

CHOOSING THE RIGHT PRINTER FOR YOUR SELF-PUBLISHED BOOK

You have completed all your pre-publication chores, and are now ready to head to press with your self-published book. The choice of a printer is critical to the success of every book. Its visual appearance will be a major contributor to a potential buyer's decision whether to carry it to the register or place it back on the shelf.

One of the first decisions you must make is to decide upon the quantity of books you will need in this first printing. Calculating that number is in great part guess work, but it is so important to your budget that you must weigh every possible factor as you make the estimate. At the outset, it will determine whether you select a digital printer (under 1500 copies) or an offset printer for a larger press run. Because the size of the press run influences the cost-per-book, it is directly related to the pricing of your book.

Determining Quantities

Many factors go into this critical decision. You must carefully think through the answers to several key questions. Is yours a niche book or is it designed for general distribution? Will you market it through the Internet principally? Or through distribution to retail booksellers throughout the nation? Or both? Is it a book that libraries will want to buy even though their budgets are currently so tight? What specific demographics are you targeting and how do you think you can best reach them?

What is the selling price of your arch competition? Since size of the press run directly influences the price-per-copy of the book, you will have to ensure that you can meet your competitors' prices profitably. This is particularly important if you are planning distribution through mass marketers like airport bookstores, chain discount retailers or book clubs. These outlets will demand price-shattering discounts from you.

If at all possible, develop commitments for sales well prior to actual publication. You may be able to do this with a well prepared press kit for the book including chapter descriptions and a detailed overview. Of course, it will take personal selling as well. Once you print Advance Review Copies (ARCs), they will be excellent tools to help gain these commitments. Possibilities for advance sales include mass marketers, book clubs, charitable organizations that might want to

use the book in a fund-raising promotion or businesses that might use the book for training or other purposes. Of course, the customers you choose to target should always be users of substantial quantities

As you determine quantity, I remind you again that the size of the press run directly affects the per-copy price of a book. A title that might cost \$2.50 when it is part of a press run of 2,000 copies, can cost as high as \$7 or \$8 if you choose to run only 200-300 copies. That's why it is so important to try and accumulate all potential bulk buyers before finalizing your press run.

Other key considerations are the location of the printer, for books are very heavy and therefore costly to ship. Does the printer offer a distribution division to help move your book to the market? Can the printer handle the text format and/or the graphics you include? (Not all presses have the same capability.)

Preparing an RFP

Your next step is to select three or four printers that you believe can fill your specific needs. Enter "Book Printers" into your search engine and you will find endless entries. Several gurus will rate printers. Speak with published authors you meet at writing conferences or writers clubs for their recommendations. Once you've narrowed down your list, it is important to prepare a "Request for Proposal" (RFP) that lists your major concerns and requirements, and asks the printer to respond. This is standard procedure in the industry.

Although you can add any additional considerations you wish, a basic RFP should contain the following:

1. Can the press handle the format of your book?
2. When requesting a price, offer several alternate press runs (IE 250, 500, 1000, 1500). That way you can select the most cost-effective run for your needs. Be certain to include the cover specs (1,2 or 4color) and the paper weight you desire for the cover and the interior.
3. What proofs will the printer provide you? You must have at a minimum a "Blue Line" or final proof before the presses roll.
4. Specify the binding you desire, probably "perfect bound," the most practical and most

- popular for standard sized books.
5. Does the printer have digital capability to produce Advance Review Copies as needed? (We'll discuss the need for ARCs when we tackle promotion of your book. For now, suffice it to say these are advance galley copies required by certain key reviewers who will only accept your book prior to its publication.) Request a price for the number of ARCs you anticipate needing (probably in the neighborhood of 30 to 75 depending on how ambitious your early promotions will be.)
 6. Delivery. Give the printer the destination(s) to which you want your books shipped and the quantity required for each. Request pricing to include shrink-wrapped bundles with a maximum of four dozen to a carton. (Books are very heavy in the aggregate and must be in perfect condition when they are to be sold.)

Pricing Your Book

A major question for most novice authors who self-publish is how to establish a realistic price for their book. There are many varied answers but certainly no definitive responses. Basic to the question is the pricing of your competition. Obviously, you must meet it or your book will lose any potential sales unless you can demonstrate readily that your title brings the reader a far greater value than any competing book. That's not always easy to do in a way that your potential buyers will believe.

Peter Bowerman, a highly successful author of nonfiction books, writes, "Price your book at roughly four to six times the cost of your paper, printing and binding." Publishing guru Dan Poynter states, "Books you intend to sell through bookstore and mail order should be priced at a minimum of eight times production costs (printing and trucking); textbooks at five times."

Patricia Fry, author of numerous books and President of SPAWN, feels that eight times cost is excessive, and prefers to base pricing on the competitive picture. I agree, unless the press run is quite large and brings down the cost-per-unit to rock bottom levels. For example, the approximate breakeven point is a run of 2000 copies; anything lower would be too costly using the eight times factor. (Reasonable printing price for 2000 books 6 X 9 softcover 300 or so pages should be approximately \$2.40 per book. That would be \$19.21 when multiplied by 8.)

Other experts suggest you calculate the number of books you anticipate selling in the first year and use that as your press run. That's fine, if the resulting price makes sense when compared to your competitors. Frankly, I tend to support the competitive analysis as the most cost-effective way to estimate the most effective length for your press run.