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The Aids Epidemic Book: From Concept to National Book Release in Six Months

Situation

In 1985, after I had a successful near decade long career in sales, marketing and sales management, I received a phone call from my former college roommate, Dr. James Slaff. Dr. Slaff and I were roommates at Yale. He had gone on to graduate from the University of Virginia Medical School, and had received a prestigious appointment, at age 32, to become a Medical Investigator at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland.

As is now well known, the AIDS Epidemic was becoming not only a national, but also a global health concern and a major story for all media outlets at that time. Dr. Slaff understood the science involved and realized that there was a need for a book to be published that could objectively present the factual information on AIDS in a way that was understandable by the average American, who did not have advanced scientific or medical training.

Dr. Slaff called me and asked if I might be interested in “auditioning” to become his co-author on this project. Dr. Slaff had tremendous medical and scientific expertise, but not the ability to communicate this information in “layman’s language”, as he knew it needed to be done. Dr. Slaff knew my background – in which I had worked with a direct sales organization while I was in college and for the seven years that followed my graduation. I had literally spent nearly 10,000 hours in door-to-door selling of educational books.

As Dr. Slaff put it “you have spent the equivalent of five full professional years sitting across from Americans in their living rooms and across the kitchen tables communicating ideas and information.” The question he had was whether or not I could grasp the science well enough to be able to translate it – and write it – in a manner that was both medically and scientifically accurate and also understandable by the average American.

I went in to New York City and spent the weekend at his brother Jonathan’s apartment, receiving intensive instruction from Dr. Slaff about the science behind AIDS, something which I knew virtually nothing about. He then gave me the opportunity to write up some sample content to see how I did. We were both pleased with the result, and I was hired for my first writing job – on a project that had both national and global potential significance.

Task

We faced some truly unique challenges. First, the scientific community was in a “rapid learning curve” about virtually all subjects related to the epidemic – significant new information and new results from studies were coming out literally every week. Second, given the global importance of the topic, and the need for information about it, we had to assume that there were other teams or individuals were working on the same or a similar idea. We felt the pressure of a “ticking clock” virtually the entire length of the project. Third, neither of us had any history of publications – so we were virtual ‘unknowns’ to the publishing world.

Action

We first contacted a friend of ours from Yale, Don Gastwirth, who had graduated from Yale Law School and was an expert in intellectual property. That was a major plus – as Don agreed to do all the legal work involving copyright protection – and also to serve as Literary Agent – selling the book to the publishing world. Dr. Slaff then had me live with his wife and their daughter for the next several months, which involved an average of 90-100 hours per week of researching and writing.

Results

Within less than four months we had completed the book, and in less than a month later we had signed an historic contract with Warner Books, the book division of Warner Brothers – to publish our work as an “instant book”. This meant that, rather than the usual lead time of 12-18 months to go from manuscript to bookstore,

they published it and released it in less than six weeks. Dr. Slaff and I each went on a national media tour, in my case involving 60 appearances on radio and television. The book was endorsed by Dr. Gerald Sandler of the American Red Cross, who bought it in bulk and used it to educate their staff worldwide. It eventually was printed in five languages, with more than 300,000 copies worldwide. The book was also praised by many of the top AIDS researchers in the world, including Dr. Robert Gallo, Dr. Zaki Salahuddin (both of the National Institutes of Health), and Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien (of NYU Medical School).