

Travel guidebooks ride digital wave

August 7 2013, by Dewayne Bevil

The world of travel guidebooks keeps spinning, although it must weather changes in format and distribution in order to spread the word about vacation destinations.

A trend toward electronic books and the demise of bookstores - including retail giant Borders - have been part of a sea change for travel books, said Julie Neal, who produces "The Complete Guide to Walt Disney World" with her husband, Mike, from their home in Celebration, Fla. They published their first [print](#) edition in 2007.

"We have depended on our pretty red book with the pretty photos on the shelf. It tempts people to pick it up and thumb through it," she said.

"They see all the photos, and they buy it. We've sold 120,000 books that way."

She sees pluses in [digital editions](#) for readers and publishers. This fall, the Neals will introduce an e-book version of their travel guide, a genre that hasn't "exploded" in the electronic universe yet, she said. Before that, the couple will have smaller, more specialized editions, beginning with one devoted to New Fantasyland at Magic Kingdom.

A good e-guide should link to additional information about the location, include videos and ample videos and easily connect buyers to restaurants and other spots, Neal said. It's not merely a snapshot of the printed page, she said.

"You don't see good reference [e-books](#) that have that kind of capability.

We're trying to create that," Neal said. Their comprehensive e-book contains more than 4,000 links, she said, and will be formatted to work on e-readers, tablets and smartphones.

"It's all right at their [fingertips](#), literally. It's just a huge benefit to readers if the book is done right," she said.

An e-book can have many layers of information and the ability to filter it for specific data, she said.

"With just our print book, we weren't able to do the kind of depth that we always wanted to do. Just for economic reasons, we couldn't just add more and more pages," Neal said. "No one's going to spend \$50 for a travel guide no matter how much good information is in there."

E-books are available through online retailers such as Amazon, Apple and Barnes & Noble. They determine the prices, Neal said, which can range from 99 cents to beyond the price for a print edition.

Travel-book purchases decreased from 10.91 million in 2010 to 7.97 million in 2012, according to Nielsen BookScan, a sales-tracking service. Despite that drop, there is optimism.

"It does seem that there was a lot of talk for a while ... that everything would become digital and there would be no more print," said John Mutter, editor of Shelf Awareness, a blog that follows the publishing industry. "It seems like it's kind of stabilized."

Print and e-books can co-exist, he said.

"What seems to be happening is that most people read print books and e-books, depending on the circumstances and what they're reading. The same seems to apply to travel," Mutter said.

"E-books are not taking over the world - at least not yet," said Kelly Monaghan, owner of The Intrepid Traveler, a Connecticut-based publisher. "In our case, the e-book sales of every book are fewer than the print sales," he said.

The decrease in retailers is a big hurdle, Monaghan said. It's more difficult now to get books in front of potential buyers.

"We have to pay careful attention on how we're going to be able to reach an audience for a book," he said. "That means that we are producing more and more books about Walt Disney World and Disneyland."

The Disney fan base is "large and easy to reach," said Monaghan, who has five Disney-oriented authors working on nine or 10 titles.

Although e-[books](#) are made for most Intrepid Traveler titles, some work better in other formats, he said. Its print book about what to do while waiting in line at Disney World has a mobile application. A "Hidden Mickeys" book has an app and an e-book, he said.

Personal preference plays a part.

"There are some people who like to take an iPad into the park, but other people would rather have something that wouldn't be as traumatic if it falls into the water or gets stolen," Monaghan said. "There's always a place for that paperback book that you can slide into a back pocket or purse and carry with you."

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