

Guiding You Through the Publishing Maze

How often have you met a frustrated author complaining about his/her inability to find a publisher?

It is so hurtful to pour your soul and long, long hours into the creation of a well-written, timely book, only to face the insurmountable hurdle of finding a publisher...even a literary agent. Now that isn't to say that first-timers have never broken through the barrier. But breakthroughs happen all too infrequently, and that's a problem for those of you who are just beginning your writing experiences following your retirement.

At one time, publishing houses were peopled by dedicated men and women whose love of books outdistanced any other considerations. Today much of the industry has morphed into a clique in which the bottom line rules. Quality and diversity are relegated to secondary considerations when major publishers select a book to produce.

The Welcome Mat

At first this change was devastating to authors, both new and experienced. But exciting new developments in technology and the proliferation of smaller, independent publishers have combined to throw open the welcome mat. The key is to know which of the avenues that now present themselves is the best for you and the book you are crafting.

Signs abound that these alternate methods of publication are gaining more respect and more popularity. Just last May, it was heartening to hear the Book Industry Study Group, the prestigious monitor of trends in the industry, describe the independent family of small publishers as "sizable and growing with surging numbers."

Just a few years ago, Publishing on Demand houses (POD) were frowned upon by most of the book industry. Many reviewers refused to rate books the POD companies published. Today, many of these companies have earned respect and books they've produced have reached the best seller levels. Self-publishing is rapidly becoming a preferred way to produce your nonfiction work. It is not as effective for fiction titles.

Meeting Your Needs

Books of any length today can be turned out economically. Remarkable new printing technology has made possible short press runs of as little as 25 or 50 books (ideal for distributing memoirs just to immediate family and friends) that are as attractive and professional as those you find on the bookstore shelves. And at acceptable per copy costs. Prior to the development of the digital press, short run costs per copy (even runs as high as 1,000 copies) were astronomical.

Unless your press run is more than 2,000 books, it makes sense to use digital technology for your printing needs. Longer press runs are best accomplished with offset printing, at one time the only way available to print your book.

Offset technology employs plates that are prepared and then set on the press. While the final product often is of higher quality than digital printing, as many a hundred or more copies of the book might be wasted as ink, plates and the speed of the press are adjusted.

Publishing on Demand

While the stigma of POD publishing is essentially gone, it behooves any author to ensure that the house he/she selects is legitimate. Shysters do exist in this marketplace, as they do in so many others.

The web page of Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America (www.sfwaworld.com) offers an excellent guide to choosing the right POD publisher. In his book *The Fine Art of Self-Publishing*, Mark Levine evaluates 48 POD houses and ranks them by quality.

Writers now benefit from the growing popularity of the POD approach. Most of the charlatans have been forced out of business. As legitimate competition has increased, the remaining companies are offering a variety of bonuses to attract business.

Variations on the agreement authors sign affect their rights and the control of the production processes. Most POD houses promise clients they will have control of distribution, pricing and a host of other decisions. However, since the ISBN (International Standard Book Number) in almost every arrangement belongs to the POD house, unsuspecting authors don't realize that the entity that owns the ISBN controls the flow of revenue, and that can restrict you from making many key decisions.

But there is a very important upside to POD publishing, particularly for newcomers unfamiliar with the nitty-gritty of organizing your book for publication. The endless details are formidable and distract the author from other key tasks.

Aside from locating a quality printer, chores include formatting your inner text; designing a compelling book cover; and applications for copyright, ISBN and Library of Congress registration.

The POD house will place your book with a distributor, relieving you of this important chore, but you must assume all responsibility for marketing and promoting your book. Every POD house offers promotion campaigns, but frankly, they are totally ineffectual. Take on the job yourself or hire a PR and book marketing specialist.

Searching for the Best

The first step in selecting a POD publisher is to head to the Internet and enter “Publishing on Demand.” You will find endless numbers of POD houses to evaluate. Once you’ve weeded out those you consider the best for your book, contact them and request more information.

Pricing usually is based upon length of your book. You can figure roughly that a 70,000-word manuscript will result in about 300 pages of final text, depending on the type fonts used and the size of the page.

While evaluations of the POD houses are not available on the web site www.booksandtales.com/pod/podpublish.htm, it offers a wealth of information on contracts, pricing, royalties, distribution and more.

Doing It All Yourself

Ever-growing numbers of authors are turning to self-publishing these days. Two factors have contributed greatly to this trend: the difficulty of getting your book accepted by a traditional publisher and the new printing technologies that make preprinting prep so much easier. Another significant factor is the ability to keep all the profits from sales of your book, and not just a royalty of 5 or 10 %.

There is a great deal more effort required to produce your book this way, but many feel the rewards far outstrip the additional tasks. Now that traditional publishers offer minimal or no promotional help to anyone other than star-level authors, many writers opt to take on the other aspects of publication, but keep all the profit since they are forced to handle marketing and promotion themselves in either case.

Because self-publishing has grown so in popularity, I have devoted a complete article to it alone. Click on the article headed “Doing It All Yourself.”