

# Challenges of Reaching Broad Audiences with Popular Publishing: Lessons learned from the Field Guide to the Identification of Pebbles

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## Summary

You have a great idea for an Earth science outreach publication .... then what do you do? Who is the intended audience? How do you make the publication attractive to the audience? What are the challenges of self publishing and/or finding a publisher? How will you distribute your publication effectively? What kinds of funding, resources and networks are there that you can take advantage of? These are some of the questions that will be discussed in the presentation, using the author's experience with the bestselling Field Guide to the Identification of Pebbles as an example.

## Introduction

The Pebble Guide was inspired by the fact that kids love rocks, and the need for a hands-on guide which could be used in classrooms to remove the burden from teachers of feeling that they needed to know the answer to every "what kind of rock is this?" question from their students. With only limited experience in popular publishing gained with the "South Vancouver Island Earth Science Fun Guide" (1998), the prospect of self-publishing a field guide to pebble identification was a daunting one. The Field Guide to the Identification of Pebbles was published in late 2005. The entire first print run of 2100 copies sold out in nine months. In 2006, 9300 copies were distributed by Mining Matters, PDAC, to every Grade 4 and 7 teacher in Ontario. In late 2006 Harbour Publishing took over publication, and 22,869 copies have since been sold, bringing the Pebble Guide onto the Canadian National Bestseller list under the categories of Paperback Non-Fiction, and Canadiana. The Pebble Guide has been on the British Columbia Bestseller List continuously since February 2007, in the Number 1 Children's Bestseller position for the majority of this time. A French translation was produced in 2009. Total life sales of the Pebble Guide now number 34,269 copies.

Key questions when embarking on an outreach publication project include; Who is the intended audience? How do you make the publication attractive to the audience? What are the challenges of self publishing and/or finding a publisher? How will you distribute your publication effectively? What kinds of funding, resources and networks are there that you can take advantage of? What is involved with marketing? Experiences gained with the Pebble Guide will form the basis of a discussion around these questions.

## Who is your audience?

Knowing the intended audience is key to the success of an outreach publication. Is this a children's publication? For adults? Of general interest or for specialists? Is it intended as a tool for a particular group such as teachers, government, local communities or industry? Once you have identified the audience, produce the publication to meet the needs of that particular group.

## How do you make the publication attractive to the audience?

Telling a story and using good visuals are key elements, as is connecting with and showing relevance to the audience. For the Pebble Guide, connecting with the audience was made easier because everyone seems to relate to rocks. The Pebble Guide, however, deliberately focuses on rocks in a form that appeal to most people (who hasn't collected pebbles?) whereas

people are much less likely to pick up and be interested in a rock chip. Pebbles are beautiful, personal (we collect them in places that are interesting and important to us) and they tell fascinating stories.

For the Pebble Guide, the original intended audience was students and their teachers. To make the publication attractive to this audience, visuals were going to be crucial. When thinking about the nature and extent of visuals, it is worth remembering that 50% of the human brain is devoted to visual processing. The photography and layout of the Pebble Guide were done by Ken Josephson who is a professional photographer and draftsman. He did an amazing job of producing beautiful, life-sized, high quality images which clearly show the features that facilitate pebble identification.

The story and text are also important. Here, what worked for the Pebble Guide were catchy, engaging headings, relatively small amounts of text providing relevant and interesting scientific information about where pebbles come from and what they tell us. A special “But! Did you know that ...” section was added to engage readers further in rocks (and minerals) as resources, such as “we eat minerals”, “metals are used in the weirdest ways!” and “Mica is magnificent!”.

The form of the publication can be anything from a poster, to a book (coffee table to pocket sized) or a pamphlet. For the Pebble Guide I chose an accordion-folded pamphlet as the format which would best facilitate easy use by children, parents, and teachers. The Pebble Guide was designed to be used both inside the classroom as well as outside at the beach or in the playground, so attributes such as sturdiness, being waterproof, pocket sized and easy to lay out were all important.

One thing to think about at this stage if you are self publishing is to apply for an ISBN number – this will make your publication more attractive to bookstores and libraries when you get to the marketing and distribution stage.

### **What are the potential sources of funding?**

The Canadian Geological Foundation CGF ([www.canadiangeologicalfoundation.org](http://www.canadiangeologicalfoundation.org)) is an important funding source for development of Earth science outreach publications. Other organizations to approach include NSERC Promoscience ([http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/Promoter-Promotion/PromoScience-PromoScience/GrantsGuide-GuideDesSubventions\\_eng.asp](http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/Promoter-Promotion/PromoScience-PromoScience/GrantsGuide-GuideDesSubventions_eng.asp)), and local sections and/or outreach divisions of our Earth science societies (see the CFES member listing at (<http://www.geoscience.ca/otherorgs.html>)). There may also be special government initiatives in your area that could be capitalized on.

### **What kinds of support networks are there for marketing and distribution?**

How do you get the word out about your publication to reach as wide an audience as possible? Networks are crucial when it comes to marketing and distribution, especially if one is considering self publishing an outreach or communication publication. Beating on doors is one way to distribute your product, but networks like the Canadian Geoscience Education Network (CGEN), with over 400 members interested and engaged in outreach, are wonderful ways of getting the word out. My thanks to Christy Vodden and CGEN for getting the Pebble Guide started, it could not have been done without them. Other useful contacts are EdGEO, who provide lists of resources to teachers through workshops and a website, Earth science societies (GAC would most likely be willing to list the publication on their site), the CFES Outreach liaison committee who share what's new in outreach for all Canadian earth science societies and related groups. Let's make sure that all excellent outreach publications are easy to find and accessible to order. Give some copies to the local library and make sure there is information there for how readers can order a copy or contact you. Even if your outreach product is not being sold through a publisher e.g. if published by GSC or a not for profit group, look for creative ways to expand the distribution reach. Perhaps there are opportunities for distribution through a

society newsletter, in a school textbook, on the web, together with a local newspaper. The Pebble Guide connection with Mining Matters, who distributed thousands of copies to teachers in Ontario, has been a key element for awareness of the product in that region.

## **Finding a publisher**

One way of accessing a broader audience more systematically is to use a publisher. Publishers will have existing, usually extensive, distribution networks, as well as publicity people and marketing approaches that you can capitalize on. Many bookstore owners that I approached with the Pebble Guide noted that they generally prefer to purchase products through a publisher as this minimizes the paperwork required. It may even be a factor in their taking on the publication or not. An additional plus for going through a publisher is that they have access to systems for recording number of copies sold for the purposes of bestseller lists, an important marketing tool in itself.

When searching for a publisher, look for a fit of content and approach. Harbour Publishing was a good match for the Pebble Guide as they already publish a range of nature books and field guides and was therefore likely to have clients interested in this type of publication. Harbour Publishing was more than willing to take on the Pebble Guide especially given that it had a good sales record and local distribution list.

## **Be prepared to talk it up**

As part of the marketing, it is usually advisable to do radio and local TV interviews, book signings and public presentations. This is greatly facilitated if you are with a publisher. If not bring a copy of your outreach publication to the local newspaper, call up the local radio show host, organize a book launch at the local bookstore and go from there. Local media are generally interested in local news, and often focus on stories about individuals doing something interesting.

It can be a great idea to develop some hands-on activities that complement the outreach publication, which you can do as part of a presentation, book launch, classroom visit or public talk. Have fun with it, make it personal, and share your passion!

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