

Print On Demand

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The purpose of this article is to consider Print-On-Demand publishing as an alternative to the aspiring author. It has its strengths and its weaknesses. You may well wonder as you begin reading this, but in the end I'm going to say some good things about it.

To a large extent, the title explains the technology. The way that literature has traditionally been printed involved running many copies simultaneously in order to bring the price per copy down. Smaller print runs, such as advertising brochures or concert programs, cost more per copy because they are small print runs. Printing a single book was all but unthinkable.

In the case of novels, the traditional print publisher begins by publishing several thousand copies. His goal is to run off the smallest number of copies he can while getting the best possible price per copy. These books are then sent to bookstores, which tend to prefer something along the lines of what has succeeded before. The remainder sits in a warehouse somewhere. Perhaps to be shipped as the orders come in, perhaps to be joined by any "remaindered" copies the bookstores couldn't move. This represents an investment on the part of that publisher, hence his paranoia about experimenting with new formats or (more importantly) new authors.

Print-On-Demand (POD), as the name implies, uses a completely different process. The end result is, the price per copy on a small run is much lower. How small of a run? Try one book. Zero inventory. The book is economically produced when the reader

orders it, not before.

This technology was probably invented for sales literature. Then someone realized it might be a pretty cool way to get ARCs (Advance Review Copies) out to the book reviewers before the book was actually available. Finally, someone decided to get it into the mainstream of authors.

Why is it so much cheaper to publish a single book via POD? The reasons really aren't relevant to this article, besides which they'd probably bore you. But if you care, the first link below spells it all out.

http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_01.htm

http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_02.htm

http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_03.htm

http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_04.htm

http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_05.htm

I recommend reading (or at least skimming) all five of those, by the way. It's quite a comprehensive analysis of how. Then come back to this article to determine why. Or if.

So why would an author publish in the POD format instead of the traditional print format? Anyone using a POD publisher will find himself or herself with zero marketing and zero editing.

Have you ever heard of the author who self-published and wound up with a best-seller? They do exist!

Now look at all the self-published authors who couldn't do that. They're the vast majority. The author who uses POD could be facing similar longshot odds.

(Keep reading. I'll say good things about POD eventually.)

POD has a definite advantage over self-publishing, in that you don't wind up with a few hundred copies of a book you can't sell in your basement. But neither option will ever bring you the readership that you'll get from a successful book from a traditional print publisher.

I have self-published. I went down to the local bookshop back in the pre-POD days, ran off 80 copies at \$3 a copy, and sold them to local bookstores for \$6 a copy. Lots of fun, and lots of learning, but I didn't get rich. My wage per hour stunk, but that was fine with me because I honestly didn't care. I broke even.

Most of us, though, just don't have that kind of time. And even if we do, why bother? Take the money you'd have invested and buy some Microsoft stock, then take the time you'd have invested and write more books. You'll be happier and you'll make more money.

Having said all that, why am I recommending POD at all? In my case, it's because I've written some books that no print publisher will ever pick up. That's my honest appraisal. If I were a mercenary type, I'd follow that up with something like "Why'd you even write those books then?" But if you are a REAL writer, you know the answer. It's always about writing first, marketing second. Two different hats. I'm assuming you already did the writing and now are wondering what the heck to do with it.

As an example, my EPPIE 2002 finalist is too short. I wrote it back when print publishers wanted 40,000 words. Now they want 50,000. But it doesn't take 50,000 words to tell that particular story, and I'm not padding it. Even if I were willing, it'd stink and nobody would buy it. Give the publishers some credit. They know padding when they see it. The same goes for the readers. It's not an option.

As another example, consider my short story collection. Critically acclaimed and selling well, but no traditional publisher wants short story collections from unknown authors. It's just that simple.

So, I simultaneously published these books in ebook form and POD form. Ebooks are cheaper and more environmentally friendly, but the paperback option is still there for those who can't or won't ever read an ebook.

(Daddy is in that group, by the way. How about your family?)

(If you want to know more about ebooks and why I recommend publishing in that format first, send a blank email to electronicpublishing@sendfree.com. As I write this article, I'm assuming you've read that one.)

Straight POD publishing has one glaring weakness. Anyone who thinks he/she can write has access to it. This gives it a credibility problem that's not going away.

As an author, your goal is to write what's in your heart, find people who like to read what you like to write, and get it out to them. (That's my goal, anyway.) If your name happens to be John Grisham, that equals many readers. But that's simply luck of the draw.

Many of us don't have such mass appeal. Possibly you're the sort of writer who knows exactly where you stand in that respect. But many don't, and they're flooding the POD market with stuff that most readers just plain don't want. Add to that the badly edited stuff, and the credibility problem with POD is understandable.

Ideally, what you want is for your epubliher to simultaneously release your book in both ebook and POD formats without charging

a POD setup fee. That way, you can direct all your promotional efforts at that single URL. My list of epubshers, in the aforementioned article, includes some who do exactly that. I've had good experiences with Novel Books Inc, Zumaya Publications and Hard Shell Word Factory.

Taking advantage of the POD option will also do this for your ebook. Many reviewers just plain won't touch an ebook. If you've done the POD bit, in addition to being able to tell all your friends and family "Look at this, I'm a real author because here's the paperback," you'll be able to send review copies via POD to those book reviewers.

If you find yourself with an epubsher who doesn't do this, you've got to do some shopping for a POD publisher. As you do this, remember the this. If a publisher makes all its money from writers, it doesn't need to sell a single book to a single reader to stay in business.

No matter how much praise they send your way, that's the bottom line. Writing is a calling, but publishing is a business. Those authors who won't distinguish between the two are what keep the opportunists in business. Ever see anything by Vantage Press in a bookstore or a library? I haven't. And yet, they were getting US\$5000 from many aspiring writers when I was starting out over 20 years ago and they're getting even more today.

Some POD places are no more than thinly veiled vanity (or subsidy) presses. No, on second thought, ALL POD places are like that. They have a valuable role to serve, but let's be honest. They do no editing, and they don't care. They're not making a massive profit from your setup fees, but they're making enough to stay in business. Even if you don't sell any books to anyone except your Gramma.

My previous article recommends epubshing before print publishing for the free editing you'll receive. If you're going with POD, consider it mandatory. Either that, or pay an editor. The author who can write a mistake-free manuscript does not exist. It's just that simple.

Still interested in POD publishing? I've done it, by the way, and it worked out well. Here are the questions you should ask yourself when you select a POD publisher:

Sale price of each book:

- * Who decides what it is?
- * Will readers pay that much for your book?

Profit per sale vs. your setup cost:

- * How many copies must you sell to break even?
- * Knowing all promotion is on your shoulders, can you sell that many?

As a rule, US\$99 or less setup cost is good and US\$800 is very bad. The latter, no matter how much publicity they promise you, is a vanity press . You will not sell enough books to recoup that \$800 unless you are a real marketing machine. If you are a marketing whiz, then you probably already know better than to pay that \$800 up front. Pay \$99 or less and then go sell hundreds or thousands of books.

A comprehensive list of POD publishers can be found on-line at <http://www.published.com/forum/booklink.html> . No, that site's not mine. A bit of hype from the POD publishers themselves, but worthwhile in spite of that.

One that isn't mentioned is Digital Print Australia, at <http://www.digitalprintaustralia.com> . I have used them before. My setup cost was AUD\$35 (roughly US\$18), which compares rather favorably to those listed below. Their price per copy is also excellent. The quality is at least as good as what you'll find in the bookstores. If you've ever bought a paperback from Writers Exchange E-Publishing, you've seen it already. If not, Digital Print will send you a free sample.

Two problems you may have with them, though, are shipping charges from Australia if that's not where your readers are located, and the fact that they don't offer a way to sell the books on their site.

For selling the books, I used the Book Store feature of AuthorsDen at <http://www.authorsden.com> , which is free. It offers a secure server. I know some authors who I trusted enough to send money to without a secure server. But I suspect that most of your prospective readers won't know you that well. In fact, they won't know you at all.

If the POD place only prints "trade paperbacks," which are the larger ones, your cost per book (and sale price per book) will be higher than if you can print "mass-market paperbacks." The choice is yours, but whatever you decide, visit the local bookstores and price similar-sized books. If you write like Stephen King but charge twice as much per book, readers are going to buy the author they've heard of, and that's probably not you. Yet...

Michael LaRocca is the author of four published novels and an EPPIE 2002 Award finalist. He is an American living in Asia, and he's been a full-time author and editor since December 1999. His website is designed to help you find the best free & low-cost

quality reads, and to help you improve/publish/promote your own writing free and avoid scams. http://free_reads.tripod.com

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