Speaks for itself, this one does

Tilting at Windmills #9
By Brian Hibbs

(Originally Ran in Comics Retailer *#10)*

One of the best perks of owning a comic book shop is the ability to read through your stock at whim – checking through old musty back issues, to see what cool stuff you might find. During one of my last whimsical journeys, I stumbled through a back issue of *Eerie*. Issue 81, to be exact (bitchin' cover turn on King Kong, with Fay Ray in the ape's position, and Kong in the girl's). While my general memories of this mag are, shall we say lukewarm, at best (a lot of these stories seemingly existed to show as many scantily clad women as possible, regardless of plot-needs), I figured, "what the hey, I've got 10 minutes to waste." The first story basically confirmed my worst suspicions, and a quick flip through the rest clinched it.

But then I hit a column, simply titled, "The Comic Books", by a fellow named Joe Brancatelli. Now what (I suppose it to be) a regular column on comic books in general is doing in a black & white "Tits 'n' Screams" magazine, I'll never know, but this column really surprised the hell out of me. It was critical, it was insightful, and, well, it was still relevant to today's market. Anyway, instead of describing it to you, I'm just gonna reprint it, verbatim (to which I owe Meloney Crawford Chadwick of Harris Comics a passel full of thanks – not only was she smack in the middle of launching a new line of comics in today's hostile market, but she found the time to track down obscuro rights to a defunct column for your humble writer. A standing "o" for Meloney, 'kay?)

Before I start the reprint, let me observe something: this column is from 1976. That's a while ago (by comics industry standards, that is), and a powerful lot of changes have elapsed in the industry since then. The most important of which is, of course, the formation (and ascension) of the direct market. No one in 1976 could have predicted how much the industry's health could revolve around the direct sale market. I mean, 16 years ago, Diamond distributors didn't even exist (as such), and a substantial proportion of the Image guys were in elementary school! Anyway, enough with the observations, let's get to the meat, and I'll see you at the end.

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Less is more
By Joe Brancatelli

Enigmatic California Governor Jerry Brown gathered reams of publicity from the less-is-more stance he adopted during his quixotic campaign for the Democratic Presidential nomination. But both the hype and the substance of the less-is-more doctrine quietly went the way of most campaign rhetoric as soon as Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford geared up their publicity machines for the quadrennial "Promise More Services and Lower Taxes No Matter What" derby otherwise known as the presidential elections.

Now I'm certainly not going to muse about the politics of America here – all you Americans can jump into the Pacific Ocean for all we New Yorkers care about you anymore – but I am quite willing and even eager to consider less is more as a short-term panacea for what ails the comic book industry. Me, I believe nothing will save mass-market comics as we now know them, but application of less is more might stave off imminent doom for a couple of years.

As opposed to the bedrock American belief that more of anything is peremptorily better than less of anything, less is more recognizes the equally bedrock notion of a point of diminishing return. While much of the American economy is based on the notion that big volume is its own reward, less is more says its is often times desirous to do less, to produce less, to sell less, because - in the long run - your return will be greater than had you done more, produced more, sold more.

Being as totally steeped in traditional American values as they are, comic book producers have naturally followed the more-for-more's-sake theory blindly in total disregard for what is actually happening in their marketplace, Blithely tripping down the more-is-always-better road, comic-book companies always managed to produce new titles at every turn – even though doing so depressed the margin and profits of the new titles and reduced the sales and profits of the existing ones. Like so many other Americans, comic book moguls have constantly been blinded by the sheer dint of volume to the detriment of the bottom line.

For example, Marvel published only one comic book starring Spider-Man several years ago. It sold, let us say, X number of copies and made Y profits for a cost of Z dollars. By adding a second title starring Spider-Man, Marvel thought it could sell X+X copies and make Y+Y profits for a cost of Z+Z. What happened, however, was that the two Spider-Man titles sold only 3/4X+1/2X and made a profit of only 3/4Y-1/2Y. The cost was the full Z + Z, though.

That's what we call diminishing return, folksies. Rather than get a full X worth of sales and Y worth of profits from the new investment of Z dollars, Marvel got a diminished return on its second investment and a reduced return on its original investment. Similarly, when Marvel then added a third Spider-Man book it was paying Z+Z+Z dollars to do so, but only getting something like 5/8X+3/8X+1/4X sales and only 5/8Y+3/8Y+1/4Y profits.

I chose Marvel for that little demonstration not because it is the only comic book company ignorant of diminishing return – god knows, it is not – but because it consistently manages to be the most oafish in its flouting of it. Marvel actually has three Spidey titles now when you count *Marvel Team-Up* – which always features the Web-Spinner – and each individually sells fewer copies per issue than what the original *Amazing Spider-Man* title sold in a one-book market. Granted, the combined total sales of the three books are higher than the one book's sales ever were, but the three books aggregately return less profit now than the one Spidey book did during its heyday in the late 1960s.

All of which brings us to less is more and its eminent desirability for comic books. What has happened to Marvel's three Spider-Man titles happens in a larger sense to the comic-book macrocosm; all titles compete against each other and take readers and profit away from each other. Moreover, because of the vagaries of the magazine market we discussed in previous columns, there is only a limited amount of space available on retail display racks – distributors estimate there is room for only about four of every 10 comics published today.

So the question, then, is why produce all those additional comics in the first place, comics that will never sell because they will never be seen? The old argument that you have to overproduce to sell notwithstanding, there is no reason to be glutting the market. Distributors say they can only distribute four of every 10, so why give them 10? Give them four because that's how many you know they can distribute.

What I'm proposing is not a reduction in the print run of comic book titles. That would result in only a marginal saving, since the big cost today, despite rising newsprint prices, remains "start-up" dollars needed to produce even one copy of any title.

What I suggest is that the companies cut the number of titles they produce down to the bone, down to the tried-and-true best sellers. If a company publishes 60 titles now, let it cut back to the 15 or 20 most successful ones. With the additional 45 titles out of the way, not only will you be saving the costs of producing those comics, you'll be giving your best sellers a chance to improve their sales performance, too.

For example, if a distributor is committed to giving a retailer only 240 comic books per delivery, he'll probably give him four copies each of those 60 titles. If, however, a company only prints 15 titles, chances are the distributor will give perhaps 15 of each instead. And since the titles around are best sellers, those extra 11 copies will probably sell better than the copies of the fringe titles that once cluttered the stands.

What I'm saying, in a nutshell, is this: I'd be willing to wager that if Marvel and National each cut their number of titles by 50 or more percent, their profits would not only increase as percentage of sales, but also in terms of actual dollars, Sales of the remaining titles might improve from 40 percent to maybe 60 or 70 percent of the press run without adding a dime to the cost.

I'm sure that the total number of all comics sold won't decrease, either. Given the better display, the total sales of those 15 or so best sellers should easily match the total sales of 60 titles which were never displayed properly.

And for National and Marvel, both fighting and losing battles with their bottom lines, a 50 percent or more cutback in titles and costs with no loss of total sales would be very helpful.

So take heed out there, Jerry Brown was right. Less is more – at least for comics.

One caveat, though. Knowing the turkeys in the comic book business, the minute they cut back titles and see sales and profit increases in the remaining books, they'll wrongly interpret it as a new comic book boom and reinstate the old titles.

That'll put us right back where we started.

Again.

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See? Still reasonably relevant, eh? While Brancatelli's proportions may be a bit off, by today's numbers, the premise still holds. These days, there are four monthly Spider-Man books (well, 5 if you wanna count *Marvel Tales*, or 6 if you throw *Spider-Man 2099* in the mix, but I personally won't count *2099*, because it's far too new to be able to judge it's long-term impact), and the numbers look like this: *Amazing Spider-Man* sells somewhere between .9 to .75Y (Y being *ASM*'s circulation before the multiple Spidey titles): that is somewhere between 300-330,000 copies, compared to around 370,000 copies in the late 1960's. The best I could find for current circulation was numbers for 1990, but Todd McFarlane was drawing the book then. This is the Spidey's 30th anniversary, so they're probably doing nearly as well, but I'm going to project, based on my store (where *ASM* sales are significantly lower since Todd left), and go with the 300,000 figure. *Spider-Man* (the title created for Todd) currently has sales figures of about .85Y, *Web* is at .7Y, and *Spectacular* hovers at .45Y (these are approximations based on Diamond's sales charts for November, just so's ya know).

So we come to sales of .75Y + .85Y + .7Y + .45Y. Or 2.75Y sales (and profits) for a full cost of 4Z (and maybe higher, since I'll assume that Marvel's paying more, proportionally, today than they did in the 1960's.)

Now, this only covers distributor sales. What actually sell-through is may be a whole 'nother matter (I'm thoroughly convinced that actually sell-through is probably less than 75%, nationwide – what store do you know that doesn't have a huge backstock of unsold material?).

Lemme change gears, and use a specific example (from my store) of sell-through. Before they started the second *Ghost Rider* title, *GR* sold (actual sales, not orders) about 57 copies a month. Now that there are two titles (and we're past the initial launch-hoopla), *GR* sells 38 copies a month, while *GR: SoV* sells a piddling 23. We're up a measly 4 copies (not even 10%!) between 2 titles, and now it takes twice as much rack space.

That's really where Brancatelli didn't go far enough – rack space. Despite the fact that the distribution network then is absolutely unlike today's in nearly every way (stores now get to actually order material themselves, based on their predictions of what will sell, rather than a distributors whim and fancy), there is still not anywhere near enough rack space in most stores for the volume of material that is on the market. Brancatelli suggested there was room for only four out of 10 titles on the market then, I'd be surprised if it was *two* in 10 these days! Perhaps in the more idealistic 70's (hah!), when Marvel was a very different beast, he didn't conceive of this, but today I think it's clear that the majors pump out as much material as they can to crowd other publishers off the rack. If you, as the retailer are taking 200% of your rack space to sell 10% more books, if they sell two *Ghost Rider* titles, then that's one less book that has room to compete with a Marvel.

The thing that *really* wigs me about Brancatelli's piece is that for the longest time, I've thought I was a "lone voice crying out in the wilderness" (or at least the only one who was getting column inches!), but here we've got a guy, 16 years ago, who saying basically the same things I am today. During both periods, our industry was at a crossroads of what we would be, of how we would conduct ourselves, and whether it was "something for everyone", or "mostly for us". Brancatelli believed in 1976 that mass market comics as we knew them would disappear within years. And, if it wasn't for the direct market, and the changes (and sophistication!) that it brought, I've little doubt that he would've been right. Sometimes you do get second chances. But, I'll observe, that most of those second chances were for the publishers and the fans only. Very few of the same retail locations are selling comics today as they were in 1976! The retail market continues to sell comics because of a paradigm shift in distribution methods. If we do get a third chance that's not generated from within our industry, odds are it'll be a shift away from the comic shops, and towards mass-market locations. You and me are going to have a hard time fighting against the resources of, say, a Blockbuster chain of comics.

Less is more, for our futures – 'cuz those who ignore history....