HOW TO MARKET YOUR
BOARD GAME

WITHOUT A MASSIVE BUDGET

BY BOBBY FIORENTINO

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Secret #1

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Conventional Wisdom Is Dumb

"So $360 per card...times 20 cards...I can provide the graphic design for your game for $7,200."

I don't respond right away. Because my Kickstarter goal is $500, and I don't know how to explain to this artist that according to her rates, I can afford art for one and a half cards. I think back to some of the lessons I've learned in my research on how to make a board game.

"The art makes the game. Spare no expense."

I finally respond. "Ok, that sounds good. Let me talk to my partner and get back to you."

I read about other game designers who use all of their savings to create a game. Some even dip into their retirement accounts. Maybe this is just the price of getting to be creative and make something new for the world?

"Don't make a game to make money, do it for the love of it."

I ingested a lot of conventional wisdom from podcasts, blog posts, YouTube videos, forums, and Facebook groups. Some of it was from well-known board game designers, some from amateurs, and more than a little was from wannabes regurgitating conventional wisdom they heard somewhere else.

I'm going to go ahead and swap out "conventional wisdom" for another term:

Myths.

Much of the advice you read about designing or marketing a board game is made up of myths. They are platitudes that feel good to say but don't get you any closer to getting your game made or funded.

Which is not to say that there are ill intentions in the advice. In fact, a lot of advice given is good, it's just misguided or misplaced.

For example, consider the following bit of oft-repeated conventional wisdom (can we start saying myth yet?):

"You should be working on multiple games at the same time. It helps you solve problems and come up with new solutions."

Bullshit. Who has time to work on five or six games at the same time? First time or amateur game designers barely have time to design, playtest, and market one game. I run a Facebook community of board game enthusiasts, the Board Game Club, and when I found out that the vast majority of them wanted to make their own game I asked what was the main reason they hadn't. One of the top answers was not having enough money (we'll get to that later, it is the main promise of this book afterall).

The other biggest reason was TIME. Unless you don't have a "regular job" or any responsibilities like family or cats, you probably aren't swimming in enough time to design a whole bunch of games.

But here's the thing: This isn't bad advice *in general*, it's just bad advice *for you*. One day when you've designed the next Wingspan or Gloomhaven then you have the luxury of following all

the myths to your heart's content. For now though, let me cut through the noise and tell you which advice will help you make a game and get it funded, and which advice is made up of myths which will have you spinning your wheels and projecting a launch date of 2048.

"If you build it, they will come."

Just, wow. Thousands of board games are released every year. It does not matter how good your game is, it will not sell if you don't have a solid marketing strategy.

Let me repeat that: The quality of your game is not the main determinant of how well your game sells. It certainly helps, especially if you really want to get into the elite tier of funding. But the main indicator of whether or not you fund is how well you can market.

If you have never made a game, or have only made one or two smaller ones, here is the path I lay out for you. We're making games fast. And we're making them cheap.

Have you seen that Brad Pitt movie Moneyball, where he has to use his team's money strategically on the baseball players that give the best bang for the buck? That's us. We're moneyballing the board game industry.

A handful of companies own the vast majority of all board games bought. And those companies are buying each other out or merging all the time. You are up against an Empire.

The Empire has the luxury of spending ungodly sums of money on art and marketing. You don't. We don't work for the Empire - we are Rebels. We don't have the resources of the galaxy at our disposal. We don't fly a fancy, top of the line Star Destroyer. We

fly rinky-dink aftermarket X-Wings that are on the verge of falling apart.

But that is where our power is. The Empire is big, but it's slow. We are quick. The Empire has grand plans but they are inflexible, when they start a plan the whole apparatus points that way and cannot veer off course. We are nimble, we can adapt to new information and new opportunities.

Stop listening to advice that is geared toward good and orderly Imperials. You are a Rebel. Start acting like one!

Secret #2

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Failure is Overrated

I was on the verge of giving up on my board game. Months had passed and I didn't feel any closer to the finish line. We couldn't get past the insane costs it seemed to make a game.

My communication with my partner was a mess - it was a curious combination of too many cooks in the kitchen and nobody taking control and steering the ship. What a terrible mix of analogies but we were living it.

The struggle was eating at me inside. I publicly declared to my board game community that I was going to do it! I was going to jump into the pool first, blaze the trail, manifest my destiny (here I go with those analogies again) so that THEY didn't have to! I was going to be the hero!

Yet, I was no hero. Just another board game enthusiast who wished they could make their own game, but couldn't. I was as stuck as everyone else. But they weren't letting anyone down, I was. Or at least I felt like I was. And it did not feel good. I was on the brink of failure.

"Failure is the greatest teacher."

Ah, but if I failed that was ok right? As I mentioned, many excellent board game designers fail when they release their own games. These are respected, highly-thought of people in the board

game community who devote a good amount of their energy and resources to helping others.

Many of these board game designers are pretty open about their failures, some even do post-mortems and deep dives into what exactly went wrong with their campaigns in excruciating detail. In fact, most (if not all) designers actually are HAPPY that they failed, because of the valuable lessons learned and experience gained. *"They didn't fail,"* the wisdom goes. *"They leveled up! Ready to slay an even tougher dungeon boss later on."*

If you haven't caught on to my attitude yet, let me spell it out for you.

Failure being a good thing is a myth in the board game industry. It just means that you failed to plan, you didn't do your homework, you had no idea how to market your game.

This flies so much in the face of everything you hear that I feel the need to clarify! Maybe put a little asterisk next to my bold accusation:

YOUR failure is not a good thing.

OTHER PEOPLE'S failures are great teachers.

Let that sink in for a minute. Do not plan to fail. Let everyone else around you fail and then learn the lessons for free without having to waste your own time, money, energy, and self esteem in the process.

When someone makes their dream game without any idea if anyone wants to play it, sets an unreasonable funding goal, spends exorbitant sums of hard-earned money on artwork and advertising and fails to get their game made, they are gambling with their own limited resources. You should circle this person like a hawk, but

instead of seeking their advice, seek to learn your own lessons from their mistakes so that you don't have to.

There's a saying in marketing:

 "Pioneers get shot. Settlers get rich."

Don't be a pioneer. Let someone else blaze the trails and have their back full of arrows. You be a settler - follow well-worn and proven tracks to success. Although this book is more about marketing than design, the two should go hand-in-hand, so that means not getting overly risky with your theme.

 "But - there are a million fantasy dungeon games and space games out there!"

There are, because those themes are popular and they *sell*. Unless you are very experienced, don't get too cute with your first few games!

"But - what about Wingspan!"

Yes, if the designer of Wingspan had sought my advice I would have told her to shy away from a bird theme. In fact, countless other respected folks in the industry did. The right mix of publishing circumstances and good design let lightning strike here.

Lightning does strike. People do win the lottery every day. But the vast majority of board game designers neither win the lottery or get struck by lightning, so until you know what you're doing, follow a proven track.

Are you ready?

Secret #3

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Do Not Rely on Publishers

A game designer basically has two options on how to get their game out to the world into buyers' hands:

1. They can choose to publish their game themselves usually through a crowdfunding site such as Kickstarter or The Game Crafter. They are responsible for EVERY aspect of creating, selling, and delivering the game (including customer support after the game is delivered). The game designer is responsible for all expenses, profits and losses.
2. They can come up with the gameplay design and have a publisher handle everything else in exchange for a percentage of the sales or profit. The publisher handles all other aspects of getting a board game made and distributed.

I see a lot of chatter seeking and giving advice for how to get a publisher to publish your game. Option 2 looks pretty good, doesn't it? All upside, almost no downside, and a whole lot less work.

The conventional wisdom here goes something like this:

"If you're new, why not let the big boys handle all the complicated things like artwork, marketing, manufacturing, and fulfilment? This way you can focus on the aspect you love - designing and playing your game!"

Like all the aforementioned myths, this advice isn't bad *per se*, it just makes more sense for someone who has more experience,

credibility, and leverage.

Let's go through just a few reasons why starting out intending to have someone else publish your game is a bad idea:

1. Getting a publisher to publish your game isn't easy

Thousands of games are published each year, and there are way more board game designers clamoring for publisher attention than there are publishers desperate for "good ideas". A publisher prefers to work with someone they have experience with who they know can deliver. If that's not you, then you might be in for a long road

2. It is a lengthy process, often taking years to find a publisher

It's very rare to find a publisher overnight. A relationship must be built. Do you want to get your game moving now, or at some undetermined time in the future when someone else deems your game is good enough?

3. It can be expensive to meet with publishers

Flying to various offices or attending a multitude of conventions throughout the year to beg...I mean, pitch. While cons are fun, it becomes a job like any other if you're constantly "working" them and the hotels and travel costs add up quickly.

4. Even experienced, successful game designers have trouble getting publishers to accept some of their games

If big names behind big games have trouble, you'll have to be pretty lucky and work really hard to get your game noticed.

5. When you decide to go with a publisher, you're not off the hook for marketing

You just are marketing to publishers instead of to board game players. And who do you think you have more in common with, a

fellow board game enthusiast or a publisher?

6. And then if a publisher accepts, it is often years until the game is actually released

Assuming most publishers are already in the process of producing many other games, yours will have to sit in a queue as they slot the game into their product pipeline. That's years where you're not collecting any money, and worse...

7. You have no control

This was touched on earlier, that once you sign with a publisher you basically have no control over your game anymore. But you're also at the mercy of external factors.

In "For the Love of Board Games", Scott Caputo and others tell stories of having a game ready to submit to publishers, only to have similar games come out ahead of their game. Sometimes several games with similar themes or mechanics come out in a short period, such as many Mars-themed games a few years ago.

So while you could have gotten the jump on the market years earlier, market conditions might change by the time the publisher is ready to start making your game. Maybe there will be a recession then, or maybe there will be fifty other very similar games.

8. You lose out on the experience of learning all the steps in the board game creation process

Not going through the process robs you of vital knowledge that improves you as a designer. Having this experience actually helps you in the future when you design future games. To put it simply, you "don't know what you don't know" until you get your hands dirty.

9. You give up creative control

These next two reasons are the biggies. In the end, you sign your game over to the publisher. Sure, your name is probably on the box but they can retheme it, change the mechanics, put whatever art they want on it, or never even release the game. And this is your baby! How can you sign away your baby?

10. You don't own your community

This is my #1 reason that using publishers is a bad idea. You're leveraging someone else's community.

When you come out with another game in the future, you're just relying on the hope that board game buyers recognize your name. You don't have a way to directly communicate with them.

It's like getting little to no benefit from your previous work. Imagine each game you make being a brick. Having someone else in charge of your marketing is like laying each new brick next to the previous one, alongside it in a row. Yes, you move forward but it's not easier and you're no higher up than you were before.

If you market the games yourself, each game builds on the previous ones like stacking bricks. You are in communication with your community every step along the way, they know you and know you deliver. After a few years of stacking bricks, you have an impenetrable tower!

Ok, so up until now I've told you a lot of things I *don't like* about how board games are typically advised to be made and marketed so I think you've had enough negativity.

I hope you're ready to rebel against these antiquated patterns and are ready to market your board game. You ready? Let's go!

Secret #4

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Start Building Your Customer List Yesterday

I've said it before and I'll say it again:

It doesn't matter if you design the greatest game of all time if no one gets to play it.

When you first start out in creating your own game, it feels very daunting. Every change you make and every question you answer seems to only create more questions:

"How many players should my game accommodate?"

"How long should the game take?"

"How do I balance the game?"

"Is this game fun or different enough??"

The truth is, building a game is the fun part. It's easy. Every problem you've ever had as a game designer, thousands of other designers have had and have solved.

In fact, every design question has probably been asked and answered in an easily accessible public forum. With a little searching you can find five different ways to solve your problem.

So if designing board games is easy and fun, what's the

problem? Why aren't more wannabe game designers embarking on their own quest to make their first game, and why aren't more first-time designers succeeding?

The answer: marketing and business are hard. It's messy. There's so much to know, that you don't know what you don't know.

Out of all the problems a business can have, the only one that can't be overcome is not making any money. Money comes from sales, sales come customers, and customers come from leads.

So how does one get leads? How do you get someone interested in your game?

This is a business question, not a board game one. Yes, the better the game you make, the easier it will be to attract and retain customers. But in the end, it's basic Marketing 101.

So where do these leads come from? Here are a few traditional options:

1. You can get a handful of people to see your game at a convention

2. You can buy ads or pay for sites to promote your game

3. You can pay for lots of high-priced reviews

These are expensive options, and if we're starting to think like businesspeople, the return on investment is no good.

You can seek out free publicity, by begging to get on podcasts and spamming Facebook groups and other forums. If you go this path, it's tricky to honestly engage with the greater board game community without being seen as a taker.

I have two big suggestions for the proper path to market and

fund your board game, and the first and simpler one is this:

You need an email list.

And you need it yesterday!

You create an email list by having interested people opt-in and voluntarily give you their name and email address.

That's it.

Sounds simple, right? *Sounds toooo simple,* you might be thinking. Well you'd be right about that. Although the concept is simple, the execution is a little more complicated.

But first let's talk about why getting an email is so important. The average person needs to see a marketing message seven times before they're ready to buy. Communicating by email is an easy and free way to make these seven contacts and build trust with your follower and eventual customer.

Email is also more personal than most other forms of advertising. While people are used to scrolling through feeds and watching video, email feels like one-to-one talking even if you're blasting out a message to thousands of people.

People actually *check* their email, which is very important. Imagine you make a post on your Facebook profile. If someone checks their feed a few hours or a few days later, your post will be lost to the sands of time.

Not so with email. It will remain there in the prospect's inbox, unread with an annoying indicator that the inner OCD in us forces us to at least open it.

Creating an email list is not without its own set of challenges. For one, why should anyone want to follow you? What do you have

to say or offer? But here's a sneaky little secret I've discovered:

People don't need to be interested in your game to opt into your email list.

In fact, I've come to the opinion that asking someone to opt into your list just to hear about your game is a bad idea. It's narcissistic if you think about it:

"Ooooh look at me and my amazing fancy game! Don't you love it?? Give me your email so I can deign to let you know when you'll have the *privilege* of giving me your money for it."

Instead, offer people something that gives them a reason to want to open your emails. There are many different things you can give your list:

News about the board game industry

Advice about games, game design, etc

Literally free stuff

Giving away free stuff is a GREAT way to get people on your list. It creates a feeling of goodwill and people naturally want to reciprocate.

Board game players love getting free stuff. Doing giveaways for new games, cool swag, and other interesting paraphernalia is an excellent way to build a list.

As your list gets to know you, and in fact grows to *like* you, it's no big deal to one day send out the email "Oh hey, by the way, I have a new game I'm working on. Take a look, and share the link if you get a chance."

That's when your hard work and goodwill pay off.

Notice that I say you need a list *yesterday*. Many board game designers focus on making their game to completion, set a launch date, and *then* switch on marketing mode.

By then it's often too late, and in order to get the traction they need to fund, they scramble to get a big marketing budget together for those expensive options I detailed above.

Contrast this scenario with one where you have a bustling list of clamoring buyers. You let your people know months in advance about your launch date. You update them on the progress, give them exclusive look at the artwork and behind the scenes stuff.

Then on launch day, you send out one email and BAM! You're funded. This big spike of interest naturally brings you to the top of the search algorithms and surfaces your game to strangers who have never heard of you but see that there's a lot of interest around your game.

Imagine you're walking down the street and you see two restaurants - one of them looks empty, and the other one has a line out the door and around the block of people clamoring to get in. Which restaurant would you want to eat at?

The best time to start marketing is yesterday. The second best time is today.

There are other advantages to having communication with followers over a long stretch of time, but let's save that for the next section.

Secret #5

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Your Community Is Everything

After creating an email list, my #1 piece of advice is to create a board game community.

While communicating with your email list is great, it's very much a one-on-one relationship. You write emails, they read them. Maybe they reply and you get into a brief interaction.

Such is not the case in social media. One person's interesting post can lead to a back and forth of interesting or entertaining ideas. People get to know each other and make new friends with like-minded individuals.

That is the power of the community: it is stronger than the sum of its parts. There is a synergy that is created when great people come together.

And the best part about creating a community is that as your people interact and feel closer to each other, by default *they will also feel closer to you*.

This is how you create a relationship and build trust. As a natural byproduct, followers become not only customers, but ambassadors of your games and your brand.

Creating a solid email list can almost guarantee that you'll get your next game funded. But creating a vibrant community all but

guarantees that you'll get *all* your future games funded.

Now, you may be getting a little anxious about this. Perhaps you don't see yourself as a leader, or even a particularly social person. The feeling is understandable, we are all board game nerds after all.

Luckily, you have many options these days. A few years ago, there was only one option: blogging. If you had no creativity or spelling that didn't work so good, writing was not an option.

Now you can go completely different routes based on your personality and preferences.

Can you barely read, but work well off the cuff? YouTube videos or Facebook lives are for you.

Have a face for radio? Podcasts are a great way to spread your gospel.

Are you an aspiring amateur photographer and compulsive feed scroller? Instagram, baby!

No matter who you are, you can start producing content and drawing people together. They will appreciate you for it. They will buy your game for it.

Another game design advantage to having a community is that feedback is always available. You can share your project and collaborate on different possibilities and perform small-scale tests to see how your game ideas are working.

This can save you lots of time and keep you from making a game that no one wants. In fact, you can use polling and feedback from your community to find out *exactly* the kind of game they do want.

If you've listened, and made exactly the game that your people want, how could they not buy?

Conclusion

I hope I've been able to dispel some of the myths that float around the game design community in the form of conventional wisdom. I want to reiterate that the people in the community are generally well-meaning and giving, and that no bad advice is intentional.

Still, you must be on guard for bad advice. I couldn't cover everything, so whenever you come across new advice ask yourself the following questions:

"Is this advice good, but not good for me right now?"

"Is this advice helping me get closer to finishing and selling my game, sooner?"

Making a board game is often like walking around in a labyrinth. You can leisurely stroll down one corridor, only to end up spending too many months or years on that aspect of the game. Then when you find your path, you get lost again as you try to navigate marketing or business tasks.

Your job is to know your path ahead of time, stay on the path, and get out of the maze as quickly as possible. That's not to say you should rush any portion of your game design or campaign. But you must stay on the path and keep moving forward.

If you're liking what you're reading or are interested in more detail and guidance on how to move forward with marketing your

board game **quickly and inexpensively**, check out a little course I've made available for those of you who took the time to read this: https://www.BoardGameDesignSecrets.com/Enroll

Remember: you do not have the luxurious wastefulness that the big empires have. You have to stay fast, sharp, and nimble. Don't take advice aimed at a hobbyist or an Imperial.

You are a Rebel. So go out there and win your war!