
This year's fast-growing indie presses used different formulas to achieve success

by Jim Milliot and Clare Swanson | Mar 06, 2015

The fastest-growing publisher on PW's list this year is Callisto Media, which was cofounded in 2011 by Benjamin Wayne, president and CEO, and Matt Oesterle, v-p of product, and had its first full year of operation in 2012. Comparing 2014 to 2012, revenue soared 833%, and the number of employees rose from six to 24 last year. The number of "title completions," after jumping from 17 in 2012 to 90 in 2013, declined to 56 last year; according to Karen Hartwig, v-p, commercialization, this was because Callisto focused on long-format titles last year, after doing a mix of long-form and short-form titles in 2013.

Prior to forming Callisto Media, Wayne was president and CEO of a number of digital media startup companies, and Oesterle was the CEO of Offertarget, a provider of lead-generation software for Internet retailers.

Using their background, the two men create proprietary algorithms to mine Big Data for topics of consumer interest. Callisto then hires authors to write specific titles based on these algorithms, making individual financial arrangements with authors based on background and expertise. Major subject areas for Callisto include cookbooks, health/fitness/dieting, self-help, business, and crafts/hobbies/home, and the company releases titles under a number of different imprints. Its top-selling titles include Paleo for Every Day, Mindfulness Made Simple, and Memory Tips & Tricks.
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titles are available in print and digital formats, with some in audio, and are
distributed by Ingram Publisher Services Turner Publishing’s 186% sales
gain in 2014, over 2012, has been aided by acquisitions, which has helped
raise its title count significantly and kept staffing levels even. Todd Bottorff,
president and publisher, also points to the company’s higher profile, which
has helped boost sales of its frontlist titles. The company’s biggest books
last year were Baseball Prospectus 2014 and Gluten Freedom, by Alessio Fasano. The acquisitions have also
diversified the Turner list, which now stands at more than 3,000 titles and includes such genres as historical
romance, inspirational, thriller, and fitness. Bottorff has upped Turner’s direct marketing efforts, relaunching the
company’s website. The new site features links to a number of retailers where Turner titles can be bought. Bottorff
believes the investment he has made in raising Turner’s visibility with accounts will yield more dividends for the
company’s frontlist this year. Among the titles he has high hopes for are Peter Kieman’s American Mojo, a global
view on the revitalization of the American middle class; the fully illustrated children’s book Leopold, written by Ruth
Westheimer and Pierre Lehui and illustrated by Suzanne Beaky; and Pat Croce and Adam Slutsky’s debut YA
historical pirate series, Plunder (book one is self-titled).

BenBella Books posted a huge sales increase between 2012 and 2013 and held on to most of those gains in
2014, giving the publisher a 54% jump in revenue in 2014, compared to 2012. Publisher Glenn Yeffeth reports that
BenBella did particularly well last year with health, science, true crime, and business books. BenBella released one of its all-time hardcover top sellers, Whole, in paperback, and it sold “very well,” Yeffeth says. The company
also had good sales of a true-crime book in both digital and print formats: BenBella released an e-book edition,
The Savage Murder of Skylar Neese—a book about the killing of a teenager written with the cooperation of her
parents—shortly after the tragedy; five months later it brought out an expanded version of the book in print, titled
Pretty Little Killers. In general, Yeffeth says e-book sales represent about 25% of the company’s total sales,
although for books with lots of media exposure e-book sales can run as high as 50% of revenue. To augment
sales through the traditional channels, BenBella has had some success selling books directly to consumers for
authors that have a significant platform.

Among the books Yeffeth is excited for in 2015 are Broadcasting Happiness (August), on the power that positive
thinking has to transform business performance, by journalist Michelle Gielan; Media Circus (October), on how it
feels to suffer tragedy in the public eye, by Kim Goldman (who experienced this first-hand during the O.J. Simpson
trial) and People journalist Tatsha Robertson; and The China Study Quick & Easy Cookbook (May), which looks
at making a whole-foods, plant-based diet simpler and easier, by vegan chef Del Sroufe.

No Starch Press, based in San Francisco, specializes in, according to the publisher, “geeky books on topics like
hacking and security, Lego, programming, coding for kids, [and] Manga STEM guides.” Its 41% increase in 2014
over 2012 was due to “tremendous growth” in its Lego and children’s programming lines, as well as solid backlist
sales of its core tech titles, says the company’s Makenzie Dolginow. Among its hits last year were Beautiful Lego
and Python for Kids.

No Starch, which turned 20 in 2015, kicked off the year by partnering with promotional site Humble Bundle, which
featured 15 of No Starch’s kids’ programming titles. The bundle was Humble Bundle’s third-best-selling e-book
bundle ever, according to No Starch, selling more than 34,000 bundles, which grossed more than $450,000.

Utah-based publisher Cedar Fort Inc., founded in 1986 by Lyle Mortimer and Lee Nelson, specializes in LDS
fiction and nonfiction, as well as general trade titles in the cookbook, clean romance, and YA categories. The
publisher attributes its 41% growth to a “total restructuring” of its in-house production teams, according to
production manager Heidi Doxey. Rather than dividing itself into traditional departments such as editorial and
design, Cedar Fort has genre teams that work together, each focusing on its own titles. “[The restructuring] allows
us to respond quickly to trends in the marketplace, both in acquiring new titles and packaging our books to help
them stand out from everything else on the shelf in that genre,” says Doxey. The publisher reports it has also
increased its sales by "branching out into new areas, such as film distribution, e-books, and audiobooks." Diana Keuilian's The Recipe Hacker, a cookbook that offers healthy versions of classic comfort foods, was one of the publisher's top-selling titles in 2014. Released in 2012, Visions of Glory, by John Pontius, remains one of Cedar Fort's bestselling titles.

Morgan James Publishing increased its revenue by 37% in 2014, relative to 2012, despite shrinking its workforce by seven. Founder David Hancock says the company "can do more with less"—title output rose by 60 over the period—by working with entrepreneurial authors who "know how to market themselves very well." The company has also gotten a better handle on two of its newer imprints, Faith and Kids. Faith has grown faster than Kids, but Hancock is encouraged by more interest in Kids' titles from nontraditional outlets such as Pottery Barn. To spur sales, Morgan James has just hired a new Kids publisher. The big driver of sales for the company has been its core segment of business books, led by Jeff Walker's Launch, which has sold more than 60,000 copies since its release last June.

Nonprint has also helped Morgan James grow. The company continues to add more audiobooks to its mix, particularly through its partnership with Audible, and it has tested the e-book bundling market via BitLit. Sales of traditional e-books, however, fell 12% last year compared to 2013, something Hancock attributes to the restructuring of its fiction list in 2014, during which Morgan James didn't release any new novels. The company has hired a new fiction publisher to revive the list in 2015. Hancock also hopes to open a London office this year and has just signed an agreement with Aer.io to get into the direct-to-consumer business.

Fox Chapel Publishing saw significant expansion in 2014 with two major acquisitions. In April 2014, the publisher bought rights to an archive of roughly 1,400 titles from New Holland Publishers U.K., which doubled the number of titles on Fox Chapel's list and brought the company into some new areas (Fox Chapel formed a new imprint, IMM Lifestyle Books, to distribute the newly acquired list). Five months later, Fox Chapel bought the Creative Homeowner imprint from Courier Corp., taking on more than 100 titles in home design, home improvement, landscaping, and gardening. "We made two very large investments in future growth in 2014, while continuing to grow our existing business," says president and publisher Alan Giagnocavo. The acquisitions let Fox Chapel increase revenue by 4% in 2014 over the previous year, even after it posted large gains in 2013, due to Fox Chapel's success with its Totally Awesome Rubber Band Jewelry books (which capitalized on the rubber band loom trend).

Also during the year, Fox Chapel expanded its dedicated sales force team by adding Mary Faria (formerly national sales manager with Becker & Mayer and Simon & Schuster Children's), Terry Jarvis (national accounts manager, Time Home Entertainment) and Mike Rohrig (national accounts manager, Creative Homeowner). An even bigger makeover took place at the beginning of 2015, when the publisher made a change to its sales and distribution, taking over both functions from Ingram Publisher Services. In the U.K., Fox Chapel combined all trade distribution with Grantham Book Services, and all sales with the Manning Partnership, consolidating all of the publisher's U.K. sales with the team handling IMM Lifestyle.

Verso Books points to the launch of its direct-to-consumer channel as the primary reason for its 31% growth in 2014 over 2012. The publisher, which has offices of equal size in New York and London, began selling directly from its website in April 2014, and Verso reports that there was no negative impact on its trade sales. Direct sales brought in an extra $840,000 globally, 16% of the company's total sales. In direct selling, the company also began bundling e-books for free with all print purchases. "Bundling e-books with print books had been much talked about but little done," says Verso managing director Jacob Stevens. "And our readership reacted very enthusiastically to it." E-books in general have been very important to Verso's overall growth. While the number of print books it released rose by one in 2014, compared to 2012, its total number of ISBNs jumped to 328, from 208, which, Stevens explains, is mainly due to the need to create two ISBNs for every e-book Verso publishes—one for the North America market and a second for the rest of the world.
In 2013, Verso switched its North American sales and distribution, moving from W.W. Norton to Random House (now Penguin Random House Publisher Services). The new team at Random House, has, according to Stevens, "ensured that [Verso] trade sales have grown steadily from July 2013 to date." The company's biggest success in 2014 in the U.S. was *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, by Gabriella Coleman, which explores the group of computer hackers known as Anonymous. In the U.K., James Meek's *Private Island* and Danny Dorling's *Inequality and the 1%* were both strong titles for the publisher.

One of the first hybrid publishers, Greenleaf Book Group, has had steady gains in book sales the last few years, helped by the growing acceptance of the hybrid/self-publishing model, says Maryn Masumiya, business development executive for the company. "The growth in hybrid and self-publishing has certainly helped us grow our brand and our author roster," says Masumiya, noting that its backlist now stands at 1,250 titles. "At one time, authors considered self-publishing a last resort, but that has changed."

With a solid distribution base, Greenleaf has published a variety of bestselling titles, including last year's hit, *Reboot with Joe*, by Joe Cross. The business genre has always been a strong subject area for Greenleaf, but in the past few years the company has seen tremendous growth with its health titles, specifically those focused on niche communities such as paleo eating, yoga, and juicing, according to Masumiya.

Greenleaf has traditionally had good sales at airport retailers, because of its strong business list, and its continuing efforts to diversify its account base has resulted in growing sales into specialty accounts such as the Container Store, Publix Supermarkets, and Bed, Bath and Beyond. E-books sales have been fairly consistent at around 10% of total revenue, but Masumiya notes that Greenleaf allows its authors to handle their own digital rights if they choose—and as a result, "[Greenleaf doesn't] handle the digital product on some of the titles we publish."

"Our frontlist is the driving force of the company," explains Pegasus Books publisher Claiborne Hancock. "It's taken a few years, but we're finally finding our stride, both editorially and critically, and having lots of fun doing it." The New York City–based publisher, launched by Hancock in the fall of 2006, is distributed through W.W. Norton and focuses on titles in the categories of history, science, biography, food, philosophy, crime, and literary fiction.

Pegasus's standout titles in 2014 included Camilla Lackberg's crime thriller *The Hidden Child*, which sold 36,000 copies in both e-book and print. Lackberg continues to be the publisher's top-selling novelist and is set to release a new novel, *The Drowning*, in September 2015. Leslie S. Klinger and Laurie R. King's *In the Company of Sherlock Holmes* sold more than 10,000 copies in hardcover last year. The book, commercially successful, was also in the news as the book that brought Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes into the public domain. When it was published, the Doyle estate demanded a permissions fee. Klinger sued the Doyle estate and won.

Pegasus also released its top-selling history book in 2014: Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson's *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text That Reveals Jesus' Marriage to Mary Magdalene*. The book sold nearly 20,000 copies in e-book and print. "Pegasus reached a milestone in 2014 by coordinating our first global book launch with *The Lost Gospel*," says associate publisher Jessica Case. "The book received attention from every major news market in the world. It was a pivotal moment for the company, both in terms of sales and raising our profile on an international scale."

Michael Kerber, president of Red Wheel Weiser Conari, based in Newburyport, Mass., attributes the company's 8% growth rate to an increase of sales by its distribution clients and a jump in e-book sales. Digital sales in 2014 were up 46% over 2012, which Kerber says was due to the expanding number of platforms on which Red Wheel e-books are available, including subscription services. He also pointed to the conversion of the publisher's backlist titles to digital editions as another reason for the bump, as well as the "very strong" performance of one particular title, *The Afterlife of Billy Fingers*, by Annie Kagan, which generated nearly $200,000 in digital sales in 2014. The book has sold 32,500 e-books since its February 2013 publication, and 57,000 print copies, according
to Kerber. Other top titles in 2014 were The Book of Awakening (Conari Press, 2000), with 45,000 print copies shipped and 6,300 digital editions sold, and Warrior Goddess Training (Hierophant, 2014), with 14,000 copies shipped and 4,200 digital editions sold.

In 2015, Red Wheel plans to “build on [its] strengths,” according to Kerber, keeping its focus on its core body, mind, and spirit categories. To that end, the publisher has taken on new distribution clients, Quest Books and Atlantis Rising magazine, and announced a joint publishing imprint with holistic education provider New York Open Center. Among Red Wheel’s titles that Kerber is excited about for 2015 are Never Argue with a Dead Person, by Thomas John, Divine Spark: Consciousness, Psychedelics, and the Birth of Civilization, by Graham Hancock, and Pope Francis’s Little Book of Wisdom.

After a dip in sales in 2013, revenue rose again at Toronto-based ECW Press in 2014 and the company had an overall gain of 7% in comparing 2014 to 2012. Copublisher David Caron says the company had about 10 titles that did well last year, all selling in the range of 6,000–8,000 copies. Its fiction list benefited from having two titles longlisted for Canada’s prestigious Giller Prize. Its strongest title in the U.S. was Joni Mitchell, by Malka Marom. The U.S. generally represents about two-thirds of ECW’s annual sales, and Canada accounts for 20%; the rest consists of sales of books to other territories, and other sales, such as rights. As its sales have increased, ECW has added to its workforce, including hiring a staff member dedicated to e-book distribution. ECW now handles most of its own e-book sales to the top 20 e-book retailers/aggregators and recently moved print distribution to the Perseus Books Group’s Legato division. Caron says ECW uses Perseus’s Constellation unit for e-book sales “where it makes sense.” Caron says he is bullish on prospects for 2015 because of the strength of the overall book market and ECW’s own list. Because ECW has an unusually large number of strong titles, Caron notes that the staff has been debating which book it wants to make its lead title this fall. One candidate could be The Iron Sheik: Listen Jabroni! by the infamous wrestler and Keith Greenberg. The title is the first book due out under a deal ECW signed with the World Wrestling Federation last week. ECW is doing well enough that later this year it will be moving to a new building that the company recently acquired.

Fast-Growing Independent Publishers

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<td>Turner Publishing</td>
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<td>BenBella Books</td>
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<td>No Starch Press</td>
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<td>San Francisco, Calif.</td>
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<td>Cedar Fort Inc.</td>
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<td>Morgan James Publishing</td>
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<td>Fox Chapel Publishing</td>
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<td>Greenleaf Book Group</td>
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<td>Pegasus Books</td>
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<td>Red Wheel Weiser Conari</td>
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<td>ECW Press</td>
<td>7%</td>
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