



GUEST OF HONOR

Encyclopedic Approach

Great Barrington, Mass., entrepreneur Karen Christensen and Berkshire Publishing Group lead the reference-publishing pack

WRITTEN BY ROBIN CATALANO
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Nine years ago, Karen Christensen made her first journey to China. A successful writer of environmental books with a thriving publishing company, Christensen always dreamed of someday creating an Asian reference book. She wrote up a proposal, and it was picked up by Scribner three days later.

Christensen, accompanied by her family, traveled to China for research. It was her first time in the country, and it was a magical experience. Despite arriving during the same politically charged week in April 2001 in which China had captured a downed U.S. Navy spy plane, Christensen wasn't intimidated. "It was such an interesting time to be there," she says. "We found China very exciting. It's just so important economically and culturally. It's such an influence on the world today. I wanted to make sure that everyone could have access to much of the same information."

The Encyclopedia of Modern Asia was released in 2002 and was an immediate success.

"I never intended to be an encyclopedia publisher," says Christensen, a tall blond with an assured manner. "But it's provided an opportunity to learn about a lot of things I wanted to know more about and to work with a lot of interesting people."

Now, Christensen, CEO of Berkshire Publishing Group, is known for her interest in all things China, and has been invited to speak on topics such as social networking in the country at a variety of industry conferences. She is on the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations and is working to forge partnerships with Chinese publishers, including the Encyclopedia of China Publishing House in Beijing. It can be an uphill battle, since publishing in China is still very much state-controlled, but Christensen relishes the challenge. "Education is a huge growth movement in China," she reports, "and academic publishers are poised to be an important part of it. It's very complicated right now, but that's what makes it so exciting."

The seeds for such global concerns were planted early. As a child, Christensen dreamed of traveling to far-flung locales and made her first trip abroad at age sixteen. After studying writing and literature at the College of Creative Studies at the University of California Santa Barbara, Christensen moved to London in 1981, where she worked for the journals division of Blackwell Scientific and began amassing an extensive network of science and writing professionals. She also did a stint at famed publishing house Faber & Faber.

Even more significantly, Christensen, pregnant with her son, began looking into environmental topics. "Having a child tends to make you focus on environmental issues," she explains. "I had a friend who had written a small environmental novel, and he encouraged me to do something

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CHINESE ART IS PART OF THE DECOR AT BERKSHIRE PUBLISHING GROUP, WHERE THE *BERKSHIRE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CHINA* WAS PUBLISHED IN MAY 2009.

similar. But I thought maybe I should write a nonfiction book on ecology.”

A contract soon followed, and Christensen, a born researcher, set to work. During a period of eighteen months that included her second pregnancy, *Home Ecology* was created. The book was released by Fulcrum Publishing in 1990, just as the green movement was picking up steam, and high demand sent it into its third printing even before its public release in the United Kingdom.

The following year, Christensen and her family returned to the United States, moving to upstate New York. “I had a couple of books under contract with a publisher in the city,” she says. “I thought I’d just live the freelance life.” But raising two children during the recession of the early 1990s proved daunting, and she took a job with a now-defunct academic publisher in Connecticut.

Christensen saw a need for more academic and reference publishers, and in 1998, she and her then-husband, anthropologist David Levinson, founded Berkshire Reference Works as a packaging company in Great Barrington, Massachusetts—managing the editorial and production processes for a larger

company that handled printing, distribution, and marketing. They started with one full-time employee and worked for several of the major New York City publishing houses, such as Macmillan, Charles Scribner’s Sons, and SAGE.

Although Christensen declines to name exact figures, she estimates that start-up costs—for computer equipment, employee and contractor salaries, and printing—ran into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, much of which was financed by a loan from Greylock Federal Credit Union in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. “People expected me to get investors,” she says, “but Greylock helped configure the loan so that I wouldn’t have to give away equity.”

By 2001, Berkshire Reference Works had ten employees and a busy office on Castle Street and was earning substantial royalties on its globally focused packaged books, ranging in topics from world history and international relations to sports, community, religion, popular culture, and environmental issues. Christensen herself continued to author several popular environmental books, including *The Armchair Environmentalist*.

How Karen Christensen Does It

Favorite productivity tools:

TimeDesign planner with Outlook; Skype; 3x5 cards.

How do you organize your time?

Compulsive list-making.

Favorite business books:

Confessions of a Radical Industrialist by Ray C. Anderson and Robin White; *Green to Gold* by Daniel C. Esty and Andrew S. Winston; *Mr. China* by Tim Clissold; and, of course, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.

The best job you ever had:

Running a global media company from Great Barrington, Mass.

The best business advice you ever got:

Make it fit on the back of an envelope.

Your iPod playlist includes:

Vivaldi, Bruce Springsteen, and lots of Chinese lessons.

Business-related publications you read:

The Economist, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times* (I enjoy the advice columns and the weekend section—especially the gardening page).

Business-related websites you read:

I use Twitter to keep up with a handful of journalists from Greenbiz.com, Businessgreen.com, and Forbes.com.

What metrics do you use to measure success?

Profit growth and influence within the information industry.

How have advances in technology changed your business?

I run Berkshire Publishing from my laptop (I'm answering these questions en route to New York from Washington, D.C.), and I could do most of what I do from Beijing.

After *The Encyclopedia of Modern Asia* was released in 2002, other books, such as the *Encyclopedia of Community*, followed, as did accolades from publications like *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and London's *Times*.

But Christensen and Levinson knew they could take the company even further with its own imprint. "I was at a library conference in Charleston, South Carolina, and was on a panel with a guy from Google," Christensen recalls. "He very politely said, *It's such an interesting time to be starting a reference company*. He thought I was crazy." But there was method to Christensen's madness: she wanted not only the flexibility of conceptualizing the books she published, but also the ability to spin off smaller publications from them, thus creating additional revenue streams.

As the newly renamed Berkshire Publishing Group, the team produced its first independent titles, the *Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction* and the highly acclaimed *Encyclopedia of World History*, in 2004. The kudos continued, thanks in large part to Mary Bagg, who came aboard that same year as an editor. "The quality of the prose we're publishing now is really much better because Mary has taken such control of the copyediting process," Christensen says. "She understands these things on an intuitive level."

For her part, Bagg has witnessed a lot of changes in the editorial process over the years. Although

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THE EDITORIAL STAFF AT BERKSHIRE PUBLISHING GROUP, HOUSED IN A PRIVATE RESIDENCE IN GREAT BARRINGTON, MASS., NOW DOES ALL ITS PROOFREADING ELECTRONICALLY, SAVING PAPER AND TIME.

Berkshire Publishing was an early proponent of electronic editing, typeset manuscripts—thousands of pages long—were printed out for several rounds of proofreading. Nowadays, everything is done electronically. According to Bagg, it's not only a more eco-friendly approach, but it also saves time and money.

Another change came in the form of the company's leadership when Levinson and Christensen parted ways, and he left the company in 2007. Christensen moved the offices from Castle Street to her Great Barrington home the following year, partly to eliminate rental costs and partly to be greener. "I had this large house, and most of it was unused," Christensen remarks. "I thought, *Why not be more sustainable and use the space more efficiently?*" While she envisioned a smaller business, with one or two full-time staffers in the office and freelance project managers and designers working remotely, business has been so strong that she currently employs five full-time and a half-dozen part-time freelance editors, and one full-time designer.

If not for the several computer workstations that line the walls, the offices, which occupy four unused rooms on one side of Christensen's house, would look like studies. Books are stacked ceiling-high on shelves and form miniature Stonehenges on tables. The rooms are cozy and familiar.

Daughter Rachel, 20, who lives in the house and assists on the editorial and financial side of Berkshire Publishing, understands the inevitable mingling of their personal and professional lives. "There is no distinction between the two," she says. "It's a family business; you accept a certain amount of overlap." Christensen's Chinese-speaking son, Tom, is also part of the company, working to make and maintain contacts out of the company's new Beijing office.

The changes notwithstanding, Bagg notes that some things have stayed delightfully the same. "Berkshire Publishing is a remarkable company with great connections in the global academic and professional worlds," she says.

Despite the poor economy, Christensen feels that Berkshire Publishing is on solid footing. "We're in a sector that's not everyone's cup of tea. In reference publishing, we don't have the issues with returns and discounting that are so challenging to trade publishers," she says. "In selling to libraries, we

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do have to deal with licensing issues, but it isn't usually as complicated."

Christensen disagrees with Internet prognosticators who predict the downfall of print publishing within the next five years. "Most of our sales—about three-quarters—are still print, split roughly equally between public libraries and high



TAKEAWAY

STAY IN THE LOOP

Be aware of current trends in your industry and use that knowledge to offer products that are "hot," rather than offering what buyers already have.

NEW WAYS OF NETWORKING

Take advantage of new technologies like Skype to create face-to-face relationships with clients, contributors, or vendors around the globe. Networking has always been smart business; the Internet makes it easier, and more important, than ever.

school libraries. I'm a real believer in the value of an encyclopedia as a complete course of knowledge. It's a lot of information, but it's broken up into smaller, well-edited pieces that are easy to digest. I think there's enormous value to this in a world where there's such a deluge of information."

To stay ahead of the trends, Christensen pays close attention to what's happening in the publishing industry and the world at large, and looks for the "hot-

spot topics" that are useful to libraries and classrooms. "In tough economic times, you can't just publish on perennial topics like American history," she observes. "A buyer is going to be looking for what she doesn't already have."

Christensen is also using previously published and new material to create print-on-demand books and is looking at ways to maximize technology for both networking and marketing. She does very little print advertising and direct-mail marketing, limited conference exhibits, and counts e-mail blasts, e-newsletters, a blog, and Twitter among her most important tools, because they allow people to pass along information quickly to a large network of contacts.

Christensen uses Skype to keep in touch with contributors and remote contractors and increasingly finds herself entertaining important visiting academics in Great Barrington. Luckily, she's never had a problem drawing in some of the biggest names in academia for her projects. "I'm not a great editor," she admits. "What I'm good at and what I still love is the networking side. Building relationships with a variety of people is what I really enjoy."

The next year promises to be a big one for Berkshire Publishing. Following on the heels of the five-volume *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, released last May, the company will debut volumes one and two of the *Berkshire Encyclopedia on Sustainability*, a ten-volume, solution-based series on restoring the planet. The second, and newly expanded, edition of the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History* will also be released.

As always, Christensen has her eye on ways to make her business greener. "Our office isn't particularly resource-intensive, but one thing I get on a bit of a hobby horse about is that people think publishing is about trees. We do print on appropriately sourced paper, but energy use and e-waste is a much bigger problem. We're committed to the global sharing of information, but there really is a huge impact. We're looking at ways to reduce that, but the work is ongoing." **BBQ**

Robin Catalano is a frequent contributor to BBQ: Berkshire Business Quarterly and a contributing editor to Berkshire Living.

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