

Interview

A New Leaf for Publishing

Saj-nicole A. Joni 08.01.07, 4:15 PM ET

In an increasingly digital society that seems to read less and less, HarperCollins CEO Jane Friedman believes the publishing business is in great shape.



While the overall health of the industry might be debatable, Friedman's success is not. During her 10-year tenure, HarperCollins' annual revenues have increased from \$737 million to more than \$1.3 billion. With greater expansion into online sales, digital warehousing and large-print editions, the company appears well-positioned for the future.

Jane Friedman believes that books have a profound influence on societies and lives. In recent years few have equaled her contribution to, and influence on, the publishing industry. Known as a visionary with unstoppable energy, she's pointing the way to making one of our oldest industries relevant in very modern terms--in times where centuries-old tradition is threatened by an online, downloadable, wired world.

SNJ: When you look out into the future of publishing, what do you see?



JF: I think the book business is the healthiest I have seen it in a very long time. We are seeing a breadth of titles selling in many different channels of distribution. We are no longer publishing for the independents only, the chains only, the big box merchandisers only, the online sellers only. We are selling across the board. The health is the breadth, diversity and range. That's good for business, and more importantly, it's good for society.

The hunger for books grows out of desire that is deeply human: to inform, to educate, to entertain, to feel, to connect--to share story and to learn from each other. Yet publishing has struggled in recent years. What's underneath your vision and

ability to turn this around?

First and foremost, I'm a publishing CEO--one of very few who have come up through publishing. I try to recognize the importance of every single book. The author is most important; and before the author comes the editor. So we do everything we can on the editorial side and that brings us the right authors.

The whole point is getting the words of the author to the consumer, where the consumer wants it, when the consumer wants it and on whatever vehicle the consumer wants to consume it. Since we understand and embrace this premise, I am very positive about the digital world, e-books, downloadable audio, larger print books, trade paperback editions and overseas expansion, covering both English and other languages.

What's at the root of your leadership; what made you able to create and sustain breakthroughs as you rose?

I have never had a plan. I have an innate and insatiable curiosity--I'm always curious about what we can do next. You take experience and capitalize on it, but you have to let go and move on because you have to give 100% of your attention to what you are doing at that moment.

The other aspect is that I'm ever-present. I participate in almost every industry event. I make every effort to attend every HC author event even if it's for five minutes. The authors love it, and it feels right to me. If an author can spend years on their work, I can certainly hop into the car and go from place to place. On average, I do about

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three or four events a night. I'm very involved with everything that has to do with the industry and as well as sit on boards such as Poets & Writers and Literacy Partners. There is no substitute for being fully immersed--because to innovate and take risks, you have to know what's happening. I balance unfettered curiosity with unfiltered doses of reality--and it also help to know everyone.

Leaders often raise the bar on innovation and risk by getting out in front of the action with some highly visible, unexpected and memorable decisions.

That's so very important. For example, we printed 400,000 copies of *The Making of the Titanic*. The movie was coming out at that time. HarperCollins was very busy supply chaining everything--strangling everything--because it had been bleeding money. There was a highly committed woman in charge of supply chain. She came to me and said "we have some very good vibes about the movie" and added, "We are going to print 40,000 copies." And I said, "No, we are going to print 400,000," and she turned absolutely pale, did not know where to run and report on me. And we subsequently sold a million copies of a \$20 book.

You've often said, "I'm a leader first, and then I just happen to be a woman." What does that mean to you?

Right. Fundamentally, my important leadership traits are gender-blind. There is a part of my insight and innovation that feels innate. I look at things and often, it is just clear to me. For example, early on, I saw the author tour, and I just knew it would work. I saw audio books; I have great instinct for what titles will go big. My recent obsession is larger print.

And being a woman is an afterthought?

I am proudly a woman and proudly a working Mom. I am a touching, feeling person. I nurture talented men and women; I understand life situations that go beyond work. I don't think I'm superwoman and I know I cannot do everything.

You are leading the way in embracing the old and the new, and getting it all to work. How?

I'm very open and very available. I'm pretty opinionated, but I also will listen to others. And I like taking risks. I don't demand of anybody more than I demand of myself and everybody is aware of that. I encourage people to stretch, to reach. I do not like a company that feels like it is a prison in any way.

What's next?

For me, the starting point for leadership is that I completely love what I do. I have this passion, and it has sustained and grown for 40 years. Working for a publishing company is the best job in the entire world because I get to know a little about everything, and because I am blessed to be working with people who are so much smarter than I am in their fields. I have learned so much from them--that's what keeps me going; there is the next thing to learn.

Saj-nicole Joni is CEO of Cambridge International Group.