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Will publishers perish?

The rise of print-on-demand technology and websites devoted to self publishing is making it ever easier for writers to bypass conventional publishers

BY EDWARD WILKINSON-LATHAM

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There is a saying that "everybody has a book in them," yet at a time when we find it more important than ever to communicate in print, it has never been more difficult to do so.

Many authors have become frustrated with conventional publishers, entrenched by market projections, annual styles and the unmentionable word "returns."

The alternative is self-publishing. Unfortunately, in the past, some vanity publishers have tarnished the idea of self-originated publications by overcharging and under-promoting. Rarely simple, self-publishing can require authors to print, distribute and market their own books, which usually involves a lot of expense and hard work.

But with recent developments in digital printing technology, small self-publishing businesses are starting up that are fast filling the void left by conventional publishers and previous tailored publishing ventures. Using low-cost digital printing methods that allow small print runs, known as POD (print-on-demand), it is now possible to publish a book for a fraction of the cost of a traditionally published book.

The digital book file is simply stored in a database, connected to a network of servers and every time the book is ordered, the file is sent to a digital printer, where it is printed and bound. Networks are being connected to a growing number of printers in different countries, allowing a book to be created and marketed in one country but be printed and bound in another in a location closer to the customer. Ideal for books with limited appeal, book clubs or backlist books in print that only sell a few hundred copies a year, POD has allowed many small print houses to become rapidly popular.

UK Authors Press is one such company that grooms authors to produce their best work. A joint venture with KMS (Knowledge Mine Solutions Ltd.) that supplies the printing, distribution and marketing, UKA Press (ukapress.ukauthors.com/) deals with manuscript reading, selection, editing and design.

Writers send initial manuscripts following simple guidelines, clearly displayed on the UKA Press site, and if a team of readers accepts the work, the writer is provided with an editor to finalize the text and to arrange format, synopsis, biography, cover art and even ISBN number -- in short, everything, except the writing of the book.

One of the advantages of POD printing is that authors can create and market their books without any cost. Only when the book is ordered on-line is it printed and bound, and then the self-publishing business and the author share the respective percentages of profit, after incurred costs. UK Authors for example, takes 15 per cent of the profits, as opposed to mainstream publishers, which run at 8 to 10 per cent.

Marilyn Ross of SelfPublishingResources.com is an award-winning author, having self-published 13 books in 27 years, including *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing*, *Jump Start Your Book Sales* and *Shameless Marketing for Brazen Hussies*. Despite her successes, she says that with POD there can potentially be a lack

of quality control. "Books are not always edited, some covers are uninteresting templates and the companies sometimes slap their own names on the books as the publisher. And the purchasing terms are structured in such a way that they don't conform to the 40-per-cent discounts for bookstores and no-returnable policies."

Ross agrees that in today's publishing climate an author must be dedicated to promoting his or her own book, whether self-published or conventionally published.

"Why do all the work for a paltry 10 to 15 per cent when you can make triple that or more? Authors today like to be in control of their own destinies. The thought of a big publishing house changing their title, dressing the book or rearranging text is unacceptable."

She is a firm believer that today, with the advantages of POD, a writer can have the best of both worlds. Publish a book, make it a success and then sell the rights to a major publisher. "We've done this with five of the 13 books we've published. With this approach, you remove the risk for them, yet leverage yourself to get a much better advance and have more clout in negotiating the contract."

Richard Brown, a published writer both conventionally and self-published, is currently working on a series of Canadian family histories for self-publication. He agrees that authors can retain all the creative control over their work, especially if it is created with a niche market in mind.

"Had there been print-on-demand only a few years ago, my last book would have sold even better, because I ran out of the second printing, but orders are still trickling in. There are at least 50 disappointed potential customers out there. With POD, readers and authors are satisfied and the costs can be contained and are easily calculated. Becoming a publisher is now easy."

PABD (Publish and Be Damned) offers perhaps the fastest and easiest way of seeing your book in print and being your own publisher. Adlibbed Ltd., the founder of the web-based concept at <http://www.pabd.com>, has automated a large part of a book's creation by developing a series of on-line, on-demand tools that help writers to format and design their own books. The tools are provided free of charge, and if one becomes a member, PABD includes a personal on-line shop, where the client can use further on-line coaching to market their work.

PABD is the brainchild of Iain Plunkett, a professional copywriter, and creative director Andreas Duess. They met while working at The Banner Corp., one of Britain's leading technology-focused ad agencies.

PABD established a simple philosophy: to provide writers with an easy means of turning their manuscripts into a finished book regardless of the arbitrary tastes of others, in such a way that the marketing and cost of the publication should not act as a barrier.

"We think it should be easy to see your book in print," says Plunkett, "and it shouldn't cost the earth. We only make one promise: We will help you create a high-quality book. What you do with it is up to you."

Plunkett says a lack of control or guidelines plagued earlier self-publishing ventures, but when, "people design the book for themselves, they feel empowered, especially when the final book has a professional finish that will help it compete on the bookshelf."

"We compare book publishing to amateur dramatics," says Duess. "You know, people on stage in their local church hall. They'll never be on Broadway, but they give themselves and their family pleasure and that's all that is needed. However, we're finding that a lot of professional writers are coming to us. People who are sick of publishers and want to take control of their own work and distribution. So the quality of work will be higher than we thought."

As the gates potentially open wider, giving the opportunity to every man and his dog to publish, I ask Plunkett and Duess if PABD will be the catalyst for the book market to be inundated with substandard work or even inappropriate material.

"We have some strict rules on the publication of risqué, inappropriate work, as do most self-publishing sites, but a badly written book will simply be sorted out by the market," Duess says.

Duess, also a keen photographer, is publishing artist trading-card books and is experimenting with the idea of turning Internet "blogs" (journals) into books, which he says is "only the start of what could be termed 'community publishing.'

"Anywhere there is a community based on mutual interest and, let's be honest, the Internet is absolutely packed to the brim with them, this type of self-publishing makes creating their own publications a viable option. A natural coming together of two growing Internet trends."

Lisa Charters, vice-president of on-line sales at Random House of Canada, says that short-run or POD is seen as a very useful technology for keeping books in print and available to consumers, but is used at the moment by established publishing houses as a way of extending the life of a book, rather than as a first-time printing method.

"Short-run printing is currently cost-effective for small print runs only. It is therefore not effective for us for the first release of a new book, which requires higher print runs and market distribution to have impact and prominence at book retailers across the country."

Andrea Lowne, the head of UK Authors Press, admits that at times her job as a small publisher can be relentless, often involving either unreadable or illiterate manuscripts. But she sees POD and small publishers as the future. "I personally know many supremely talented writers that are not related to this or that 'celebrity,' " she notes ironically, "but I don't expect things to change in the foreseeable future at [mainstream] publishing houses."

Before you start writing, however, remember that the quality of the book must still be of a standard to compete in the market. Anthony Delgado of Boho Press notes many authors "publish what they want, instead of determining the market and need for such a book, often not even researching the competition. . . ."

Those in the book trade may view the developments in digital publishing with mixed feelings. But for the writers among us, whether professional or unpublished, those dark days of simply hoping to see one's book in print are over.

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