

# The POD option

Weary of waiting on traditional publishers to dash his hopes, a writer turns to print-on-demand publishing—and successfully avoids a garage-full of books

By Don Meyer

**T**O MOST OF US, publishing means sending your book to an agent for consideration or directly to a publisher and hoping for the best. There are, however, other publishing options.

We all strive for standard, or royalty, publishing. If a publisher agrees to buy your manuscript, it will front all the costs and usually provide you with an advance. The publisher does all or most of the work, including promoting, marketing and paying for a minimum print run (usually 5,000 copies). The royalties you receive are around 8 to 12 percent.

Subsidiary publishing, or copublishing, is a joint project between the author and the publisher. Typically, a minimum printing is determined (usually 3,500-5,000 copies) and the author pays half the cost of printing, including marketing and distribution. In this scenario, royalties are normally split 50-50.

Self-publishing (or vanity publishing) means the author pays for all expenses including printing. A print run is determined (usually 1,000-5,000 copies). The author then has several cases of books in his/her living room or garage and has to set up the marketing, placement with online booksellers and distribution. The author receives 100 percent of the royalties.

While the above is a brief, oversimplified version of different publishing

options, there is another alternative: print-on-demand (POD) publishing. With POD publishing, books are only printed when they are needed. There is no inventory, no surplus and no remainders. Royalties are normally 20 percent.

Typically, with POD publishing there is an up-front fee of about \$450 to \$1,000. After the setup is complete, books are printed when required. The author receives a few copies as part of the initial cost. After that, the author may buy discounted copies for review and/or to sell. There is no inventory, no storage and no remainders.

With POD publishing, some of the marketing is done for you. The publisher creates graphics for you to print business cards, fliers, posters and other self-promotion materials. In addition, the book is also listed with the major online booksellers.

I had two manuscripts that I was trying to pitch to publishers. I agonized through the usual waiting time and ultimate rejection process. In the meantime, I was attending writers conferences and book fairs to get ideas and make contacts. At one book fair, I met an author who was promoting two books she had published through a POD publisher. The author explained the POD process to me. At first I was hesitant because of the self-publishing stigma. After subsequent discussions with the author, I decided to publish my Vietnam memoir, *The Protected Will Never Know*, using the POD process in order to learn for myself what POD was



After his positive experience in using a POD publisher for his first book, *The Protected Will Never Know*, Don Meyer followed suit with *Snow Ghost*.

all about. The POD publisher I chose was referred to me; when I picked mine there were only five such publishers, but now I believe there are more than 20.

You should have the best product you can create before you submit a manuscript. Just about anything can be published, and usually the POD publisher will take what you submit and print it. Not only did I review my manuscript several times, I also gave it to a professional editor before I submitted it. Remember, this is the product you will be selling, so take the time to make it your best work.

As for the submission process, I signed on to the POD publisher's Web site, selected the package I felt was right for me, supplied my credit card for payment, accepted the contract and submitted my manuscript. For my book, I provided my own cover art. I included an author picture (vanity does run deep) and a blurb for the back of the book. Then I hit "send."

I received an acceptance e-mail that the submission process was complete and an associate would be assigned to help me with the final stages.

Within two weeks, I received proofs. I read the proofs over several times and made a few changes. I submitted my changes and waited.

Three weeks later a box arrived with copies of *my* book. I could not resist—I went to the online booksellers and there was my book for sale!

I sent copies of my book to reviewers. I convinced the local bookstores to

place copies of my book on their shelves (usually on a consignment basis). I offered to do book signings. I encouraged all of my friends and relatives to buy a copy, and I also set up a Web site.

While I was basking in this euphoria, I was still submitting my other manuscript, that of my novel *Snow Ghost*, to publishers and reading my rejection letters. After six months, I did everything I could think of to promote and distribute my published book. A realization hit me that I had one published book that people were buying, and I was agonizing over my other manuscript still being rejected. I made an easy decision to take my second manuscript through the POD process.

The publishing of my second manuscript was easier than my first one. I had a copy of my second book in four weeks. The usual printing is a trade paperback; this time, however, I also ordered a hardcover version. Both versions were made available from online booksellers as well as my publisher. I updated my Web site to reflect that I now had two books published and two books for sale.

As my new book began selling, I was still receiving rejection letters. I thought about the irony of having my published book on my desk as I was reading the latest rejection letter!

Before you think that POD publishing is the answer you have been waiting for, let me point out some realities.

First and foremost, you must do your homework. As I mentioned earlier, there are a lot more POD publishers now. Make sure you research them thoroughly. Pick the one that is best suited for your type of work. If one publisher does not seem appropriate, find another. Remember, we all get blind-sided when someone offers to publish our work. Always get a second opinion.

Another point to remember is that POD publishing is still considered self-publishing. If you get your book published through a POD publisher, it will probably not get accepted by the major bookstore chains. You may not be given the respect you deserve when you say you used a POD publisher. Typically, POD-published books are priced slightly higher than comparable books (but you usually get a better royalty).

One of the major criticisms about POD publishers is that they will print anything. There are no editorial stages and no editor chopping your manuscript to pieces to get the best possible and most marketable work to print. You do all the work. Therefore, I would recommend that you ask someone who can be objective and who will give you an honest opinion to read your manuscript. I strongly advise you to have the best possible version of your manuscript before you hit the “send” button.

Marketing is solely your responsibility. You will need to do your own promoting. Visit your local and regional bookstores (not the chains) and offer to do a book signing or a signing/reading. Work with writers groups to do a signing and/or reading. I did a book signing at my local library and donated part of each sale back to the library—a double promotion event. Contact independent bookstores through mailings or e-mails, but don’t become obnoxious. If one doesn’t respond, try another. Stay within your genre. For example, if you wrote a mystery, contact mystery bookstores. If you wrote a nonfiction book, contact bookstores that carry books on the subject you wrote about.

Another area to consider is printed material. Send your book out for review. Contact your high school, college newsletters and associations. Get business cards printed that you can shamelessly hand out. Add a signature line to your e-mail or correspondence listing your book with a link to your Web site or e-mail. Be creative.

Lastly, remember that with POD

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**Marketing is solely your responsibility. ... I did a book signing at my local library and donated part of each sale back to the library—a double promotion event.**

publishing you will need to pay an upfront fee for setup, and there may be additional fees if you choose additional products and/or services.

**I**N MOST CASES with POD publishing, you keep the rights to your manuscript, but review the contract thoroughly. Keeping the rights to your book allows you to continue to pitch your work while you are selling your book. You may be able to attract a publisher or agent to take your manuscript to the next level by publishing it as an audio book or mass-market paperback. Or, there is also the possibility of selling the movie or TV rights to your book.

I recently finished my third book. I haven’t decided how to get it published yet. I may pitch it to an agent I know. I may send it off to a couple of publishers that specialize in this manuscript’s genre. I won’t spend a lot of time waiting to hear back from them, however, because I will not hesitate to POD-publish my third manuscript.

I have heard that the average turnaround time for a manuscript to book is five years. One year is spent trying to find an agent, and it usually takes another year for the agent to place the manuscript with a publisher. The time from acceptance by a publisher to the street is about 24 to 30 months! Once the book is on the street, there is typically a three-week window for it to sell. If the public does not embrace the book within this time frame, it is relegated to the world of remainders. The life of your book is over.

In contrast, my first book is approaching the three-year mark, and it is still selling and still with major online booksellers. The same goes for my second book, which has been out almost two years. I’m pleased with my POD publishing experiences, and if you are discouraged with the traditional publishing methods, I urge you to consider POD publishing your book.

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