



Self-Publishing

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**What's the Deal
with Self-Publishing
By Karen Hodges Miller**

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Chapter 1

Is Self-Publishing Just a Fad?

The rise of new technology and new methods of marketing and distributing books in the past decade have changed the publishing world, making it not only possible, but even profitable, for authors to bypass traditional publishing houses and publish their own books. Today more authors are publishing books themselves than are using traditional publishing houses.

But self-publishing is not new. In fact, it has a long and honored tradition. The list of authors who published their own works either consistently, or before being picked up by a traditional publishing house, is long. A few of the authors on this list include Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, William Blake, Jane Austen and Walt Whitman. Author Virginia Woolf founded Hogarth Press with her husband Leonard to publish not only her own works, but those of others authors, most notably

works by T.S. Elliott, E. M. Forster and Robert Graves.

While many people point to these classic authors of previous centuries to show the potential for success in self-publishing, there is also a new and growing list of very successful authors who are bypassing traditional publishing models and publishing their own work. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is now a household name. The first of E.L. James' three-book series was self-published in June, 2011. The books have now sold over 70 million copies. They have been picked up by a traditional publisher, Vintage, a British house, and are being made into a movie. And while some have criticized her literary style, no one is criticizing her marketing savvy. Her net worth is now estimated at \$80 million.

Rachel van Dyken, Chelsea Fine and Alan Sepinwall are just three of a growing list of best-selling authors that you may already be reading without realizing that their books are self-published. Science fiction writer Hugh Howey sold 400,000 e-

books before being picked up by Simon & Schuster, printed in paperback and hardback, and had his work optioned by Hollywood. The film rights for the post-apocalyptic thriller have been purchased by “Alien” producer Ridley Scott.

But what impresses the publishing world more is that Howey was able to craft a deal with Simon & Schuster that allowed the publishing company to acquire the print rights but gave Howey the digital, or e-book, rights. He reportedly turned down several seven-figure offers from publishers before reaching the mid-six-figure agreement with Simon & Schuster.

Many first-time authors seem to feel that there are only two possible outcomes in publishing: international bestseller status or failure, and that only a large, well-known publishing house can make the first a reality. The truth is that most books published today, whether by large, traditional publishing house, a small independent press or a self-publisher, won't become international bestsellers. The average book that is published

today sells somewhere between 300 and 500 copies. This list includes everyone from today's most famous authors, such as J.K. Rowling, Stephen King or James Patterson, to the self-published author who just wants to put out a short treatise on the history of stamp collecting and everyone in between.

Reasons to Choose Self-Publishing

Other authors, however, choose to publish their own work without ever going in search of an agent or traditional publishing house. Two of the most common reasons cited for choosing to self-publish are:

1. Greater control over the content of the book
2. Speed to market

There are good and bad points to both of these reasons. Yes, as the author you want to have the final say over the content of your book but also, as the author, you may not be able to look at your book objectively. Additional editing by an objective, professional editor can make to make

your work the best it can be. And yes, you can get a book to market in a matter of a few months, rather than the years it often takes with a traditional publisher, but that may also mean that your book is published before you have a marketing campaign in place. I suggest a compromise: don't rush your book to market as fast as you can, then develop the marketing plan. Take a few months longer to get your book out and have a plan to start marketing it as soon as it is published.

There was never a greater time to become an author. Technology such as print-on-demand, e-books and enhanced books that include video, audio and web links, are changing our concept of the book as well as the way in which we purchase them. Although many people have looked at the recent downsizing and closing of major bookstore chains as the death of reading in general and the bookstore in particular, nothing could be farther from the truth. Books – both fiction and nonfiction – are a growing market, and book sales are one of the

biggest bright spots in the last few years of an overall lackluster economy.

Until the past ten years or so a book was an easy thing to define: words printed on pieces of paper and sandwiched together between two covers of a more robust paper. The printing process was expensive and involved creating original templates that were costly to make and bulky to store. A print run of several thousand was necessary to bring per-book prices down to a reasonable rate so that an author could make a profit. Distribution was primarily through brick-and-mortar storefronts, making it necessary for individual authors to depend on large publishing houses to deliver their books to stores throughout the country.

All that began to change in 1995 with the opening of Amazon.com. Twenty years later this website is often called “the world’s largest online retailer” and has been at the forefront of changing the way the world buys, reads, prints and publishes books.

We often confuse the words “printer” and “publisher.” A printer is in the business of printing words on paper. A publisher delivers information to readers – in whatever form they would like to read it. Today’s readers want more and more content – information, entertainment, news, opinion. We are devouring this content in many forms: in printed books, on e-readers, on our desktop and laptops computers, and on a variety of mobile devices. The statistics are staggering.

- Over 786 million paper books were purchased in the United States in 2013
- Amazon.com sells over 20 million e-books per year
- Total e-book sales are leveling off at a little over 10 percent of the total book market
- Less than half of all books are sold in bookstores
- Self-published books represent nearly one third of all e-book sales on Amazon’s Kindle store.

- Over 292,000 new titles or editions were published in 2011

What does it all mean? For an author or an independent publisher it is easier than ever to bring a book to market. It is now possible for niche books with target markets of under 2,000 to make a profit. It is also much more difficult for a first-time author to get noticed.

I recently met with an entrepreneur who wants to write a book. His story is fascinating; he came from a difficult background, has been successful in two different industries and had an inspirational message. “I think my message would be good for everyone to hear,” he told me. “But I’m a businessman; of course, I’m not going to write a book if I can’t make money on it. I want to know what my return on investment will be.”

This gentleman had fallen prey to what I call the Great Publishing Myth, which I sum up by paraphrasing a quote from a well-known movie: “write it, and they will come.” I am always amazed

at the number of people I speak with who believe that they will write a book, upload it to Amazon as an e-book at no cost to themselves where it will instantly be discovered by thousands of disparate readers across the country, and become an overnight bestseller. Even savvy businesspeople and entrepreneurs – people who know that to sell a product they must market it – seem to believe this myth.

Today, it is important for many businesspeople, particularly consultants or anyone who is selling a service, to have a book. It is a mark of credibility, proof of expertise. A book can help you sell your services to more clients and ask more money for those services. But for a book to do this it must be well-written and edited, be correctly formatted, have a distinctive, professional cover and be marketed to the right target group.

According to a survey reported in The New York Times, 81 percent of people believe “they have a book in them...and should write it.” Before

you begin to write your book, ask yourself these questions:

- Why am I writing this book? What is the one central message or theme I want my readers to learn?
- Who is my target market? (Be detailed; remember the person who is selling to everyone is selling to no one.)
- What do I want this book to do for me?
- Where and how will I market my book?
- How much time and money am I willing to invest in creating a professional product and marketing it?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, only the answers that honestly reflect your personal needs and interests. Knowing those answers will mean the difference between a successful book and one that sells only a few copies to friends and family. We are in the midst of a revolution in book publishing. The face of the

industry is changing so quickly it is often difficult to keep up. The way in which we publish, distribute, market and shop for books is changing. Only one thing remains constant – quality is just as important, maybe even more important, as ever.

Chapter 2

What Are Some Basic Considerations for Self-Publishing?

Everyone loves a rags to riches success story, and every author wants to believe his or her book has a chance to sell millions of copies and become an international bestseller. But while very few books reach this status, it is possible to be quite successful as an author without it.

The vast majority of books fall into the “midlist” category. This is a term publishers use to describe which are not bestsellers, but instead, sell slowly and steadily year after year. These are the books that were the backbone of the publishing industry for decades, but lost favor as the Big Six publishing houses focused more on blockbusters and bottom line profits than on producing steady sellers. Both fiction and non-fiction books often fall into this category and can be extremely successful for an entrepreneurial author.

What do I mean by an entrepreneurial author? It is the author who understands that selling a book is just like selling any other product, and selling a product means it must be competitive with other similar products in the market; there is no “write it, and they will come.” The entrepreneurial author knows that there are three ingredients needed to help a book sell.

1. It must look professional
2. It must be well-written
3. It must have a marketing plan

You Can Judge a Book by Its Cover

Some of the very low-cost, “big box” self-publishing houses have made it so easy to self-publish these days that scores of people are publishing poorly written, unedited work that has little or no chance of selling more than a handful of copies to family and friends. Not only is the work filled with spelling errors and grammar mistakes, its cover is a nondescript “template.” I have even seen

hand drawn covers on books for sale on Amazon.com. How many copies do you think these books sell?

I had a conversation recently with an author who told me he would never pay a publishing house, or even a printer, again. Why, he asked, would he pay for this service when he could publish his books for almost nothing through one of the many do-it-yourself publishing services now available? Of course, he was also wondering why a well-known, national public relations firm would not take him as a client.

“How many books have you sold?” I asked him.

“I’ve sold 50,” he told me proudly.

“Were any of them sold on Amazon.com?” I asked.

No, he confessed, his 50 books had been sold to people who already knew him through a local bookstore in his small town.

I looked at his cover: plain, one color background with the title centered in Times New

Roman font. I suggested he make changes to the cover to make it more attractive to readers, but he was uninterested. A more elaborate cover cost more money with the service he was using, and he was unwilling to spend it.

The bottom line: if your book doesn't look professional on the outside, no one will bother to pick it up and find out if it is well-written on the inside.

You Can't Do It All Yourself

Looking professional on the outside may be the first step, but it is certainly not the last. A great cover does not guarantee great book sales. Once past the cover readers will quickly learn if a book is well-written, professionally edited and free of typos and grammar mistakes. They will tell their friends if they think a book is a good read or a poor one – and today the word “friend” includes everyone on the internet.

No author can write a book, edit that book and then proofread it. All good writers have an

editor and a proofreader. We know that we lose perspective on what is good or bad in our own work. We know that we will fall in love with a sentence or a paragraph and want to keep it, even if it doesn't move the story forward or make sense in the context of the overall work. We know that after spending weeks and months lovingly crafting each word we can no longer be objective. And we know that after looking at a work ten, twenty or fifty times, we can not see our typos and misspellings. Looking professional means seeking outside help from professional editors and proofreaders.

Marketing Your Book

As I said earlier, there is “no write it and they will come” in the book world today, and there is certainly no “upload it to Amazon and they will come.” While the bookselling giant should certainly be a part of your marketing plan, you can't expect to just upload your book to that site and see it instantly obtain bestseller status. I have seen no statistics on exactly how many books are on Amazon; authors and publishers are constantly

uploading or deleting books to the site, so it is constantly changing. One estimate I did see, however, was at least 12 million books. Finding one book on Amazon isn't like finding a needle in a haystack; it's like finding a needle in a field of hay.

Don't let that discourage you. Amazon is only one way to sell a book, after all. And the site also offers excellent ways for authors to increase their visibility. It is much easier to find a book on Amazon if the reader knows the authors' name or the title of the book. That's why you need a marketing plan.