

# Mastering the Indirect Sell in E-Books



*BY CARL FRIESEN, MBA, CMC*

Nearly 10 years ago, when I published a book through the print-on-demand publishing service Xlibris, the book was made available in 3 versions: hard cover, soft cover, and most intriguingly “e.” “E” for electronic, and it was a PDF of the book pages, which could be downloaded to a computer.

This was well before the days of iPads, Kindles, Nooks, and other e-readers. It was also well before the news broke that Amazon’s e-book sales had exceeded its hardcover sales.

Suddenly, e-books are hot.

So, I decided to dig into the question of whether and how e-books can be used to help A/E/C firms connect with their prospects and clients.

It seems that we're talking about three uses of the term *e-book*.

- 1. Print gone electronic:** This is the kind of e-book Xlibris and other publishers produced over the past decade—just the text of the book, displayed in pixels. It's been updated to display on dedicated e-readers such as the Nook and Kindle but is still basically just the text, ma'am. I'm slowly chewing my way through *The Black Swan* downloaded from iTunes to my iPhone, one tiny screen at a time—an example of this approach.
- 2. Print with “stuff” added:** Publishers are salivating over the idea of e-books of the type above but with added extras (for which they can charge more): video interviews with the author, the chance to have one's comments relayed to other people reading the book, interactive graphics, and other “stuff.” A friend recently showed me a children's book on her iPhone, a mystery story in which the reader (user?) could click on a map or other images to uncover clues about the story. It was a video game crossed with campfire storytime. Grown-up examples can be found at [www.vooks.com](http://www.vooks.com) (video + books) in which videos are combined with text.
- 3. (Short) text, pictures, maybe some “stuff”:** Like a novella compared to a novel, this type of e-book is a short, focused look at a subject. Typically fewer than 40 pages or screens, it may be mostly text but is generally well illustrated and attractively produced. Some of these books have links to other content, but from what I've seen, most are just a PDF.

This third definition of e-book seems to be most relevant for content marketing purposes, and specifically for promoting the abilities of A/E/C firms. But it's important to note that these e-books are not a sales brochure. They aren't a catalog of services. They don't “sell” at all—in a direct way, that is. They demand the mastery of indirect selling.

## What's new about e-books?

An e-book is much like a technical or scientific paper, or a white paper, in that it provides useful information. But it's written not in the tone of “here's what we think” or “here's what we've learned” but rather, “Here's a solution to a problem you may be facing.” It's readable and visually appealing with good imagery to back up the words, not dense pages of text with a few charts.

One of the best examples of an e-book is *The e-book e-book*, by Jonathan Kranz, a leading guru on all things e-book. His Web site, [www.kranzcom.com](http://www.kranzcom.com), is a great place to start learning about e-books and what they can do for your firm.

In an interview, Kranz said that an e-book can be a good marketing strategy for any entity that distinguishes itself largely on the basis of its intellectual abilities and know-how.

That describes many A/E/C firms. If yours is an omnivorous firm that will make an attempt at any kind of business—the firm that can't say no—I don't think it's as useful. But if your firm wants to be known for a niche such as assisted-living housing, historic building restoration, or deep geothermal energy, an e-book is your chance to demonstrate your firm's understanding of that niche.

“Good social media skills, SEO strategy, and obtaining buy-in from your firm are important to getting the most from your e-book.”

For example, one of the issues with deep geothermal is environmental permitting, particularly around the potential for near-surface groundwater contamination. If your firm has learned something about how to manage that, it's good content for your e-book. Pipeline and valve clogging is also an issue because of dissolved salts and minerals in the deep underground water. So, if you want to be known for deep geothermal expertise, consider an e-book, *Overcoming the 10 Most Common Challenges in Deep Geothermal Projects*. If you were a property owner wanting to build green, wouldn't that title spark your interest?

Kranz says that your subject must focus on an area of pressing need for your readers (read: market). It's good business sense anyway, I think, because naturally your firm should be trying to find the intersection of what it has to offer and what its market wants. So, like any aspect of content marketing, e-books are an opportunity for marketing people to push their client-side professionals into thinking in depth about what motivates their clients to buy. Personally, I think that is one of their biggest benefits, just like writing articles and writing speeches.

Kranz says that one of the biggest challenges in producing e-books is internal. Many senior leaders don't like that it doesn't “sell.” “You don't even talk about our wide range of services,” they say and sometimes will push to turn the e-book into a sales brochure. So, be sure to get their understanding up front that, if it sounds like a sales pitch, it will get ignored and the money and effort of producing the e-book will go to waste.

Speaking of money, e-books of the type I describe are generally downloadable at no charge and can be freely passed along. Charging for the information may make people value it more—but at a drastic cost in the number of people who are reached by it.

## Platforms and distribution

My colleague Jennifer Tribe, partner in Highspot ([www.highspotinc.com](http://www.highspotinc.com)), who has expertise in supporting content marketing through books and other means, says that there are still challenges around for which format to design. The big names like Kindle, iPad, Amazon, and others all have their own formats, but there are services such as Smashwords ([www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com)) that help you set up the book to meet the needs of different e-readers. These services are largely set up for people who want to sell their books.

But for an informative, indirect-sell e-book of the type I'm describing, PDF seems to be the way to go—it's a universal format, most people already have the reader downloaded to their computer, and it's easy to send through an e-mail or post on your Web site.

Tribe recommends finding a designer who has experience in producing content that displays your information well. Services such as elance ([www.elance.com](http://www.elance.com)) can help you find someone with experience, who fits your budget.

One of the debates is whether the e-book should be just a stand-alone document or if there is benefit to including links to other content such as videos, podcasts, slide shows, white papers, and the like. Some books, like the children's book I mentioned earlier, have interactive graphics.

## "E-books are hot."

I put this question out on a few LinkedIn groups, including SMPS, and responses were mixed. Generally, the consensus is that, if the extras are worth the effort and expense, include them—if not, don't. If you do insert links to a Web site, make sure that "link rot" doesn't degrade the book's value, so maybe put all the content linked to your e-book into a separate part of your firm's site, where items won't get moved around.

Several people I spoke with about e-books pointed out that it does no good to prepare your e-book without having a good distribution plan for it. Good social media skills, SEO strategy, and obtaining buy-in from members of your firm are important aspects to getting the most from your e-book. **■**

## About the Author



**Contributing Editor Carl Friesen, MBA, CMC—**whose last article on "Visualizing the Future" was published in the December 2010 issue—is principal of Global Reach Communications, which helps business professionals demonstrate their expertise through publishing articles in magazines and authoring books. He is based in Mississauga, Ontario, and can be reached at 289.232.4057 or [cfriesen@rogers.com](mailto:cfriesen@rogers.com) or [carl@showyourexpertise.com](mailto:carl@showyourexpertise.com).