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# TEN REASONS YOU SHOULD BECOME AN INDIE PUBLISHER

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An Indie Publisher is a person who chooses a route to publication that is independent of the traditional commercial publishing process. It usually involves paying to design, print, and distribute the book. It may also include very small or regional presses, on-line publishing, eBook publishing, and print-on-demand publishing. Indie publishers usually publish their own works, but they may also publish on behalf of another person, often in partnership. Currently, there are over 4,000 members of the Independent Book Publishers Association (<http://pma-online.org/>), but that is most likely a small percentage of the number of independent publishers actually producing their own work.

So why should you become an independent publisher? Here are my top ten reasons.

## 1. *You've written a great story.*

You know your story is great because you've market-tested it. That means people—real people—have read and enjoyed your story. These people are not your closest friends, spouse, parents, children, fiancé, or anyone else who has a vested interest in telling you it is great. These are people who are representative of the market segment for your book. If your book is a YA novel, you've had some kids between 13 and 20 read it. You've listened to what they had to say about the book and you followed their suggestions when they gave you feedback. If your novel is a hard-boiled mystery, some 40 to 60-year-old guys down at the local pub have read it and decided to pass it on to others. If you've written a time management book, the executives of three companies have read your manuscript and have decided to recommend the book

to their middle management and professional staff.

If you haven't done any of this, you don't actually know that you've written a great book. That doesn't mean you can't publish it, it simply means that you are at greater risk because you haven't proven the book's worth. You don't really know how people will respond to it. What you have instead is a story you think is great. But you aren't the market. People just like you are too busy writing their own books to buy yours. Commercial book publishers want to know who will buy your book, and as a responsible independent book publisher, you need that same information. So stop and think carefully about who will want to read what you have written, then find half a dozen of those people to read your manuscript. Listen to what they say when they've finished. What did they like? What did they dislike? What should you change to make them interested in buying the book for themselves and their friends?

When you've done this bit of field work, you will know you have a great story!

## 2. *Your manuscript is publication ready.*

There's a difference between having a great story and having a great book. Believe it or not, a lot of the difference is technical. Your initial audience and test market might give good feedback, but when critics pick up your book, they will be less inclined to overlook errors in grammar, spelling, and syntax. They will notice a transposition, an incomplete sentence, a copy and paste error, and a missing or ambiguous antecedent.

There are different levels of editing, but you have at least had a line edit—checking for grammar, spelling, and material errors—done by a careful and skilled editor. Nothing says “self-published amateur”

like consistently confusing the use of “then” and “than.” This is often a simple typo, but one that is almost impossible to catch on your own. Because you are success-minded, you have enlisted competent people to help prepare your manuscript.

*3. You care about what people think when they see your book.*

We say you can’t judge a book by its cover, but people who buy books do exactly that. If the cover does not attract the attention of the reader, the book won’t sell. An increasing number of both print and eBooks are bought on-line, so the impression a potential buyer has of your book is based on a 1”x1.5” thumbnail image of the cover. People will not see the 2.25”x3.5” version of the cover unless they are inspired to click on the thumbnail, and are unlikely to see the full-size cover until after they have made a buying decision!

Of course, you may not be a professional book designer. So you’ll need one. This person should be able to design the cover, the author blurb, the text, and the chapter headings, using professional publication design tools like Adobe® InDesign®, Adobe® PageMaker®, QuarkXPress®, or a similar quality tool that controls typography of the print and PDF versions of your book. If you will be producing an eBook, the book designer needs to know how to design with XHTML and CSS according to the Open eBook Specification (<http://idpf.org/>) in such a way that the book not only looks good, but performs well on whatever eReader is used. eBooks are not an excuse for poor design.

If you do not have the design and technical skills necessary to produce an attractive book, locate a professional book designer to help you produce a quality product.

*4. You’re not J.K. Rowling.*

Or Dan Brown. You are not John Grisham, Steven King, or James Patterson. Or even Stephanie Meyers. These authors will account for 80% of fiction book sales this year. Since you are not going to sell a million copies of your first novel, or even 50,000, you must be pragmatic about only printing and distributing the number of books you believe you can sell. A traditional commercial publisher has to sell approximately 10,000 books to break even on a short print run. As an independent publisher, you can break even on 500. How much profit you can expect on your book will depend largely on what expenses you incur producing it. We covered the up-front cost of producing your book above—writing, editing, designing. There is also a cost of goods sold, which is the actual printing and delivery cost of your books.

Since you are a good businessperson as well as a creative writer, you will control the up-front costs by doing as much as you can yourself, and by negotiating favorable rates or even bartering for the things you need others to do. You may, for example, give a royalty to your designer instead of incurring up-front cost. This will increase your cost of goods sold, but will keep your cash flow under control. Create a budget for yourself that will allow you to at least break even at 500 copies (not including your own labor). Even at that, understand that only 20% of all books published last year sold more than 100 copies. That should be encouraging to you. If you sell 500, you are practically a best seller!

*5. You know the first 100 people who will buy your book.*

This is important and is closely related to #4 above. If you purchase 500 books 200 pages long from a reputable printing company, you should be

able to get the books for about \$3.00 each in today's market. This number changes based on everything from the length of the print run to the number of changes you make to fluctuation in market prices for printing. If you have already sold the first 100 copies at \$15 each when your books are delivered to you, your cost of goods is paid. That means that from that point on you are recovering the up-front costs and hopefully making a profit.

If you don't know your first 100 customers, how will you find 500?

eBook publication without a print run is a very acceptable way to reduce your cost of goods. So is print-on-demand, in which only the copies you sell are printed. But you should still have a good idea who will buy the first 100 books. One hundred sales in the first week of publication will rocket your book to the top of any eBook store, and nothing attracts attention like a fast-moving title. People will buy because "everyone else" is buying. The first 100 books are critical to your success.

*6. You have a business with legal and accounting processes in place.*

Indie publishing is a business with expenses, income, and taxes to be paid. You want to keep your business expenses and income separate from your personal or family income for practical purposes. If you are trying to earn money by publishing, you need to be able to track every expenditure and every sale. If the sales come in as unreported cash from which you buy your daily latte, you will not only risk your self-esteem, you may risk legal consequences as well.

To paraphrase an old "Sally Forth" cartoon by Francesco Marciuliano: "By becoming an indie publisher, you not only get to be the captain of your own destiny, but also the crew, the shipbuilder, the

dockhand, and the first to come upon the wreckage on the beach."

If you have not yet set up your business, do so before you pay out any expenses. Put the money you are willing to risk on your publishing venture in your business bank account and budget your expenses within what you have to spend.

*7. You have funds available to invest in your future as a writer/publisher.*

Yes, this is where that first deposit in your business bank account came from. You've decided that you don't really need your 401k, the stock Great Aunt Ida left you, or your children's education fund. Or you simply have an extra pile of cash lying around and want to do something creative with it. Perhaps you have a patron or an investor. Any of these are likely sources of funding for your publishing venture. And no, I'm not recommending that you cash in your 401k or mortgage your home, though I've known people who did. It is better to finance your business up front with a cash deposit in a bank than to fund it from your credit card. You will have more success controlling your expenses this way.

Stop and think about the publishing industry. When you submit a book to an agent and the agent sells it to a publisher, that publisher believes strongly enough in your book that it will pay you some amount of money in advance, pay for editorial services, pay for design and production, pay for printing, marketing, and promoting your book—all before they have sold a single copy. When you become an indie publisher, you are accepting the same responsibilities and liabilities. You have to pay for your book. There is considerably more respect in the industry today for people who genuinely take the route of being the publisher, rather than paying someone to publish your book for you (vanity publishing).

As the publisher, you have the funding

available to publish the book and know just how much you are risking.

*8. You have a marketing plan.*

There is absolutely nothing worse than receiving eight boxes of books, stacking them neatly in your garage, and leaving them there, unopened, for the next two years. But that is what will happen if you don't have a plan for marketing and selling your books. Your website, your presence on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iBooks, and Borders, and local independent booksellers who carry a stock of your books are all important forms of availability of your book; but they are not a plan for selling your book.

You need to know how to get people to buy your book. How will you use social media, like Twitter and Facebook, to drive traffic to your website or to an on-line bookstore? What events and contests will you sponsor? How will you get your book reviewed by the local book critic in the newspaper? On which television shows, radio shows, and podcasts will you be interviewed? Where will you do readings?

These are all standard avenues for promoting books, but because you are an indie publisher, you will think of many non-standard avenues as well. My cookbook—created as a fundraiser for a local youth theatre—is available at every intermission of every show in the theatre. It is also sold at the wine shop that suggested wine pairings for each of the menus. Place your books in venues where there are no other books offered for sale, like the coffee shop you visit daily, the newsstand in the local mall, and the bar where you wrote most of the book.

Your marketing plan outlines how you will sell your books so they don't end up sitting in the garage.

*9. You and your family are ready to spend the next*

*12 months carrying your books around with you and asking everyone you meet to buy one.*

If you have tried to get a traditional agent or publisher, you have learned to pitch your books to everyone. You pitch your books to friends before you ever start writing them. You pitch to agents and editors at conferences or through query letters. You pitch to strangers in an elevator. You pitch to people you meet on the bus. When you become an indie publisher, you keep pitching. The difference is that now you accept money and hand over books after the pitch.

You need to recruit a sales force from within your family and friends, and they need to pitch your novel. You also need to be where customers are so you can pitch to them. Arrange readings at indie bookstores, libraries, civic organizations, churches, schools, clubs, and on-line. Nothing will sell your book like your voice, passionately extolling its virtues, its characters, and its story.

*10. You have no illusions about how easy this will be.*

At least, you shouldn't have by now. When you become an indie publisher, you up the ante in a very exciting game. No one is there to take care of you. No one is there to write you a check for all your hard work. No one, in fact, is there to pick you up if you fall on your face. Becoming an indie publisher is launching a new career and you will never be the same afterward.

You decide to become an indie publisher, not because you can't be published commercially, but because you want control of the process and believe in your ability to succeed. You become an indie publisher for the same reason you became a writer—it is who you are.