The Book Designer: Interview with Robin Cutler, Ingram Content Group

Launch of Ingram Spark, July 1, 2013

Joel: Hi, this is Joel Friedlander from TheBookDesigner.com and I want to thank you for joining me today. I'm very excited because I have as my guest today Robin Cutler from Ingram Content Group. Most self-publishers know Ingram as the owner of Lightning Source used by many self-publishers for print on demand but Ingram is an enormous company, probably the largest distributor of printed and digital content in the world.

Now Robin joined Ingram in 2011. She leads a team that assists independent publishers in making their content available to retail partners throughout the world. Robin was Vendor Manager previously at CreateSpace, another name that will be familiar to self-publishing authors. She served as the CEO of Summerhouse Press and was also Assistant Director of the University of South Carolina Press. She holds a BA in journalism from the University of South Carolina and I know this has to be a very very busy time for you, Robin, so I want to thank you for making time in your busy schedule to sit down and talk to me a little bit about Ingram Spark.

Robin: Thank you, Joel. I'm really happy to talk to you especially as your background in publishing, it seems like we have similar backgrounds here.

Joel: Oh yeah. Well, we both come from a very deep print background and I think personally I think that's a good thing because you know book publishing is hundreds of years old and in some ways it's still bound by many of the conventions we inherited from the history of printing but it's all changing now. And, you know, I was very interested to see the announcements of a new platform that Ingram has developed for small publishers and independent publishers and I know that your specialty is with independent publishers. So, just for people who haven't heard anything about this and are unaware that you're launching something new, why don't you tell us a little bit about what Ingram Spark actually is.

Robin: Well, basically, what we've done at Ingram is try and make things easier to do business with us. That's one of our key initiatives here within the company and especially related to independent publishers to smaller publishers. You know Ingram has a lot of different programs as you mentioned. Lightning Source, our print on demand company, that's been around now for close to 20 years and then our ebook distribution platform that we have called CoreSource. What we've done basically with Ingram Spark is sort of marry the print on demand technology with our ebook distribution technology together and then streamlined all of our processes related to setting up an account making that as easy as possible and then setting up titles as easy as possible for publishers. What we wanted to do here at Ingram Spark is kind of create a one stop shop at least for the distribution side where a publisher could set up a title for both print and ebook formats and then make that title available as widely as possible on a global basis to our distribution network. So that's basically it in a nutshell. Did I do that okay, Joel?

Joel: You did really well and I really appreciate that Robin and as somebody who not only talks to a lot of authors but also publishes my own books and I work for a lot of clients, I think it's really a fantastic idea. I'm pretty familiar with the interface at Lightning Source because I do a lot of books for clients and in the

interest of full disclosure, I am a Lightning Source publisher, I have several books there for my own publishing company, and I have seen some screenshots of the Spark interface and I'm anticipating that the Spark platform will be actually available to publishers when this interview comes out so people could head over there to check it out themselves but it does look like a big improvement over the Lightning Source interface and the way publishers deal with Ingram through that interface. But, the basic idea of combining print and ebook distribution I think is something that a lot of publishers are going to be very happy about. Now is all of this going to be ready when you launch? I know that it's going to be July 1st is your launch day, isn't that right?

Robin: Yeah, that's our go live date on our site www.ingramspark.com and publishers will be able to go on that date to create an account and actually start uploading content. We will at launch have global POD service and what I mean by that is a print on demand service throughout the US, through our entities, our international entities in the UK and also in Australia and we also have print partners, and you're probably familiar with this, through our Global Connect services in Germany and Brazil that have recently come online through a partnership. So we'll have this global print on demand service available at launch. We also will have our ebook distribution platform. We call it our fulfillment, ebook fulfillment platform, available at launch and that is a network of some of our smaller, not necessarily small, but some of our less known but not the big four, ebook channels that most people are used to but used but the slightly more specialized ones like Diesel and some of the other more specialized global retails partners that we have and there's about a hundred or so of those. And then in August, we will have the big four, actually it's about 13, major e-retailers that are coming on line and that would include Amazon Kindle, Barnes & Noble Nook, Kobo and you know, all the rest of the major ones that most people have heard of.

Joel: Well that's terrific. I mean just the idea that with one account and one contract that a publisher of whatever size can go into this interface and control all their distribution worldwide for all kinds of content is pretty mind blowing in a way. We couldn't even have imagined something like this maybe two years ago. It wouldn't even have seemed possible. So, that is a very very powerful thing.

Now, one of the things about Ingram has always been and the difficulty with dealing with Ingram because it's such a big company, now Ingram does most of its business I'm assuming with big publishers but you also have clients of every different kind of size from the biggest publishers in the world down to the very smallest publishers in the world, somebody like me. You know I've got two books right now at Lightning Source so I'm wondering who really is this service designed for? Who is the ideal customer for Spark?

Robin: I would say it's a customer like you. It's a customer like I was when I had my own publishing company. It's a customer, a smaller publisher who understands the business, who understands publishing, and who can create digital files and upload them into our system and kind of understand what distribution means and all of that, the complexity of publishing. So, there are a lot of one book publishers who fit that perfectly and there are a lot of publishers who maybe have a hundred titles who are looking for, you know, the global distribution, the one stop shop we're going to have with Spark and

so what we try to do is create a platform that's specific for smaller publishers that any size publisher really can go in and take advantage of what Spark is going to offer.

Joel: And it seems like, from what I've read, that we're going to get a lot more feedback from Ingram in terms of metrics or sales information, sales channel information, that kind of thing. Is that also part of what publishers will see when they sign up for Spark?

Robin: Well they will, on the publishers' dashboard when you create your account there's like a little wiki there of you know, like your bestselling titles, what's going on with them. It's updated periodically. On the print side I think it's updated daily, on the ebook side I think it's updated monthly and it's just like a little snapshot. You can quickly see what your books are doing and then you have access to all the detailed reporting that you currently have with LSI that would include your ebook reporting as well. So it should look pretty close for a publisher for what they currently get with LSI.

Joel: Yeah, and you know it's my contention and it has been for a while that you know authors self-publishers, indie publisher, we're all very busy and the less time we can spend dealing with accounts and administrative stuff the better off we'll be so the idea for me to have a single point of contact for all your distribution could be a real boon to a lot of publishers simply because it takes a lot less time dealing with it than if you're dealing with four or five accounts or different distributors. Now historically, of course, the big problem with publishing your own books and I've been involved with this side of the business since the 1980's and even before the invention of the internet. Now I probably shouldn't tell you that because now you know I'm really an old guy but the fact of the matter is the whole knock on independent publishing was the problem that you couldn't get the same type of distribution because the whole distribution channel was really in the US set up to service large traditional publishers. So I think that all of these new initiatives, and Spark looks like the most extreme example, they seem like they're really doing a lot to level the playing field amongst publishers of different sizes.

Robin: Oh Joel, that's exactly right. You know it's the best. To me it's the golden years of being a small publisher. You can get into publishing with not a whole lot of expense. You can use tools like Ingram offers to kind of help manage your business and you're not having to spend like all the drudgery of having to do, especially if you're like print on demand. That's just phenomenal to me where you don't have to have a warehouse, you don't have to pack books up. Like that was the vain of my existence when I was a small publisher.

Joel: So you spent time standing in line at the post office, too,huh?

Robin: Yeah, that's exactly right.

Joel: Yeah, I spent a lot of time standing in line at the post office and trust me; I'm never going back there. I love print on demand and I love print books. I love to do offset books for my clients but for me, I'm not going to go there again. So that's really interesting and you know one of the things that I really like about doing business with Lightning Source specifically was the control it gives the publisher over

discounts and I'm wondering if that's going to translate over to Spark also. For instance I can go into Lightning Source and I can sell my books at a short discount if I want and that would be like a 20% discount or I can go to a retail discount or a wholesale discount, I mean I have control of that. Now it's true that we only get to set one discount for the whole account which is a big change from the past but I'm wondering if we're going to have the same kind of flexibility when we sign up for Spark?

Robin: Well that's one of the, and I'm so glad you asked that because that's one of the key points of to me what makes for a title being successful in the marketplace, really assigning the discount to it that's going to give it the best chance. We know because we're a distribution company and servicing our resale partners we want to make sure that we're helping publishers launch their books into the marketplace in a way that's the most advantageous for them. So we did first streamline that part of it and for some publishers that are used to setting their own discount, you know they might want to stay with LSI. In Spark we apply a trade discount to titles that are going in through Spark just because we've been asked for so many years so many times by publishers who don't get that right, who don't fully understand the distribution channels and why discounts are really important. We just decided we were going to decide that for them in Spark so like you said you know there are times I think where some publishers are going to want to stay with LSI. Ingram Spark's not going to be the choice for them but for a lot of publishers that just want to kind of put it out there and don't have to get involved with the complexities, Spark is going to be, you know, the best choice for them.

Joel: So that's really interesting, Robin. So are you going with like a 55% discount? Is that going to be set for all Spark participants?

Robin: Yeah, so it will be a 55% on the print side and actually it's a 60% on the ebook side. And that says that we can fulfill all of the channels that we now have in our distribution network. So a publisher would be paid 45% of their list price minus manufacturing costs on their print title and they would be paid 40% of their list price on their ebook titles.

Joel: Well thanks for clearing that up. That makes perfect sense and I know for a fact because I actually do a lot of teaching on the subject that the discounting situation is one of the most difficult things for people new to publishing to understand and the problem is that a lot of people are adverse to math which is really too bad. You have to know a little bit of math to be a publisher and you know the problem is that there's a matrix of forces coming together when you're publishing books between the discounting you're doing, the channel you're selling through, the way you're manufacturing the book, the retail price you're setting and what your market expects to pay for a book, and getting that all right and lined up is very challenging for people new to the business. In fact, I have a training course in fact on publishing called the Self-Publishing Roadmap and that module of discounts and distribution gives people the most headaches of all so I think it's kind of interesting that you've simplified that and it'll be interesting to see how publishers who might profit from the power of this combined platform distribution of Spark, how they respond to that. So, I think time will tell.

Robin: Yeah, I do to and it could be too that we go back and we have feedback from our own publishers if they want later to have that flexibility and that's something that we can go back in and readdress that but for launch we try to make this as simple as possible and make this something that most publishers would be in and sets them up for success really in the marketplace is what we're trying to do.

Joel: Well, you know just giving publishers the tools to reach 190 countries and distribute throughout the world that way is kind of powerful, don't you think?

Robin: Yeah.

Joel: That's pretty awesome. So we were speaking about pricing but since obviously Lightning Source is your print on demand arm are the prices that Spark publishers will pay for their print books, are they basically on the same pricing model as we've been used to paying at Lightning Source?

Robin: The print fees are all basically the same and also the same trim sizes and all the colour options that LSI customers are used to with the Ingram Spark publisher we also have those options. We do have on the Ingram Sparks side, slightly reduced set up fees and that's primarily because the Ingram Spark platform is designed to be more or less self service so we've adjusted our pricing a little bit to reflect that. So, it's a little bit cheaper to set up the title and then we also, and I'm actually going to give you that price if you're interested.

Joel: Oh, I'd love to hear it. Yeah, please, why don't you just run through the fees so that so at least people will have something that you know they'll be able to act on?

Robin: Okay. So it costs $49 to set up your title for both print and ebook together and that's certainly the preferred path that we would like publishers to do when they set up their title you know as broadly as possible from the get go. So $49 to set up your print and ebook title together. $49 to set a title just for print and it's $25 to set up an ebook title. Now if a publisher places an order for 50 copies within 60 days after they set up their title then we're actually going to refund back that $49 fee. And, then as you're used to LSI we also have what we call a market access fee of $12 per title that is also the same in Ingram Spark and that's an annual fee that's charged as long as the book is in distribution. And then for a revision, if you revise your files, we charge a $25 revision fee. We've removed the cost of paying for having to pay for a proof so we encourage our publishers once they set up their print titles to place an order for one copy when it goes live and then check it out, make sure it's good and then you're only charged your manufacturing fee for that one copy. So it's a little bit cheaper there.

Joel: So the Spark publisher won't be mandated to get a proof as is the case with Lightning Source?

Robin: Yes and we're also working, hopefully it appears soon, we're not going to have it launched but we're working on it very soon to have auto proofing, e-proofing available on every title, so a publisher would get access to like automatically on all their books.

Joel: So tell me more about that, Robin. I'm not that familiar with the auto proofing.

Robin: The auto e-proofing? I think LSI now proves that on black and white titles. At Ingram Spark we're going to provide that on all titles and so a publisher would get an e-proof back that would be emailed to them and they can take a look at the e-proof and see if everything looks fine and then they would approve. CreateSpace has something similar to that. You would approve your e-proof and then the title would move forward through the production process.

Joel: Interesting. So that's going to be like an e-proof so I send you a PDF and you send me back a PDF.

Robin: Yeah, exactly. Hopefully it matches what you sent us, right?

Joel: Well, yeah, hope springs eternal. I have noticed by the way just incidentally that we seem to be getting and this is solely anecdotal, but it seems to me that we're getting fewer of the improperly manufactured books. You know where we used to get the wrong book inside the right cover or missing a signature or something. That was really pretty common of print on demand vendors including Lightning Source but it seems to me that those errors are gradually going away and I think that's a great thing.

Robin: Yeah, oh yeah. And, it's the you know, as you know, and especially as a real book designer, print on demand for a long time has negative connotations but to be honest with you and I'm an old book designer myself and used to also worked at university press who have very stringent standards in terms of quality that, you know, print on demand, more and more is hard to discern as a print on demand title. I mean it's getting very comparable to offset which is just a fraction of the improvement in technology every time.

Joel: And, you and I, Robin, we might be able to tell but I do agree that they're getting closer and closer. That's for sure and probably at this point it's more the materials choices, limited materials choices, and trim sizes, bindings and finishes that mostly distinguishes the digital printing or print on demand from the offset printers but that's okay because Ingram's got offset printers too and I'm quite aware of that. So, that's very interesting. You know one of the things I ran across and researched on Spark getting ready to talk today was the idea that there would be some sort of integration with Bowker for people who are looking to acquire ISBNs kind of at the same time. Is that right or did I read that wrong? What's up with that?

Robin: Yeah, we just this past week signed an agreement with Bowker so that we could, Ingram will be a licensed vendor for ISBNs and what we plan to do with Spark is being able to offer ISBN service within Ingram Spark and that is hopefully we'll have that available to our Ingram Spark customers by the end of the summer. We're working on that right now.

Joel: Well that's another good thing about that and one of the reasons that combining even the ebooks and the print books together is a big advantage for most publishers because if you can also move the meta data that's associated with your books both for your ISBN registrations and for your distribution and combine all the meta data chores in one panel that would be really fantastic and a great advantage. I mean first of you could ensure that you have consistent meta data across all channels and also you wouldn't have to go around entering everything two, three or four times or more which is what we're doing now and it's crazy.

Robin: Yeah, yeah... I know and it's so infuriating. I know. So with Spark like when you set up a title for both ebook and print together you're presented with the combined meta data that goes for both and then you're presented with print meta data that's just for print and then the ebook meta data that's just for e and you enter that all within the same interface at one time once. And, what we do is we just boil down the basic meta data fields. We'll probably be adding more meta data as we at Spark sort of mature. Eventually we want to have other services available where you know we would need probably a little bit more robust meta data to support additional services but that's something on the road map as well.

Joel: Sure and you can add the BISAC subject categories to the wish list so we could research those and pop in the right categories because obviously it's a key task in your top level meta data for each book that you have to do.

Robin: And you know that in selling especially ebooks, selling anything online, the more robust you have your description and any information on your meta data about your book is the best way to actually get your book discovered online and so it's really important.

Joel: Hey, Robin, we could do another whole interview on metadata. I'm up for that and trust me, it's one of my favorite subjects but that's a real advantage. So, you know, when you move, Ingram has moved a lot more strongly into ebook distribution and I'm wondering about the conversion situation. I mean are you asking publishers to come with ebook files or is Spark going to have a facility that will provide conversion so that I can come to you with like a PDF for my print book and you can also generate the ebook from that same materials?

Robin: At launch we are asking publishers to bring in their EPUB for their ebook file. We're working and probably in August we'll have a conversion service if you have your PDF, we would be able to convert it for you. So be looking for that shortly after launch.

Joel: Well that would be a great service also because anything it seems to me and it seems like what Spark is designed for is exactly this, bringing all of these services that are required that you really need in order to get your book from conception, you know once you've designed it and laid it out and you're ready to go to get it out into all of these platforms and formats and bringing all of the things you need into one place so if Spark can do that I think it's going to be phenomenally successful would be my prediction.

Robin: Oh good!

Joel: It would just save people so much time and effort you know assuming that the level of each individual service is what people want. Now I've often wondered, I know that we're all busy here and I don't want to take up too much of your time but one thing I wanted to ask about was about the whole self-publisher situation like now you described really well that Spark is a service for people who understand about how books get published and discounting and distribution and that could be a single person or it could be a small publishing firm or you know even a small indie publisher but there are also have been thousands of self-publishers who really don't know much about publishing who have over the

years signed up with Ingram and of course they only had that short discount model that was very popular for a while and that drew in I'm sure thousands of people because it was widely advertised and written about and it's always seemed a bit odd to me because obviously Lightning Source is a business to business enterprise and most of book publishing is business to business. It's book publishers and their vendors doing business and moving books around the distribution channel until they get to the retailer and that's where the rubber meets the road so to speak. So it always seemed a little odd to me and asymmetrical to have these people who are basically authors who wanted to just get a book, you know, doing business with Lightning Source. This is one of the reasons why I frequently advise people in that situation to go to CreateSpace where they're really set up to handle authors and answer all their questions. So what, you know, Spark obviously is going to take some of that load off by creating a self-service platform but what about all those other authors who really are not your ideal Spark customers?

Robin: Well you know the reality is that self-publishers, like you mentioned, have always been service by Lightning Source. If a self-publisher can go through, set up an account, hopefully most of them learn through that experience so that when they come out the other end they know a lot more than they did going in but you're right. There's a lot of services like CreateSpace, like Author Solutions, like a number of public companies that are set up to help publishers create content and those companies are some of our great partners as well. So if we run across someone and we think they're better served by CreateSpace or Author Solutions or whatever, you know we're happy to refer them over that way or to a site like yours or to a publishing association like the Independent Book Publishers Association that provides some education and structure for self-publishers to become publishers.

Joel: Well that's really great to hear and yes I mean in talking with other industry professionals who do spend a lot of time educating authors because we've had a big rush of people coming into book publishing obviously. You know really I feel, and I think a lot of other people feel, our biggest challenge is in education, author education so it's gratifying to hear you say that and I think it's, I'm very interested in getting into Spark and once it launches, and actually kind of get my hands dirty and seeing how it is. The interface looks much better. I'm very excited about that and before we sign off, Robin, I'm curious if you could say what the most amazing or impressive thing or the hidden gem about Spark that most people haven't even realized yet hearing all this press and a lot of articles being written about it. What's that one thing that people are going to discover that's just really going to blow them away?

Robin: Well and we've talked about this a lot, the distribution networks that Ingram has and that these tiny little one book publishers if that's what they are will have access to this global distribution platform. It's kind of unprecedented and very easily have that access and you know a publisher can go and try to get, especially on the ebook, on the ebook retailer side, can go and they can make a little bit more money by setting up their accounts directly with some of these e-retailers but they have the breadth of distribution that we're going to have in one place and then have their book available everywhere globally is just to me what the really calling card of Ingram Spark is and you know a fairly inexpensive way to do it. So what we try to do with Spark and I guess the main word here that we want to say over and over it's just easy. To make is easier and to work with sites like yours and sites like other sites to help publishers to become savvy quicker you know. To me there's nothing that substitutes for a good book and by a good book I mean one that's been edited, one that's been well designed and one where

8

the reader and helping the reader understand that content is the primary focus. There's nothing that can substitute for that. So, working with companies and sites like yourself that can help publishers bring that in to Spark is what we're really are after here.

Joel: Well that's beautiful and as a book designer and an educator, I couldn't have said it any better myself. That's fantastic. Robin I really appreciate you taking your time. I've been talking today to Robin Cutler from Ingram Content. She's the Manager of Content Acquisition. We've been talking about the new Ingram service called Ingram Spark and I believe the URL for that is ingramspark.com. Is that right, Robin?

Robin: That's exactly right.

Joel: So people can go over there, they can find out more about it, they can sign up for an account if they think it's the kind of direction they want go in for their own distribution and put all of this amazing power of worldwide power of Ingram at their disposal. So it's a new day for indie publishers and I want to thank you for taking your time Robin. I'm going to watching this launch with tremendous interest and maybe six months or a year from now when we see how it all shakes out we'll get on the phone again and have another chat. What do you think?

Robin: Well I would really look forward to that and I also couldn't have said it any better myself than what you just said.

Joel: Well thanks very much and again this has been Joel Friedlander from TheBookDesigner.com and thanks to everyone for listening in.

Robin: Thank you.