and see if some blog or BBS somewhere has a conversation going about them. (Odds are, there will be several.) Ask other people in GAMA and the GPA and other industry lists what they know, but don't necessarily take the word of those who say "they smelled funny so I never contacted them" and look for somebody who actually used their service. If nobody has, do you really want to be first?

What most of these scammers do is truly a good faith effort to find you new business; *they just know in advance that they will fail* (and they don't care). They will list you on their web site, or mail your advertising to thousands of people, or Email it to millions of people. Who knows, it might work. But they already know that their system rarely if ever works.

You can try offering a counter-deal to these people based on guaranteed performance, but they aren't going to take it (and if they do, it will be hard to get the guaranteed refund). One such scammer said "For \$1,000 I will mail your advertising

to 25,000 potential customers. If you don't get 100 responses, then I will mail the same ad to another 25,000 potential customers for half price." Somehow, even at half price, repeating something that had already failed seemed a waste of time to me. I offered them commission deals, so much per sale, but they said (correctly) that this would require a lot of administration and paperwork. They also knew (and figured out that I knew) that they were not going to get enough responses to be worth their expenses.

Please do not post this document on a web site or pass it around. Anybody who wants a copy can ask or download a free PDF. That's not because I want to be a control freak but because I do update individual chapters whenever I think of something to add and would just as soon there be one place for the most recent copy.