

Self-Publishing 101

All the basics on the booming trend of do-it-yourself publishing

By Daniel Steven

Self-publishing is booming. Compared to traditional publishing, your book can be in print faster, you'll have more control, complete ownership, and you won't have to share revenue. Even authors who have been successful with traditional publishers are reacquiring rights to their books in order to offer them directly to readers. Here's what you should know about this growing trend.

What is self-publishing?

In traditional royalty publishing, the publisher screens books for quality and marketability and then, at its cost, handles editing, manufacturing, marketing, promotion, sales, warehousing, and fulfillment. The author receives a royalty on sales. The self-publisher, by contrast, undertakes all of these tasks at his/her own cost, but keeps all revenue.

What type of books should be self-published?

Almost any kind of book - novel, short stories, poetry, non-fiction, children's, reference, professional can be self-published. Self-publishing, however, shouldn't be attempted solely because you can't find a traditional publisher. Your book might not be suitable for publishing because of quality or marketability. On the other hand, books about controversial subjects or directed at limited markets are ideal for self-publishing. For a good explanation of when it is appropriate to self-publish, see the *Writer's Center* article at www.writerscenter.org/resources/selfpub.htm.

How do I get started?

Do your homework. Go to one of the many online sites devoted to self-publishing and learn all you can, or buy a book on the subject. Check out the Small Publishers Association web site (www.spannet.org). Then, shop around for a printer or book manufacturer (not a vanity publisher, see below). Get quotes from at least three different organizations. After you choose a printer, review the contract and make sure it covers price, specifications (binding, paper, ink, pages, etc.) and delivery. You'll need to design a book cover; the printer will be able to refer you to a graphic artist, or you can find one yourself. You'll also need to decide on the print run: the higher the amount of books printed, the lower the unit price. Most self-publishers print in the 2,000 - 5,000 copy range.

Tell me about vanity publishing.

You've seen the ads and received the e-mails. There are thousands of firms just dying to publish your book. These vanity publishers, for a fee, will print and bind a book, register its copyright, provide an ISBN number, and offer a "package" of services including "promotion" and "marketing." Despite their claims, these publishers will NOT get your book into bookstores, nor will the books be reviewed. They do, however, put your book on their web site and in their "catalog." (When was the last time you shopped for a book in a vanity press catalog?) Although it would seem that vanity publishing is easier than self-publishing, you will be overcharged and the tasks will not be done any better (and usually worse!). Keep in mind that vanity publishers (e.g., Vantage Press, Dorrance Publishing) will publish anyone, regardless of the quality, and thus a stigma is attached to their products. To avoid this stigma, many vanity publishers call themselves "subsidy" publishers, which they are not. True subsidy publishing is a hybrid of traditional and self-publishing: the author pays a fee to the publisher but the publisher also contributes a portion of the cost, and thus is selective in what is published.

What other options are available to a self-publisher?

New technology has brought more printing options. Print on demand (POD) books are stored digitally; when a customer or a bookstore orders a copy, the POD publisher (e.g., iUniverse, Xlibris, and 1stBooks) uses its technology to create a copy, thus eliminating the cost of inventory and returns. POD is substantially cheaper (\$99-\$250) than paying for a print run, so it's a good alternative if you plan to sell only in small, sporadic amounts. Unfortunately, POD print and graphics are often fuzzy and less readable than traditional printing, and the books carry a high retail price. As with vanity publishers, there is no marketing or promotional effort. If you are interested in POD, be sure you are aware of precisely what rights you are giving to the POD publisher, and for how long. Will you be able to terminate the contract and get the full rights returned to you in the event you sell your book to a traditional publisher?

Another alternative to traditional printing is electronic books. Electronic books are manuscripts converted into a digital format that can be purchased and downloaded over the Internet. Also called virtual books, e-books, digital books, and online books, they require the buyer to own compatible "reader" software. Electronic books are much cheaper to produce than conventional books, but have obvious limitations. You can sell electronic books directly from your own web site, or contract with an electronic book distributor, who will pay you a royalty of from 30-50%. Electronic books are suitable as an adjunct to a print publication, or for very limited audiences where the potential demand cannot justify printing.

How do I copyright my book?

Copyright registration isn't necessary to obtain copyright protection, although registration is a prerequisite to filing a copyright infringement suit. Book-length works are generally registered at publication; you can download the

Selling From Your Website

Whether your book is traditionally published or self-published, a web site is ideal for marketing and sales. Your site can display the book's cover, your background and credentials, contact information, reviews, awards, book signing dates, excerpts, and sample chapters. If your sample material is valuable apart from the rest of your book, you can buy software (e.g., Adobe Acrobat) that will allow viewing but not downloading. For most books, however, this isn't necessary: there is little use in downloading the first chapter of a novel.

Your selling choices are numerous. You can link directly from your site to an online bookstore that lists your book or to your traditional, POD, or electronic publisher. If you have a supply of books with a fulfillment house, you can link to its site or give the 800 number. If you want to sell electronic downloads from your own site and/or are willing to ship books directly to the customer from your own stock, you'll need a credit card merchant account and a "shopping cart" interface. Paypal.com offers a free "shopping cart" that is great for the self-publisher just starting out.

Once your web site is set to sell, make sure it is included on your business card, stationery, and publicity materials, and work to get it listed with as many search engines as possible.

Form TX from www.loc.gov/copyright. The fee is \$30.00; you'll need to send two copies of your book with the registration.

What else will I need?

You can't distribute or sell your book to stores without an ISBN (International Standard Book Numbering). The ISBN Agency provides "blocks" of numbers to publishers. The cost for the minimum block of 10 numbers is \$225.00. Go to www.isbn.org for details; the site also has listings of bar code suppliers - you'll need the Bookland EAN barcode to make the ISBN scannable. If you want to sell to libraries, you'll also need a Library of Congress Preassigned Card Number (PCN) that will appear on the copyright page of each book. Visit the copyright office: www.loc.gov/copyright/circs.

What about insurance?

Ideally, all book publishers should have insurance against copyright infringement, defamation, invasion of privacy, right of publicity, and negligence -- a so-called "publisher's policy." Practically, such insurance is usually too expensive for most self-publishers, but you should get several quotes from your insurance broker. Argo Insurance has a self-publisher's policy that is worth considering: go to <http://www.publiability.com>. You also can limit your personal liability by assigning your book to a corporation or limited liability company.

How will bookstores order my book?

You'll need a way to supply orders from bookstores (traditional and online), catalog houses, and directly from customers. There are several options. Distributors are suppliers with sales forces selling to wholesalers, catalog, and the retail marketplace; a distributor will warehouse your books for a fee, taking them on consignment, and pay you the proceeds less 50-70% of the list price. Services include order taking, invoicing, packing, and shipping. Ingram and IPG (Independent Publishing Group), both major distributors, have special programs for distributing self-published books. Wholesalers will buy small amounts of your book for 40-60% of list price and fulfill orders, but not provide any sales force. Alternatively, you can hire a fulfillment house that, for a fee, will warehouse your books, provide an 800 number order line, accept credit cards, pack, ship and invoice. Some independent printers and book manufacturers will provide this service. Of course, you also should be selling your book directly from your own website (see sidebar).

If you've got the money, the audience, the desire and - most important - the right book, self-publishing just might be right for you.

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