



I have met the enemy—and he's online

Online publishers are out to steal the hearts and minds of your readers. What are you going to do about it?

Jahan Salehi doesn't look like someone who'd steal your livelihood.

In fact, Jahan's a fairly normal fellow with a lovely family and a sunny disposition. He's very smart—a dissertation short of a doctorate in Medieval History from Columbia. He loves sailing, and the seafaring novels of Patrick O'Brian. He unfortunately knows nothing about baseball, but he's a hell of a bowler, and a gourmand with the girth to prove it.

I've given presentations with Jahan on nitty-gritty topics like how to do business on the Internet. He's a dynamic speaker. He could sell wood stoves to Miamians. But he's honest. When Jahan was a computer dealer, I bought my Mac from him. When I went back to buy another, he told me where I could get it cheaper.

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So there we have it: Jahan is intelligent, persuasive, witty, well-rounded and a nice guy to boot. But though he has started three high-tech companies in the past decade, Jahan knows diddly about publishing. He has written a few magazine articles and contributed to some scholarly encyclopedias, but he's never published anything in the sense of being fiscally responsible for a physical product that you can hold in your hand.

Watch your back

Well, Jahan has added a new arrow to his quiver of start-ups. As the president of J2S2 Inc., he's now an online publisher. And if you publish a magazine in the booming alternative-health or recovery fields, he's out to steal the hearts and minds of your readers.

Jahan's first effort, the Alternative Health & Healing (AHH) Forum, went live on America Online in late 1996. He's about to launch another area on AOL, one that

deals with addiction and recovery.

Most traditional publishers "just don't get it," Jahan says. "I don't think they understand that they must have a strong online presence or else, at some point, a good number of their potential subscribers will stop coming to them for information. That's where we have the big advantage. We understand that's coming."

He admits it's coming slowly. But he says that within five years, online publishers will be seriously undercutting the print-advertising market.

Love your enemy

If you don't despise Jahan already, let me point out some of the advantages that he has over you. He and his three partners got some seed money from AOL. It wasn't much, but it was all they needed to get up and running. The cost of entry online, you see, is minuscule compared to print, especially if a big brother like AOL is your partner.

Jahan figures there are about 70 people who "work" for J2S2 in some way. But only a handful of them are actually paid employees. The rest are essentially volunteers who trade free online time for services such as copy editing and article writing. J2S2 has not spent a dime on anybody's computer or modem. Its employees and volunteers supply their own tools, like the craftsmen of yore. J2S2 has "offices" in about 30 states, where its employees and volunteers reside, but pays no rent or electric bills. The only paper price Jahan worries about is the cost for the 20-pound copier stock he buys at Staples. Postage? The occasional book of self-adhesive stamps.

I asked Jahan if there were any additional reasons you should hate him.

"We ramped up so fast partially because AOL provides producers like us with production and publishing support, as well as marketing and advertising support," he quickly replied. "We were kick-started by a major broadcaster/publisher into a field that we plan to dominate totally in five years."

Personally, I think that in the long run, Jahan's online brands would be better off on the Web than with AOL, but that's grist for another column. The point here is that you've got to meet and compete with Jahan

You've got to meet and compete with your opposition in cyberspace, or your readers will stop coming to you for information.

and his cohorts head on, wherever they are in cyberspace.

Jahan admits that print folks have a few advantages over him. Their relationships with their writers is one. Their writers' relationships with their readers is another. And they've got great brand names that are known and trusted.

I'll be the last person to yield the argument that magazines on paper have many glorious advantages over online media. But I have been among the first to argue that you had better protect your flank by producing a great online product, too. I feel stronger than ever about that.

Sure, online advertising is a buyer's market right now. No, you probably won't turn a profit for a few years. Don't let that distract you. Otherwise, you'll wake up some morning and wonder where all your readers and advertisers have gone.

Please forgive me this pun, but they will be cURLing up in cyberspace with some cad like Jahan. □