

By Mirela Roncevic -- Library Journal, 10/01/2008



Berkshire Publishing is a Massachusetts-based reference publisher many librarians may not know much about. Its catalog is growing slowly but steadily, covering hard-to-do subjects and targeting both a scholarly and a popular audience. After a conversation with the company's founder and CEO Karen Christensen, *LJ* learned that this small publisher isn't afraid of having a big vision.

When we first met at *LJ*'s offices a few years ago, you had come in to present your list. How has your mission evolved since?

There's something about an English place name like Berkshire that makes people feel they've known about us for a long time, but Berkshire launched its first major title in late 2004, creating a new imprint in an area of publishing dominated by decades-old companies. We weren't just the new kids on the block; we were the only kids on the block! It's been a challenge to get our name out to librarians, but we've had extraordinary support, too, from people who value Berkshire's fresh perspectives and innovative topics.

What should librarians know about Berkshire?

Although we have a very traditional name and are based in a small town in western New England, it surprises people to learn that Berkshire is probably the most international of reference publishers. On one publication, we had 700 authors in 65 countries. While our focus has always been global—from world religions to world sport—and will continue to be, Berkshire is becoming known for its growing emphasis on China.

We live in a world that fully embraces the idea of finding information online. Isn't it difficult for print to compete with online resources?

I haven't been in reference publishing for all that long, and maybe that makes me more flexible in my thinking about how reference is provided. The important things about a top-notch encyclopedia are 1) that it provides succinct overviews and synoptic analysis written by experts and 2) that it provides consistent, coherent, well-considered coverage of a subject or field. Once you have these elements in place, there are many ways in which to provide the content to different readers. I have a sign above my desk that says, "It's the content, stupid." I'm happy to provide content in whatever format works.

Does this mean your encyclopedias are available electronically?

I can't claim to have an online model in place—I'm not even sure I have an online strategy yet! Our encyclopedias are available through a number of partners, and more all the time as we find new ways to create useful clusters of content or to stream related information from different publications. While we bring out major encyclopedias on China and sustainability, we are already developing ancillary materials in both areas. We have a model that will provide some content free and also pull in and integrate important material from international sources.

I recently discovered that articles from Berkshire publications can be purchased online individually. How long has the concept of "Berkshire Bytes" been around?

Berkshire Bytes came about because I love competing with big companies. That's where my competitive streak really comes out. When I read that Amazon was going to start selling single articles, I asked my staff, "How fast could we provide single articles for sale?" I think we had them up and running within a week. It's not been a major effort, but it's another good way for people to get a taste of what Berkshire offers.

Is there a title on this year's list that you are particularly proud of?

I can't stop talking about the five-volume *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*. I have received many emails from scholars about the importance of this work and also notes from people who express surprise that anyone has the audacity to undertake such a venture. One of our goals is to help Americans understand China and prepare for a world in which we will work together.

You mentioned in our last meeting several months ago that Berkshire would produce an encyclopedia of the 21st century. Is it in the works?

Berkshire is very much future-focused, so it seemed natural to take on the future itself in a publication. There's a substantial body of work done by futurists—some of it wacky but most keyed to helping people make better decisions today. We've got an amazing editorial team and stellar contributors, which is a good thing because it is a tough project. Its being a print publication [to be released in 2009] hasn't exactly grabbed some of the authors, but they do like the idea of getting their work to a wider audience and especially to students.