

WHITE PAPER

My Book My Way – The Self-Publishing Model

© 2014 RHE Media Limited

BACKGROUND

Self-publishing has always existed alongside traditional publishing. However, in the past it was only really an option for wealthy authors who could afford the costs of producing their own books and the time to invest in promoting them. After all, the only barriers to publishing are money and time. Anyone can make copies of their own book and then try to sell these copies – there has never been anything that prevented authors from doing so (apart, of course, from things like government and religious censorship at various times in history and in some parts of the world). Many traditional publishing companies began as self-publishing enterprises by individuals and organisations. Many authors over the centuries have paid printers to produce copies of anything from pamphlets to books.

Obviously, before the internet and digital printing, it was much more expensive to publish your own work, and promoting and selling that work was also far more difficult. Nowadays it is easier, cheaper and faster than it has ever been to make copies of a written work and to distribute it globally. Indeed, you can write a document in an afternoon and make it available for sale in a few hours. However, simply making a book available on the internet is not publishing. No one is going to buy a book if they don't know it exists and, with ever-increasing numbers of books on the market, it is getting harder and harder to get messages about a new book heard in the growing crowd. In order to actually 'publish' a book you need to make its existence known 'publicly' – i.e. you need to publicise or promote it, as well as producing it.

Of course, being able to publish easily, cheaply and quickly does not make successful publishing any more likely, depending on your definition of 'success' in this respect. People self-publish for many reasons. It may be that they have had their typescript rejected by the traditional publishers they have approached or it may be that they simply want to produce a book for a family member's significant birthday or other family celebrations. In the case of the former author, success would probably be defined as self-publishing the book and it becoming a bestseller, thus allowing the author to thumb their nose at the publishers that rejected their work. In the latter case, success would be defined as producing an attractive publication that is received with pleasure by the family member. Authors self-publish because they think they will make more money, find more readers, publish more quickly and/or produce a book of higher quality than they would if their work was published by a traditional publisher. Some self-publishers achieve success in some or all of these ways, and many do not. Self-publishers have to face the same risks as traditional publishers – risking upfront investment, battling a great deal of competition for customers, dealing with bad reviews and criticism, receiving big returns from booksellers, etc. Self-publishers need to be entrepreneurial, they require business acumen, they must be persistent, determined and brave, they must be active self-

promoters, they have to learn a lot and learn fast. No-one has a right to succeed in publishing but everyone has the right to try for success. For traditional publishers success = profit. The important thing for authors to decide, before they embark on self-publishing their work, is their own definition of a successful publication.

METHODS OF SELF-PUBLISHING

Today there are a great many companies and organisations that have been set up to aid the self-publisher in one way or another. These range from writers' and authors' organisations that publish articles and blog posts on self-publishing topics to multinational companies like Amazon that offer easy and fast ways to produce a book and companies that say that they will also help authors to promote and sell their book. The wise author will do their research into the range of support available, the costs of that support and then they will compare the service they will receive with their definition of success, asking the question 'will this service help me to achieve my goals?' The time taken to carry out this research is well-spent as service offerings vary enormously and are quite difficult to compare. Here is a brief summary of the options.

Vanity Publishing

Vanity publishing gained its name and poor reputation by flattering the vanity of authors who believe they had written a bestseller or who felt they had been badly served by traditional publishers, and who were therefore only too happy to listen to the blandishments of a vanity press. Hoodwinked by flattery and promises of financial success, these authors are conned into paying a great deal of money for very little in return – often ending up with 100s of copies of a book they can't sell. Authors believe that they are being published by a traditional publishing company because they don't understand how traditional publishing works. Authors are asked to 'subsidise' or contribute to the costs of publication or the costs of promotion, without understanding that no reputable traditional publishing company would ever ask its authors for money. Also, vanity publishers often advertise for authors – something else that no traditional publisher would ever do. Vanity publishers are almost always to be avoided but, in the usual manner of con artists, they are often very good at disguising themselves. Things to watch out for include:

- Being told that the book will be a bestseller or that it will make a profit – no genuinely professional publisher would ever make a promise like this;
- Being 'accepted' for publication and then being told that you will have to pay for or contribute to the costs of publication, or that the author is required to pay a set-up fee. No traditional publishing company ever charges their authors and a reputable company that offers services to self-publishers will provide full details of its charges up front and before an author is asked to sign anything.
- Being required to buy a specified number of copies of the finished book. If an author is buying print from a company then the number of copies they are buying should be up to them. Also, if a publishing company's only customers for books are in fact

its own authors then it isn't going to spend any time or money promoting its books more widely.

- Being required to pay the cost of the whole publishing process without the option to pick and choose the services the author requires.
- The stigma associated with some vanity publishers may mean that an author's book is tainted by association, making it much harder to persuade retailers to stock it.

Sadly there will always be crooks and con artists when there is money to be made. Authors therefore need to do their research before deciding on their approach to publication. There is plenty of advice available online about vanity publishing and the companies to avoid.

Hybrid Publishing

There is an intermediary option between traditional publishing and true self-publishing – the wide variety of self-publishing service providers that offer a hybrid service. The author pays but their book is 'published' by the hybrid company, which often handles things like order processing, distribution and customer service. The author's book is included in the company's online bookshop and the author pays for mainly passive promotion activities – i.e. the setting up of a Facebook page, the provision of leaflets and posters and so forth. The hybrid company will charge for services like proofreading, printing and ebook conversion and they will also take a percentage of sales revenue or pay the author a royalty while retaining the rest of the sales revenue themselves. In order to retain revenue the hybrid company will ask the author to sign a contract that requires the assignment of some rights to the hybrid company.

Most hybrid companies are respectable and legitimate service providers who are up front and honest about their charges. Such a service may suit those authors who don't want to take on the distribution and sales tasks for their book. There is nothing wrong with publishing your book this way – many authors are very satisfied with the quality of their published book and the promotion it receives. However, if an author's book carries the imprint/logo of the hybrid company with an ISBN registered to this company, if the author has assigned rights to the hybrid company and if the hybrid company retains a percentage of revenue or pays the author a royalty then the author cannot be said to have truly self-published their work.

True Self-publishing

For an author to truly self-publish their own work they need to become their own publisher. This means that the author pays the whole cost of producing their book, they carry out all the tasks required to produce a quality product, and all the tasks needed to promote it and to sell it effectively and efficiently. Most importantly, the true self-publisher buys their own ISBN numbers and publishes under their own name and not under the name, imprint or brand of some other organisation – i.e. they publish My Book My Way.

What Does True Self-publishing Involve?

Self-publishing involves carrying out all the tasks that a traditional publishing company carries out. A self-publisher may decide to perform some or all of these tasks themselves or they may decide to sub-contract them to service providers that they have selected based on the cost and quality of their service. These tasks include:

- Copy-editing – the author isn't usually the best person to edit their own typescript because they are too close to the text to be truly objective about its quality. It is always wise to have an independent and objective editor who will correct errors and provide constructive criticism.
- Buying an ISBN number for each edition of your book.
- Seeking permission for any third-party quotations and illustrations and/or commissioning an artist to create bespoke illustrations, unless you are going to draw your own images and diagrams.
- Deciding on format (hardback, paperback, ebook, etc.), trim size, layout (margins, the placing of page numbers, running heads, etc.), typeface, illustrations, captions, etc.
- Decisions about prelims and end matter.
- Cover and/or jacket design.
- Formatting your book, employing a typesetter or book designer or using a template.
- Proofreading the proofs provided by the typesetter/book designer yourself or finding a professional proofreader to check the proofs for you. As with copy-editing, it is usually advisable to have another pair of eyes reading your proofs to ensure all errors are picked up.
- Deciding who will print your book and/or who will convert your typescript into an ebook.
- Taking delivery of your print books and deciding how you will store them.
- Deciding how you will take orders for the books and how you will distribute them to customers.
- Making decisions about invoicing, taking payment, credit arrangements and customer service
- Marketing – identifying your target audience/community(ies), determining how best to communicate with them, deciding on the price you will charge, the discounts you will offer to retailers and wholesalers, making decisions about accepting returns, etc.
- Promotion – starting your promotion campaign as soon as you have a cover design, building a website, being regularly active on social media, promoting your book using email and/or leaflet mailings, send out press releases, send books to reviewers, arrange book signing sessions at local bookshops, etc.
- Set yourself up as a business – open a business bank account, decide how you will do your bookkeeping, be sure you understand the tax implications and ensure you have more than sufficient funds to pay for all the activities and tasks above. Remember that promoting a book is a marathon rather than a sprint – instant success is very rare so authors need resources to support them for the medium to long-term.

This is not a comprehensive list but it does give an idea of the range and scope of what being a true self-publisher involves. Many of these tasks are important because they either remove barriers to success or increase the chances of success. For example:

- Quality – a poorly produced book riddled with errors and with a badly designed cover is a barrier to success. Errors and a poor layout create a barrier between the reader and the story they are reading or the information they are trying to access. This is why copy-editing, text and page design, and proofreading are vital – no-one notices when these tasks have been done well but readers certainly do notice when they have not been done or been done badly.
- Communication – if your goal is to sell copies of your book then there is no point in spending a lot of time producing a high quality product if no-one knows it exists. Having removed the poor quality barrier, an author then needs to increase their chances of success by actively promoting their book.

The Benefits of True Self-publishing

Before spending a great deal of money on self-publishing an author would be wise to compare and contrast the options for publishing their book. After deciding what their own definition of successful publication is, the author needs to decide if they are going to approach traditional publishers with a book proposal. The benefits of traditional publishing are outlined in our White Paper: *Our Book Together*, which can be found on the White Papers page on the PPS website www.propubuk.co.uk The benefits of true self-publishing are as follows:

- The author can guarantee that their book will be published and available for sale.
- The author can produce their book in exactly the way they want to, including their own choice of cover design, text design, paper, etc., by spending their own money as they wish and having control over every step in the process.
- The author may be able to publish their book faster than a traditional publisher would, though this depends on the publisher. For example, RHE Media aims to publish titles within three months of receipt of final typescript.
- The author can carry out as much promotion and sales work as they wish and they can promote the book in whatever manner they think fit for as long as they can afford to do so.
- The self-publishing author receives 100% of the revenues from sales of their book.
- The self-publishing author receives sales revenue on a regular basis rather than royalties that are paid once or twice a year.
- The self-published book may have a longer shelf life – the self-publishing author is likely to continue to support their own book with promotion for longer than a publishing company will (although this may not necessarily be a good thing financially).
- The self-publishing author obviously retains all rights in their intellectual property and therefore has the opportunity to exploit these rights (of course, this is only of benefit to the author if they do actually exploit the rights).
- You can publish for niche markets that are too small to be of interest to a mainstream publishing company.

CONCLUSIONS

Some self-publishers have achieved great success, demonstrating great creativity and business acumen in promoting and selling their books. Many people find self-publishing tremendously satisfying because it brings them closer to their particular community of readers. Authors are the best people to promote their work so, for those who enjoy communicating with an audience and who are natural self-publicists, self-publishing is an obvious choice.

Self-publishers have also been offered publishing contracts by traditional publishers, having already proved their abilities as authors and self-promoters in the marketplace. Therefore, successful self-publishing can raise an author's profile and bring them to the attention of commercial companies looking for authors who are likely to produce profitable product. So, these days, authors don't have to choose either self-publishing or traditional publishing, they can move between the two and benefit from both.

With the advent of the internet, digital printing and ebooks it is now far easier and more cost-effective for authors to publish their own books. There are many benefits of doing so but the costs of publication are borne by the author. Therefore, the wise author will do their research and consider the options carefully and objectively. There is a great deal of misleading information available on both traditional publishing and true self-publishing produced by people who clearly have an axe to grind. However, those with a positive and proactive vision for publishing can see that there is no need for conflict between the two business models. In fact, the Our Book Together model (traditional publishing) and the My Book My Way model (self-publishing) have always co-existed and can continue to co-exist as both models have benefits for authors and for readers.

Judith Harvey, MD RHE Media Limited.

www.ProPubUK.co.uk