

Chelsea Green Publishing - Media Giraffe Profile

Chelsea Green Publishing

Margo Baldwin - President/Publisher



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About

Margo Baldwin is publisher and president of Chelsea Green Publishing, an independent company based in White Junction, Vermont that publishes books on sustainable living.

Baldwin and her husband, Ian Baldwin, started the company in 1984 when they arrived in Vermont. "We had escaped New York City and were hunting around for something to do; something that was interesting and that we could do together," says Baldwin. They published their first title, "In a Pig's Eye" by Karl Schwenke, a collection of rural living essays, in 1985.

As an independent publisher, Baldwin feels that the web has helped her company survive. "It's allowed us to compete on a more level playing field with the big publishers," says Baldwin, adding, "Amazon has completely transformed the book business."

Baldwin believes that Amazon has provided small niche publishers, such as Chelsea Green, a place to sell their backlist, something that is essential for them to survive. "The hard thing in book publishing is to build up your backlist, books that will sell year after year. You need quite a few of those and it takes time to do that."

When asked what effect the changing media would have on independent publishers, Baldwin was optimistic, "I think it's become easier because of technology." She explains that Amazon has immediately given publishers a sales channel that they never had. It also allows publishers to print-on-demand. Although the convenience comes with higher unit prices, it avoids companies having all their money stuck in inventory.

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The goal at Chelsea Green Publishing is to promote green-living and sustainability, especially, according to their mission statement, "with the destruction of the natural world ramped up to epidemic proportions." The statement continues, "We wish to move the company forward boldly and with a new sense of urgency. While continuing our commitment to remain at the forefront of information about green building, organic growing, and renewable energy-the practical aspects of sustainability."

Baldwin refers to "restorative economics," a Paul Hawken term, to describe Chelsea Green's business model. She explains, "it's a kind of economics that's not based on trashing the earth. The economic system [currently in place] doesn't place any value on the natural resources of the world, that these are free things to use up. Your whole business cycle isn't just using and trashing, but providing real value." Using this model, Chelsea Green Publishing describes itself as a business, "built around an integrated concern for intellectual capital, social capital, natural capital and financial capital."

Chelsea Green Publishing has implemented the use of the web more and more in recent years. I stepped back into the company five years ago, we had a website up but the stance of the company was to be afraid of the web," says Baldwin. Since that time, they have redone their website, started a blog called "The Flaming Grasshopper" and are in the process of yet another makeover of their site.

"I think the next iteration of our website will be to change it to create a more green living site as opposed to just being a book catalog, once we get to that point I think the blogging and being able to pull in new feeds and repurposing content from our books as part of the website so it becomes more of a resource. It's where we're headed but we're not there yet," says Baldwin. Baldwin also believes that these tools may help tap into new audiences, something she doesn't believe they've accomplished using the web to this point.

Their blog, "The Flaming Grasshopper," was started in November 2004. Their first entry is a series of e-mails sent by Baldwin and others to editors at the *New York Times* about the book "*Don't Think of an Elephant!*" Written by George Lakoff and published by Chelsea Green, the book was listed on the *Times* best-sellers list containing the wrong author and publisher. Within a week, the book had been removed from the prestigious list and classified as a How-To/Self-Help book. Baldwin, Lakoff and others all e-mailed *The New York Times* claiming the book should not be classified this way, but the overall conversation culminates with NYT staffer Rich Meislen saying, "Having looked through the book, I think it's correctly categorized. I appreciate your concern, but people of good will can disagree, and we disagree on this one."

Popular titles published by Chelsea Green include "A Straw Bale House," Jean Giono's "The Man Who Planted Trees," Eliot Coleman's "New Organic Grower" and "Four Season Harvest," Naomi Wolf's "End of America" and "Unembedded," a collaborative photojournalism effort on the war in Iraq.

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