The eBook Discovery Quagmire:
How "Free" Earns Publishers Money

One evening last year, Vook received an email from Amazon that read, “Wow, Congrats!” Our educational titles had been downloaded 125,000 times in a single day.

Our success was not accidental.

Vook created a catalog of backlist-like titles with our ePublishing platform and marketed it with a viral free eBook campaign that led to record sales. We cracked the discoverability mystery.

The TextVook Experiment

Vook has released more than 750 eBooks on our digital publishing platform. Some of our titles were created in-house, including TextVooks, which enable readers to ”get smart, quickly.”

“The goal of TextVook was to stress test our eBook publishing platform and train our team to support the digitization of a content backlist,” said Vook founder and CEO Brad Inman.

“We replicated the conditions in which a publisher with a backlist could release a catalog of eBook titles and increase the number of sales.”

The Catalog Effect

Our TextVook series with our animated character, Dr. Vook, Ph.D. were released in the spring of 2011, in both animated and non-animated eBook versions.

Vook originally launched the TextVook series at $4.99 per title, and initial sales were disappointing. We identified discoverability as the problem. How was anyone going to find the titles?

Price Drop from $4.99 To Free

To reduce the friction, Vook made the product free in Amazon and other channels. Readers, we planned, would discover the promotion and begin to talk about the eBooks—be it within the Amazon customer forums, on their personal blogs, or through their social network. As the downloads began, the eBooks circulated in Amazon's one-of-a-kind recommendation engine, driving awareness and more pick up.

Once free, three factors kick-started the downloads:

First, the free offer sparked social media buzz. The promotion was highlighted in the limited-time special offer section of the Kindle store. Soon after, eBook and Kindle-related blogs and Twitter followers reported that our catalog of eBooks was free for a limited time. Bloggers pay attention to what's new on Amazon—free or low price points attract buzz.

Then, with massive downloads in a short period of time, we benefitted from Amazon's customer recommendation engine, which introduces new products to customers based on similar purchases.

Finally, our titles began to rise to the top and we showed up in Amazon's sales charts that are updated every few minutes.

The Amazon eco-system was poised to deliver results. And it did. Within hours, Vook's titles rocketed up the eBook rankings. A dozen titles shot into the Top 100 "free" eBooks section. The history-centric TextVooks claimed the top five spots in the "History" category, with sustained high rankings for several days. Fiction eBook author D.D. Scott experienced similar results through free price promotions.

"It's human nature for people to buy what they think everyone else is already buying," said Scott. "An author will want

to 'be visible' on as many of the charts as they can. They can do that with both the categories and tags provided when uploading eBooks to Amazon."

Scott recommends paying close attention to BISAC categories, where an author's eBooks have a better chance of staying high on the charts.

Make Amazon a Partner

Vook and authors like D.D. Scott cannot simply set the price of their eBooks to free. Such a change requires a prior approval from Amazon.

Author D.D. Scott found another way to set her titles to free using Amazon's price-matching functionality. On a book's page on Amazon, immediately below the sale's rank, customers can flag that a book is priced lower at another retailer. "First, I put my eBook free on Smashwords. Four days later, it was free on Barnes & Noble," said Scott. "One week after being made free on Smashwords, Amazon Kindle US matched the free promotion."

But Why Not 99 Cents?

Many successful self-published authors, including Scott, Christopher Smith, and John Locke, have successfully sold their content for 99 cents. We tried the 99 cents price but it didn't spark Vook sales.

We lacked the audience of successful self-published authors, who can convert free promotions into sales. We feel confident that lower price points will work for partners using our services. Amazon now provides Kindle customers with more opportunities to discover inexpensive eBooks.

“All of my fiction books are now 99 cents, and I credit that strategic price point for taking me from less than 100 sales per month to 1000 sales per month,” said Scott. “However, it was the free promotion that started it all for me.”

Promotion Duration

eBook publishers can choose to make their titles free for any period, from one day to several months. We believe one week or less is optimal for a promotion. Amazon requires at least six weeks advance notice in order to set the price for an eBook at free.

Self-published authors using the Amazon price matching functionality may see a promotion begin sooner. D.D. Scott’s book, *Bootscootin’ Blahniks,* continues to be available for free on Amazon, as an introduction to her work.

“There’s something magical about being able to say to my readers, not only do I treat you to ‘great books at great prices’, but also ‘the first one is on me!’” said Scott. Her other eBooks have benefited from increased sales; she sells as many as 5,000 copies per month.

In Vook’s case, more than 300,000 TextVooks were downloaded during the week-long promotion, and we have sold 26,000 TextVook titles that languished before the Amazon boost.

Our best results came within the first day of being promoted in the ”limited time offer” section of Amazon, along with the impact of a consistent catalog of titles.

From Free Back to Paid: The Revenue Bump

Free eBook downloads, no matter how impressive, might not necessarily translate into sales. However, these promotions paid off handsomely for Vook and D.D. Scott alike.

“I had a huge bump, going from 275 sales per week to around 2000 sales per week on Kindle. This lasted for about three weeks,” said Scott. “I’m now selling more books in one month, just on Kindle, than I sold all of the last twelve months combined.”

In Vook’s case, the eBook prices reverted to their pre-sale price point of $4.99 per book after one week of promotion.

We believe that this is directly tied to Amazon’s customer recommendation engine, which continued to recommend the TextVooks long after the promotion had ended. *World War II: The Animated TextVook* rocketed to the second position on the paid charts subsequent to the promotion.

“Digital merchandizing is not new,” said Inman. “But in the eBook world, we are just beginning to learn what is possible. We have transferred these learnings directly into the product specifications and support documentation for the Vook platform, so that our customers can now benefit.”