

“a publisher is far, far more than a printer and distributor of books, and an agent is more than a deal-maker”

The idea for *Maximum Impact* came to me just after 9/11. I was absolutely glued to the television and the Internet, watching and reading anything and everything about the attacks, and I happened on an interview with Tom Clancy. As fans will remember, two of his thrillers in the Nineties had outlined the use of airliners as weapons of mass destruction. The interviewer was tip-toeing around the question of whether Clancy felt any responsibility in all this; had he possibly given the terrorists an idea that they later used to kill thousands of innocent people? Clancy handled the innuendo with signature aplomb, but the implications wouldn't stop nagging at me. How would I feel if I'd contributed, however inadvertently, to an enormous act of mass murder?

With no real intention of writing a book, I sat down and pecked out a few sentences that would become the core concept for the novel, and that looked something like this:

Years before 9/11, a legendary computer hacker had unwittingly provided a detailed blueprint for the attacks in an online chat room. A brilliant young government agent learns of this, and unleashes her pet project, a black-budget, domestic surveillance ultradatamine, in order to track down and prose-

There were surface benefits to this approach. The book would be out and for sale on Amazon in 90 days or so, not the 18 months the traditional route was purported to take. I would have complete control of the final manuscript and the cover design. And since the story involves some high technology, it seemed fitting to produce it through the state-of-the-art in print-on-demand and e-book publishing.

There were also downsides, of course. At 150,000 words, it was a huge proofreading job with no set of eyes but my own to rely on. (Let's just say I missed a few typos, and more seriously, a handful of continuity errors.) The cover art was a struggle of several weeks and many sketches, and ultimately cost far more to produce than the balance of the publishing package. And there were other, larger disadvantages, but those only became clear during my later experience with the real deal; more on that in a moment.

So there I was, with a shiny novel on my parents' bookshelf and some occasional blips of interest out in the wider world. I Googled myself one day, and noticed that the e-book version was actually number eight on Amazon's e-best-seller's list. Then number five. And then number two. Now, bear in mind, it's e-books we're discussing; all this only meant a surge of

Taking Thoreau's advice

Jack Henderson had no intention of writing a book. Then, amid the ashes of 9/11, an idea struck him. First, he self-published...

Henderson: making connections

cute the author of the terrorist plan. But a home-grown, neo-revolutionary firebrand has already found and coerced the reclusive genius to aid in his own objective: a massive, unstoppable follow-up attack that will bring about the end of the United States of America.

I wrote the first chapter, and then put it aside to do some initial research which, as it turned out, never really ended. Chapter-by-chapter, and sometimes line-by-line, this proved to be a very groundwork-intensive story. Unlike a lot of historical fiction, every single reader would have lived through the time period of this book, and all would have their own vivid memories of the months following 9/11. To the best of my ability, I wanted the facts to be the facts, from the weather and the phase of the moon on certain evenings, to the chilling, real-life foreshadowings of Total Information Awareness in the US and abroad. I have a wall full of reference books, but *Maximum Impact* simply could not have been written without the incredible resources of the Internet. It served as much more than a super-library of facts, figures, and news archives. I found people, too; smart, insider-savvy people I would never have known existed had we not become connected online.

After two years or so, with a finished manuscript, I faced a next step that I really didn't want to take: getting published. To me, writing the book was the hard part, and I'd done that to my satisfaction. But by then I'd heard many sad stories of rejection and woe from other writers, and I had absolutely no desire to put myself through all that angst. So, with my independence and a few thousand dollars in hand, I decided to pre-empt the mainstream publishing industry's inevitable rejections by self-publishing, as both an e-book and a print-on-demand paperback.

sales in the hundreds, not the thousands or millions. Still, this modest success inspired me to consider re-editing the book and coming out with another, more polished edition.

I wrote a fan letter to a favorite author, Charlie Huston, and asked him if he'd be interested in doing a promotional blurb for my new cover. He agreed to read it and see what he thought. After a couple of weeks, he declined to do the blurb (wrong genre) but asked me if I'd like him to show the book to his literary agent. I said hell, yes, I'd like that very much. Everything else happened pretty quickly from that point on, and it's continuing to happen today.

So here's the essence of what I learned as a do-it-yourself author: a publisher is far, far more than a printer and distributor of books, and an agent is more than a deal-maker. Industry insiders may get a chuckle out of the sheer obviousness of that, but I'll take the hit; I admit it, I had no idea. Until I'd found an agent who loved the book as much as I did, and saw more in it than I had, until I'd found an editor who led me to make this story better than I ever could have made it alone, I really had no idea. And I misspoke, just now; I didn't find them, I wasn't even looking for them. They found me, and I'll always be grateful for that.

Was self-publishing a step in the right direction, then, toward a big deal in traditional publishing? Yes, in some sense I suppose it was, but it only works that way in hindsight. In truth, I was just persistently following the advice of the big, blue coffee cup on my desk. It quotes Thoreau: *Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.* My wife bought that cup for me, five years ago, in a bookstore.

Maximum Impact is published by Sphere in 14 June, price £10

