

**MARKETING**

*By Chris Barnett*

# Like Night + Day

*Alan Davis' attempts to separate his small publishing company from the big guns in the industry*

**WADING** into the travel-guidebook publishing business today as a solo combatant in a global market is like parachuting into Baghdad without an AK-47 and full body armor.

Alan Davis, founder and CEO of San Francisco-based PulseGuides, is no stranger to risk. But street smarts and dumb luck have kept him alive and prosperous. A hopeless entrepreneur, he has survived the deadly game of new-venture startups by making sure he collects a crucially important dividend on his capital investments and sweat equity: pleasure.

In 1995, "after giving 20 years to make the world a better place, I said it's time to have some fun," recalls Davis. "I was suddenly single, financially comfortable and well-traveled. Life was good but something was missing—the buzz, the edge. I realized that eating a great meal at a Michelin three-star restaurant is satisfying and enjoyable but nothing more. I had to let loose."

Davis hungered to run with the bulls at Pamplona in Spain. But how?

Basic research—scouring guidebooks, looking for press coverage—netted him nothing. The Internet was in its infancy and sophisticated search engines hadn't been invented. So Davis contacted Spain's tourism office in New York and discovered a little known fact about the Fiesta Des San Fermin, the running of the bulls in Pamplona. Since 1852, the bulls have started their rampage at 7 a.m. on the 7th of July, the seventh month. Therefore, insiders know it as 777. "But the actual fiesta kicks off at noon on the 6th with a cannon blast and the entire city erupts immediately into a party," says Davis. "Corks pop, people are pouring champagne on your head. Everyone's dancing in the street. It goes on for seven days and was the greatest experience in my life. One night I asked myself 'how many people miss this because they don't know about it?'"

Davis, personally, did not risk life or

limb trying to outrun the thundering herd through narrow, cobblestone streets. He overslept and then got lost. He wasn't really disappointed, though.

"It was a win, win. I had the thrill of thinking I was going to run—I was absolutely terrified—but I came home and did not get hurt," he says.

Emboldened, he figured there had to be another 100 or more similar exciting events around the world that were totally unknown to Americans. Between 1996 and 2000, he roamed the globe, finding and experiencing some 150 bacchanals similar to the Pamplona festival, taking notes rather than trusting his memory.

**THE FUN ALSO RISES ... THEN FALLS**

Returning to San Francisco, Davis wrote, printed and self-published 10,000 copies of a guidebook to festivals around the world with the seductive title, "The Fun Also Rises," a nod to writer Ernest Hemingway's love of the bull-running event in Spain. Publishers Group West in Emeryville handled the marketing and sales to bookstores and other outlets.

It bombed.

Davis switched to National Book Network, which claims to be the "largest independent distribution force" in North America, but "The Fun Also Rises" never achieved profitable liftoff. Yet the fledgling publisher claims he learned a valuable-if-expensive lesson: multi-destination guidebooks are not strong sellers.

Instead, he repackaged his idea. "I decided to take the concept of a peak experience, but do a single destination," he recalls. Polishing his premise, Davis

settled on doing city-guides for what he calls "five-star cities."

In 2003, under the imprint of Greenline Publications, Davis launched the Fun Seekers series of guidebooks and produced titles for seven cities: Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, Athens, Toronto and Chicago. He published them on recycled paper.

(In the late 70s, Davis, a lawyer and political activist, was on the boards of several Bay Area philanthropic organizations and did not want to kill trees to print reports. When stodgy paper industry officials rebuffed selling a paper that was pro-ecology rather than made of fallen timbers, he formed a recycled paper distributorship called Conservatree. Later, when President Clinton signed an executive order requiring the federal government to buy recycled products, the industry Goliaths moved into the market and Davis sold his company, and eventually heading to Pamplona.)

His single destination guides, too, flopped. "They didn't do well at all," he says looking back. "One reason was that we had the word 'fun' in the title and we were writing to adults. Unfortunately, people associate fun with children.



**PulseGuides' Alan Davis puts a lot of time and money into beefing up marketing efforts.**

"I really thought I could change the world—to get people over 25 and under 45 to let loose like I did, and have fun. But we realized for them, 'fun' is really 'enjoyment.'"

### DEVELOPING THE "COOL" CONCEPT

Davis had banged his head against stone walls and closed doors in creating a market for recycled papers, so he was no stranger to setbacks. He had successfully published books on Civil War battlefields and historical tomes on Colonial America, so he re-branded his venture and created two imprints. Greenline published the history books and fun-seeking books, which became the Night+Day Guides that he touted as the "Cool Cities Series" from a new line he calls PulseGuides.

Fun was out, cool was in. Davis shrewdly positioned the books as the "most comprehensive insider's guide to a metropolitan city—day or night—that gets you to the right place at the right time." With the "Cool Cities" series, he nailed the market—thirtysomething, urban, educated, curious, sophisticated, and affluent enough to want to know things are hip things and hot—any time of the day.

"Going to the Café du Monde in New Orleans for café au lait and a beignet at four in the morning is really cool, not touristy and so different from being there at ten in the morning when it's packed with tour buses," says Davis.

He found his niche. There are an estimated 15 major travel guidebook publishing companies and hundreds of independents but "Night + Day" stands out on bookstore shelves for several reasons. It's cleanly designed, intelligently organized and isn't a jumble of pull-out maps, expensive color photography, confusing sidebars, charts and other visual somersaults. The type size is small, but it's printed for young eyes. It's also sized like a TV Guide (5-1/4 inches by 8 inches) rather than long and skinny, the traditional travel guidebook format. The series is also printed, no surprise, on recycled paper.

Davis is keeping his overhead down. PulseGuides and Greenline isn't on the

34th floor of a financial district high-rise—with-a-view, but operates out of the publisher's large house in the Jordan Park area of San Francisco with a lean staff. A few editors work closely with writers on articles about each city.

"Our writers have written for other guidebooks, but our level of detail, our challenge to find what's hot—day and night—is more demanding," he says.

To make sure venues don't cool off before the guide is published is a big part of Davis' marketing strategy. So he says writers and editors work on a tight schedule. Only 45 days are allowed between a fact-checked final manuscript and printing.

### BUILDING EXCITEMENT

Getting the word out—and putting the guidebook on shelves—is as tough as producing it. Davis is still working with National Book Network, which represents 90 publishers and "sells us into bookstores. It's extremely competitive and intense." Retailers have all sorts of complex promotional fee programs, but basically PulseGuides pay a dollar-a-book to a bookstore for stocking and visibility—plus the store collects its markup on the sale, which is usually double the wholesale price.

The lawyer-turned-paper marketer-turned publisher doesn't spend marketing dollars on advertising. The battle for real estate in bookstores is ferocious and costly enough, considering the flood of travel guides competing for a few facings of shelf space.

"The problem is we're brand new and we're a concept driven guidebook," he explains. "Books stores are reluctant to carry our titles because their perception is if you don't have color photos and a fold-out map, buyers won't flip through you. But you can't give a reader a hot tip from a photo."

Instead, Davis, who's on the road 140 days a year meeting with his writers and checking out new five-star cities, creates buzz when a guidebook debuts. By putting marketing bucks and efforts into a launch party and beating the PR drums for press



coverage, the media coverage of the Who's Who partying down, appearing on the right internet sites and in hip magazine and newspaper columns, builds credibility and demand that an ad can't generate.

This summer, Davis put a "Night + Day New York" guide on every seat in the Hampton Jitney, which he insists, is "the coolest bus to the Hamptons."

Still, "Night + Day" sells itself if Davis can grab the eyeballs and attention of his target audience — GenExers in their late 20s to "Zoomers," which he describes as a Boomer with a zest for life. One nifty feature—a section in the back called Black Book—has contact information for every place and attraction in the guide summarized in an at-a-glance listing that replaces the index. The Best Events calendar and size conversion chart, too, are handy.

In early November, Davis was firming up publishing and marketing plans for 2007. There are eight "Night + Day" guides out now including Washington D.C., London and Miami, which were published in the fall. From here the plan is to publish one a month for a maximum of 20 guides.

What cities in the world will suffer the indignity of not being hip enough to rate a "Night + Day" guide? "Vienna," answers Davis. "It's one of my favorite cities, but it's not cool."

---

*San Francisco-based writer Chris Barnett prefers covering the Running of the Bulls from the safety of a saloon barstool.*