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GRAPHIC NOVELS:
CAN WE GROW
THEM AT HOME?

Executive Summary
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Introduction

In recent years, the US graphic novel market has seen substantial growth. Australia's market is also growing, with the children's sector the top performer, but locally originated content remains limited compared to imports that are generating the majority of sales.

This research report examines how graphic novels are published in the US, and provides valuable insights for Australian publishers who are interested in entering the graphic novel market, or publishing teams looking to improve their processes when working with graphic novels. Suggestions on how to make graphic novel publishing more efficient and profitable are included throughout the report.

The report also considers the question: how can we grow graphic novels in Australia?

Key Findings

Publishing

Understanding the intricacies of the graphic novel production process is the biggest learning curve for publishers entering the market, and the key to successfully publishing into the format. A longer-term focus, both in production and sales, is typically required for graphic novel publishing. Graphic novels are more likely to become solid sellers in the backlist than as a lead title, providing profitability over the long term. List planning typically extends many years ahead given the long production schedules of graphic novels, meaning that production costs and sales are harder to estimate accurately compared to other formats.

Editing

Editing graphic novels requires a unique approach. Given every creator works in a different way, flexibility is key when it comes to editing, though feedback is always best weighted to the start of the process. Editors also require an understanding of the language, rules and conventions of comics. Collaborations with a separate author and illustrator are felt to be more labour-intensive for editors.

Production

Graphic novel production is both lengthy and complex, with in-house designers and art directors often involved. In the US, additional roles such as flatters, colourists, letterers and bubbles artists are often outsourced to reduce labour for creators, or taken on in-house. One of the biggest challenges in terms of art checks is consistency and continuity in illustrations.

Promotion

Publicity is challenging due to market saturation. With a lack of opportunities for press promotion, reviews are vital in launching titles, and visibility on social media has become key. The value of award wins and nominations varies in terms of sales and exposure depending on the award. Marketing campaigns are more important than ever given the difficulty of break-out success in a thriving market.

Rights, sales and distribution

US publishers are cautious when it comes to buying rights to overseas-generated titles due to the abundance of local content and promotional hurdles, though notable international bestsellers can also find success in their market. New-release graphic novels can struggle to gain space on shelves held by

blockbusters. Appropriate categorisation is considered critical to sales, yet discoverability for graphic novels poses challenges when shelving practices are constantly changing. The bureaucratic nature of the library system presents obstacles for smaller and independent publishers in getting their titles stocked.

Creators

Due to market growth, publishers are actively seeking out creators with a view to acquiring titles. Yet sustaining a career as a graphic novel creator is challenging, often requiring supplementary income. While there has been advancement in the publishing of diverse voices, the market for underrepresented groups, including Native American creators, needs further development.

Trends and opportunities

Potential areas for growth in the US include manga-influenced graphic novels, the early reader and YA categories, diverse stories and an expansion into genres. The growing influence of digital platforms and webcomics has the power to reshape the landscape of print publishing.

Recommendations

The report outlines four recommendations for the Australian publishing industry to boost its production of locally originated graphic novels and capitalise on the growing success of the format. They are:

Invest in training for all publishing staff working on graphic novels

Provide opportunities for format-specific training for publishing professionals involved in all aspects of the creation of graphic novels.

Create a network for collective knowledge-sharing

Build our collective industry expertise in developing, publishing and promoting graphic novels through knowledge-sharing activities.

Provide greater support for creators

Lobby for funding to support creators financially in the development of graphic novels. Consider outsourcing tasks such as flattening, colouring and lettering, where possible, to reduce creators' workloads and streamline production; some of this work could be done by other graphic novelists, or by in-house or freelance designers.

Build better connections between publishers and creators

Strengthen connections between publishers and creators through networking and events. Provide opportunities for creators to pitch works, establish mentorship schemes for creators, and support diverse and underrepresented voices through more informal feedback channels for works in development.

Conclusion

The growing market for graphic novels offers significant opportunities for Australian publishers. A long-term vision and investment in the capability of the industry is essential to overcoming the inherent challenges of publishing into this format and establishing a robust and profitable local graphic novel sector.