

Independent publishing or royalty publishing — the choice is yours

Over the past twenty years I have seen radical changes in Christian publishing, and today the market is changing faster than ever. Now, some authors prefer independent publishing, while others still pursue conventional royalty publishing.

Many authors' journeys begin by knowing the right people. As much as most of us want to believe that our writing will speak for itself, the odds are against this type of discovery. The creation of a great author depends on more than just exceptional writing, but also on excellent speaking and communications skills, a marketable look, a charismatic personality, and a nonstop marketing drive. No matter which publishing track you choose, these skills are the baseline for what it takes to become a successful author. While we all know the odd author who succeeded despite an absence of these skills, in today's marketing-centric world, these authors will be even more the exception.

Royalty Publishing

A royalty-paying publisher brings much to the relationship, and some of its major strengths are listed below.

Editorial – Royalty publishers invest in projects they believe will sell through retailers to the end consumer, and good editorial work can add polish to a project that “stamps” it as one of theirs. This is a time-consuming and expensive process that involves industry experts and many self-published authors avoid it, which is one reason self-publishing has a poor reputation with retailers and readers alike.

Marketing/Publicity Relationships – A royalty publisher has spent years cultivating many key relationships and may arrange radio, print and other media opportunities to interview you and spotlight your book.

Sales Representation – A royalty publisher pays for a substantial sales team to sell their projects through to retailers and the end consumer. Since they have a significant financial interest in selling your book, they will work hard to ensure that the project is represented to the appropriate customer base. Royalty publishers are trusted by retailers. This is extremely important because there is a strong bias against self-published authors by many retailers.

Design and Typesetting – A royalty publisher has turned these operations into a science and understands both the target market and the creative process to achieve a design that will cause the customer to notice your book among all the other clutter on the bookstore shelves.

Manufacturing – Publishers manufacture books in volume and receive vendor discounts the solo author could only dream about. This process is fraught with expensive lessons to be learned and best left for true experts in the field.

Economics – Royalty publishers pay for all the services above, plus the office space for all of their employees. I have heard it said that 3 of 10 books lose money, 3 of 10 break even, and 4 of 10 make money—so publishers work very hard for that once-in-a-lifetime breakout novel that they and the author can ride to fame and fortune. The reality is that most authors never experience that breakout title and get only a small portion of each book's sale—about .50 cents for each book sold.

Independent Publishing

Independent publishing can be ideal for authors and for small organizations. This type of publishing has great freedom and potential but also some risks. Several of its major strengths and weaknesses are listed below:

Editorial – Independent publishing offers freedom in the editing process to change only the content you wish to change. Independent publishing does not need to focus on editing for the masses, since often these books are an ideal fit for limited markets that royalty publishers usually ignore. Still, good editorial work is essential and will add polish to a project that will help a book stand out from its competition. Since you are

making a significant time and monetary investment in self-publishing, an edited project ensures that your readers aren't distracted from your message by the items you may have overlooked.

Marketing/Publicity Relationships – A small author/publisher needs to work very hard to generate good buzz in radio, print, and other media. Even royalty-published authors need to carry their own weight in this arena, and any good author will create and mine a database of industry contacts with each successive news release opportunity. While many self-publishing companies offer some marketing, it usually consists of a drop in the bucket compared to the full-time marketing/publicity campaign a book really needs to sell big.

Sales Representation – Independently-published authors are on their own here. Royalty publishers are trusted by retailers, but you are not, and you need to be willing to place your book on consignment, so the retailer takes no risk by carrying your book. However, if you already have a following, you can parlay your following into a far more lucrative model by selling direct to the consumer rather than providing the retailer with the 55% discount most require.

Design and Typesetting – You need the help of someone who has significant experience with books, not just anyone who has access to a design program – printers have very specific file requirements that must be met. Working with an experienced book designer will ensure that your book is up to industry standards from the cover to the interior design.

(Be sure that the work done is on a “work for hire” basis or you will end up paying the designer their own royalty for every book that you sell for the rest of your life.)

Manufacturing – This process is fraught with expensive lessons to be learned and best left for true experts in the field.

Economics – Independent publishing can be extremely lucrative, if you have an existing audience and can sell your books yourself. Instead of the .50 cents per book earned by royalty-based authors, independent authors can easily make \$5.00 or more per book sold. You need to sell only 1/10th the number of books to make the same money as a royalty-published author! Beware of the print-on-demand solutions that cost so much per book that you have to raise the retail price above the price of other books on the shelf.

Who owns your book? Here is where many self-publishing models have their hooks into your financial future. Independent publishing may not mean that you own your book, even if you own the copyright. Whoever's logo is on the spine, or whoever owns the ISBN is who retailers or Amazon may end up contacting to obtain more copies. As mentioned above, the cover and interior art needs to be done as a “work for hire” or the artist has claim to royalties forever. Who will end up keeping the digital files from which your book was produced at the printer? Will you receive a copy of those completed files in a CD that you can then take to any other printer in the future? These hooks and others force you to keep coming back and spending more money even if their solutions no longer work for you. Ensure in writing the disposition of your work, or you may be signing away all you have worked so hard to create.

If independent publishing looks like it may be the solution you need, then visit us at www.bethanypress.com for an integrated cost-effective solution. Bethany Press has eliminated the headaches by providing cover design, typesetting, and manufacturing all in one easy stop.

John DePree

President/CEO Bethany Press