

Chapter 1

Dummies through the Ages

In This Chapter

- ▶ Chronicling the genesis of Dummies
- ▶ Listing the traits that established the brand
- ▶ Marketing the first *For Dummies* book and seeing how the packaging has evolved

Although yellow-and-black *For Dummies* books are pervasive today — found all over the world and in every part of a bricks-and-mortar or online store, covering subjects from Access to Zune — at one time they didn't exist at all. How did this brand come about? What juicy tidbits exist in the Hall of Memories to explain the brand's titling strategy (Dummies? I'm not a dummy!) and its unique elements like cartoons and icons? How has the brand evolved over time, and what successes has it had?

This chapter answers these questions and more. So read on to become an instant expert on Dummies history!

A Brand Is Born

What kind of book becomes a brand? Before *Dummies*, other book brands did exist — for instance, travelers and diners worldwide have long counted on starred reviews from Frommer's, Michelin, and Zagat. And who doesn't trust a physics textbook from MIT Press or a Shakespeare compendium from Oxford University Press? Before *Dummies*, however, no book series had demonstrated such a strong commitment to a consistent reader experience and a uniform approach from book to book.

Twenty years after the first *For Dummies* book rolled off the press, consumers can still count on *Dummies* content to provide the same type of information in the same easily accessible way, no matter what the topic. This commitment at every stage of the process — from authoring to editing to marketing to sales to interior and exterior design — gave birth to one of the most recognizable and beloved of book brands, the *For Dummies* series.

What's this on my desk? Identifying a market opportunity

The rise of the personal computer in business offices in the late 1980s created an entirely new subspecies of office workers. Office needs were pretty much the same as ever — writing memos and reports, calculating numbers, and creating presentations. Arriving at work one Monday morning and finding out that you had to get these jobs done on a computer — or else — was not

the same at all. Not only was the desktop computer an imposing piece of heavy metal, with cords snaking everywhere, but it was also hiding stuff inside (software programs and operating systems) that you had to figure out how to use.

The computer book publishing industry arose to serve this new type of information consumer. Most early computer book publishers did a decent job of helping these new, nontechnical computer users do their work. Often, however, the computer books were nearly as fat, jargon-filled, and heavy-handed as the user manuals they were designed to replace. One publisher decided to take a different approach.

Thinking like a pioneer

IDG Books Worldwide was founded in April 1990 as a subsidiary of International Data Group, or IDG (a leading information technology media company that still publishes hundreds of online and print technology magazines). Early books included titles that were often co-branded with a related IDG publication, such as the *Macworld Guide to System 7* or *PC World Paradox 3.5 Power Programming Techniques*.

But the gang at IDG Books considered themselves more of a technology start-up than a book publisher. And like other start-ups, they decided after a short while that they didn't need to be bound by traditional approaches to explaining computer stuff to the millions of people who had little computer familiarity but were expected to use them with competence. This group of rebels wondered a few things:

- ✔ What if a computer book actually helped the user manage daily work? And, gasp, was fun to read?
- ✔ What if the book didn't try to "teach" you anything in a traditional, tutorial way but instead just showed you how to do stuff by taking a reference approach?
- ✔ What if the author acted as a trusted friend who was sitting down with you over a cup of coffee, telling you how to work a computer?
- ✔ What if this lighthearted approach eased readers' fears about difficult subject matter and made these concepts interesting and manageable?

What if, indeed?

The daring of DOS For Dummies

A customer at a software store was once overheard complaining that no books were available to help him learn the basics of the DOS operating system.

"Something," he suggested, "like DOS for dummies." After becoming president of IDG Books, John Kilcullen hearkened back to this comment that he'd overheard and acknowledged that he'd sometimes felt like a computer "dummy" himself and wanted to do something about the user frustration that was increasing with the proliferation of computers. The book concept was developed, a search for a like-minded author ensued, and in November 1991, *DOS For Dummies* rolled off the presses (see Figure 1-1). We can now say that a brand was born!



Dummies is a brand, not a class of people. A consumer may *feel* like a dummy when faced with a new or intimidating topic, but the brand never considers this consumer to *be* one.

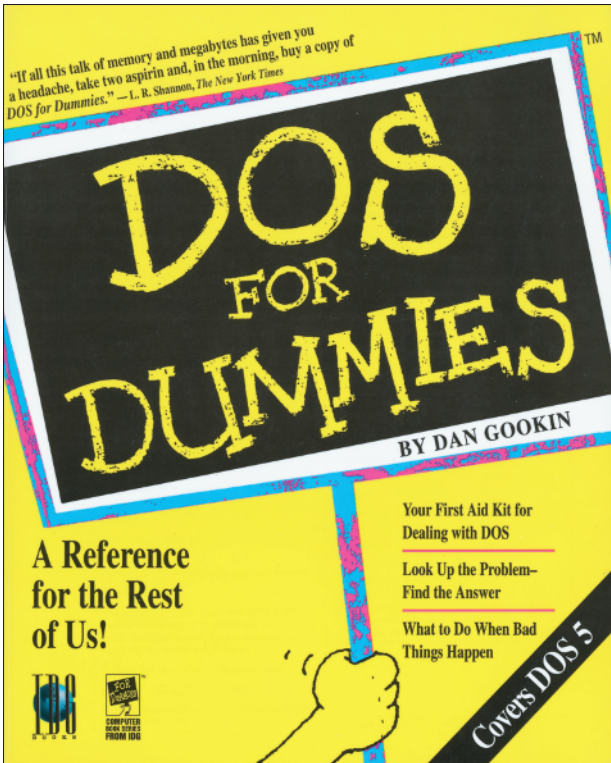


Figure 1-1: The first *For Dummies* book ever created.

DOS For Dummies was truly a first in many ways. It was the first computer book to

- ✓ Assume that the reader had no prior knowledge of the topic at hand.
- ✓ Acknowledge that lack of experience in the subject matter was nothing to be ashamed of.
- ✓ Use icons featuring tips, warnings, and other clues to help readers navigate through the material (see Figure 1-2).
- ✓ Address the person actually using the applications and call that person “you” in the text.



Figure 1-2: Icons highlight don't-miss information.



Most of all, *DOS For Dummies* was the first computer book (and maybe the first book in general) to define an audience. And after 20 years, *For Dummies* books continue to be faithful to their original mission and audience — even as the audience evolves and develops new challenges to overcome.

Decisions That Helped Establish the Brand

When *DOS For Dummies* was in development, the idea of creating a brand wasn't top of mind for the IDG Books leadership. In fact, the title didn't get much support from booksellers, and a key account refused to stock it altogether. But IDG Books kept true to its entrepreneurial spirit and published the title anyway, with a hopeful, wait-and-see attitude. The hunch was right, and the book proved to be a huge success. In creating it, some decisions were made that later became important in identifying and shaping the brand; the next sections describe some of these now-important choices. (And check out Chapter 3 for more info on the hallmarks of the Dummies brand.)

Why yellow and black?

Yellow and black were screaming loud colors that, at the last minute, were picked to distinguish the first *For Dummies* title and make that book (and all others since) really stand out from the crowd. And stand out these books did. Early Dummies veterans demonstrated some of their own irreverence when describing how to locate this fast-growing brand, telling people to go to the bookstore and “follow the yellow-book glow.”

What about those cartoons?

The cartoons beloved by many actually originated from an IDG tradition — many of the IDG magazine publications featured cartoons about technology. Using cartoons to break up the book's parts seemed like a natural fit, and the cartoons' content often illustrated the frustrations that new computer users felt (see

Figure 1-3 for an example of an early cartoon). Readers identified with many of the cartoon characters, and people really enjoyed reading them.

Why the short chapters?

Having shorter chapters (averaging 12–18 pages) was also a take-away from the early magazine tradition. The *For Dummies* books have often been described as having a “magazine attitude,” with short chapters, quick reads, easy-to-follow lists and steps, and foundational knowledge about the subject at hand. Magazine articles get to the point quickly and don’t include details that readers don’t need, and shorter chapters encouraged the same information delivery in book form.

Who needs a cheat sheet?

Everyone needs a cheat sheet! Even with short, tasty chunks of information in *DOS For Dummies* itself, having those keyboard shortcuts listed close by never hurt. All the quicker to get through your computer business with confidence.

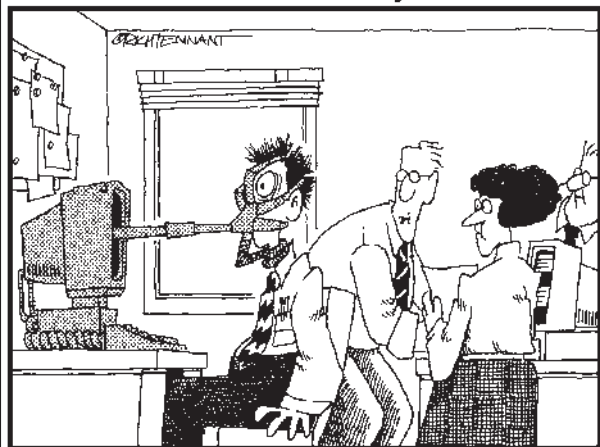
A word about the authors



Authors have played a huge part in making *Dummies* successful, and their voices are an essential part of the *Dummies* formula. But not everyone can — or should — write a *For Dummies* book. Here are some author must-haves, and if a potential author can’t deliver on these essentials, then he probably won’t get the writing gig:

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Alright, steady everyone. Margo, go over to Tom's PC and press 'Escape'...very carefully."

Figure 1-3: Cartoons helped make *DOS For Dummies* approachable.

- ✓ The author is an expert who understands the ins and outs of the topic and/or industry. He or she has inside information that makes doing something easier.
- ✓ When it comes to new or intimidating subjects, a user or reader often feels caught in an “us versus them” situation. To the reader, the author always feels like “one of us,” helping the reader figure out how to handle “them” — the know-it-all geeks or

highbrow experts who increase the intimidation factor.

- ✓ The author is the reader's guide and trusted friend, not a parent or a teacher.
- ✓ The author is a staunch companion on the journey to understanding crazy, difficult stuff. Dummies authors always say, "Here's how" and, most important, "You can."

What Happened Next: Tough Sell and Early Guerilla Marketing

Most of the bookstore chains didn't want to stock *DOS For Dummies*. Buyers worried that the title would insult their customers. The Dummies sales staff countered these arguments with the confidence that the Dummies branding method would instead strike a chord with readers and that readers would feel an instant identification with the series' mission.

The rest is history. *DOS For Dummies* sold out its initial print run of 7,500 copies in less than two weeks, and in the first 14 months, the book sold more than 1.5 million copies.

Long before Facebook "likes," e-mail blasts, tweets, and texts, *For Dummies* books seemed to sell themselves, and good old-fashioned word-of-mouth marketing helped propel the early successes.

Soon, people were writing letters (not e-mails, but real typed, word-processed, or hand-written letters) asking whether *For Dummies* had a book on "their problem."



Tantalizing titling trivia

Although the IDG Books folks had early editorial discussions about following an alliterative model for future titles (Macs For Morons, WordPerfect For Wusses, and so on), then-president John Kilcullen decided that “Dummies” was a gentle term that everyone could relate to. And besides, everybody on the team liked it. The group was still in start-up mode and could do whatever it wanted!

Among the problems were other software programs like WordPerfect, operating systems like Microsoft Windows, hardware newcomers like the Power Macintosh from Apple Computer, and, eventually, personal finance, investing, sports, health, and much more.

By following the same consistent approach, the Dummies brand could present any topic in an easily accessible way to meet the needs of all consumers — and it did. As of this minibook’s printing, more than 1,800 titles are available and have been published in more than 30 languages and 100 countries around the globe.

From Protest Signs to Clean Lines: The Evolution of Dummies Packaging

Besides the screaming yellow and black, the first *For Dummies* covers also included a drawing of a cartoon

The imitative copycats

As soon as word about the success of *For Dummies* books spread, the “imitation is the greatest form of flattery” crew started to gear up.

Before long, all sorts of publishers were trying to get into the act — there were books for Idiots, for Morons, A+ Guides, and more. One key advantage of *For Dummies* was that it was the first of its kind and consistently delivered the information that readers needed; the brand set and achieved very high expectations of its content. On the other hand, in most of these competing titles, the humor was forced, condescending, and sometimes insulting; the instructions were often incomplete or unclear. The copycats missed a key part of the *Dummies* success — *For Dummies* books defined an audience full of smart people who were confronted with stuff that made them feel dumb, and they were certainly smart enough to know when they were being talked down to.

hand holding up a protest sign, as shown in Figure 1-4. At first, the implication was that the book represented a revolution: eliminating jargon and turgid prose from computer books. The copy on the front cover shouted out benefits to the customer in short snippets — very similar to callouts found on magazine covers at the time. This bold, visual approach combined with short, easy-to-understand cover bullets grabbed customers’ attention and invited them to open the book and see what was inside.

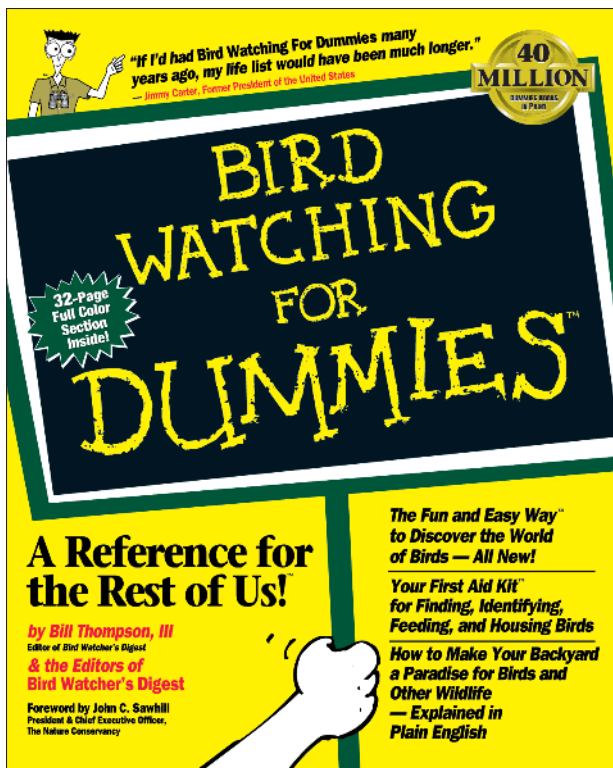


Figure 1-4: Protesting with early *For Dummies* packaging.

The protest continued to evolve as the “us versus them” audience and authoring stance evolved. All the technology in the world hasn’t really made life’s big issues any easier to deal with, but *For Dummies* books are still around, adapting to audience needs and helping people figure out the answers to “How do I . . . ?”

- ✓ Understand my new diabetes diagnosis?
- ✓ Operate a digital SLR camera?
- ✓ Plan for my retirement?
- ✓ Set up my home network?
- ✓ Gain knowledge of British history?
- ✓ Download apps on my phone?
- ✓ Learn to play violin?

A mini makeover or two

All great brands get a refresh from time to time, and Dummies is no exception. As the brand moved into more “consumer” topics (cooking, gardening, hobbies, and so on), cover photos became a great way to instantly communicate a book’s topic to customers. The protest sign gave way to the streamlined black, white, and yellow title bar that allows customers to easily recognize a book’s subject. Check out Figure 1-5 for some examples of how Dummies packaging has changed over the last 20 years.

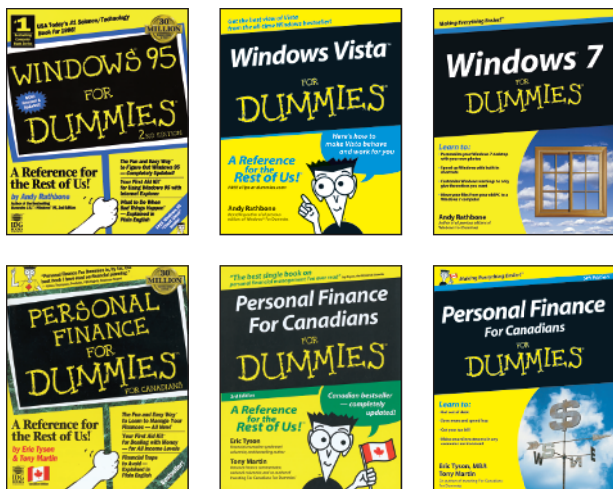


Figure 1-5: Dummies packaging has evolved over the years.

Responding to market changes

Wiley continues to refresh the Dummies packaging as the market demands. With current technologies, we're able to engage customers in our conversations via focus groups, social media, and online consumer feedback, and this input has helped evolve the packaging to the current use of the yellow-and-black glow.

Customers love the striking contrast and immediately identify the colors with the brand, whether applied to mobile apps, online videos, or other content delivery systems (see Figure 1-6). As new Dummies products hit the shelves (or virtual shelves), consumers can

always count on plenty of yellow-and-black branding and the distinctive Dummies font to identify the easiest way to get a task done.



Figure 1-6: Dummies branding sizzles no matter the content delivery method.