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Self-Publish or Traditional? My Experience with Books for Librarians

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by **Walt Crawford** (Semi-retired Speaker, Writer, Researcher) <waltcrawford@gmail.com>

You have a great idea for a book to serve libraries and librarians — one you're sure you could pitch to a library publisher. You're also an experienced writer; think you can edit your own work fairly well; and your idea is time-sensitive.

Should you self-publish the book, or work with a traditional publisher? If you *do* self-publish, how should you go about it?

I've done both (fifteen books to date through traditional library publishers, ten or so on my own) and the short answer is: There is no easy answer. Most recently, after years of self-publishing, I've gone back to library publishers for three books, while doing another on my own. The fact that I went to traditional publishers for those books says something about my own experience with self-publishing — but it's as much about my marketing skills and capital as it is about publishing routes.

Comparing the Processes

Before you consider self-publishing, you should understand the steps involved in book publishing. There's a concise discussion of those steps (and what changes in self-publishing) in my recent **Information Today, Inc.** book, *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing*, 2012, ISBN 978-1-57387-430-4. If you're a public or academic librarian, your library should own this book anyway: It shows the way to offer a new service *every* community can use — and the total cost to those who use it or to the library itself is a copy of the book.

Chapter 2 of the book, "Publishing and Micropublishing," summarizes the book publishing process as thirteen steps: Idea and writing; rewriting and initial editing; acquisition/acceptance; line editing; copyediting; authorial revisions; layout and typography; proofreading; indexing; cover design; printing and binding; distribution, sales and fulfillment; and marketing and publicity.

It goes on to consider how those steps change in micropublishing — that is, using print-on-demand fulfillment services to publish books that may serve niches with from one to 500 copies by producing books individually as they are needed.

Micropublishing is the ideal method to publish family histories and other ultraniche books — but it's also a great way to see whether a book will appeal to a larger market. Economical micropublishing primarily means **Lulu** and **CreateSpace**, both of which use print-on-demand techniques and serve as fulfillment agents, neither of which charges anything up front or pretends to be more than a service agency. (Both sell various editing, layout, cover and marketing services; neither *requires* any of them.)

Micropublishing does not change four steps (the first two plus authorial revisions and cover design), eliminates the third step and *substantially* changes the remaining eight steps. If you're using **Lulu** or **CreateSpace**, distribution, sales, and fulfillment are covered — but the rest is up to you. For some of us, that last step — marketing and publicity — may be the biggest argument *against* self-publishing.

Book quality is not an issue for **Lulu** or **CreateSpace** (both companies for trade paperbacks, **Lulu** also for hardcovers). If anything, the books may be better than some trade paperbacks since both offer 60lb. cream paper, a step up from the 50lb. white paper that's common in the field. Whether the pages of the book will look as good mostly depends on doing it right, and that's what *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing* is all about. You don't need new software (if you have Word or LibreOffice), but you do have to work at it.

Two Routes to Self-Publishing

Traditionally, self-publishing involved substantial capital costs and, in essence, becoming a small publisher: You had to contract with a printer and binder, buy several hundred or a few thousand copies up front, store them, and fulfill orders. Micropublishing eliminates up-front costs and turns fulfillment over to the service agency, but producing books one at a time is more expensive.

If you're *certain* you can sell 500 to 2,000 or more copies of a book, traditional self-publishing may yield more revenue per book. If you're a motivational speaker who sells lots of copies in the back of the room after your speaking engagements, traditional self-publishing is a great solution. For the rest of us, micropublishing makes better sense.

Advantages of No-Cost Self-Publishing

The advantages of no-cost self-publishing over traditional publishing are fairly clear. Let's take them in order through the publishing process.

There's no submission-and-acceptance process. **Lulu** and **CreateSpace** don't do editorial review: They're not publishers.

You can be sure line editors and copyeditors won't tarnish your golden words — because there won't be any editing unless you pay extra for it. That is both an advantage and a disadvantage.

The book will look *exactly* the way you want it to, if you know how to get there.

The book is likely to emerge *much* faster through self-publishing than through traditional publishing. How fast? Once you prepare the PDF for the book itself and prepare a cover (which may involve using templates that the service agency provides), uploading might take half an hour (if you've done your work right): Your book is available *immediately*. No scheduling against other books. That — and the ability to publish books that really don't have a big enough market to interest a traditional publisher — may be the greatest advantage of micropublishing.

You can set your own price (as long as it covers production costs), and these days that probably means you can price your book well below the typical library book price.

You'll get more of the cover price for each book sold than you would through traditional publishers. Say you write a 200-page paperback book. If you price it at $25 on **Lulu**, you'll net $11.80 per copy. If a traditional library publisher does it, the price is likely to be $45 — and you'll probably get $4.50 to $5.40 per copy, maybe a little more. (If you priced the same book at $45 on **Lulu**, your net would be $32.40.)

If you've struck gold, you can change your mind. You control all rights to the book. You're free to self-publish it using your own printer or to take it to a traditional publisher without even consulting **Lulu** or **CreateSpace**. The sole exception: If you've used **CreateSpace** (which always assigns an ISBN) or accepted **Lulu's** offer of a free ISBN, you can't use the same ISBN elsewhere — that ISBN belongs to **CreateSpace** or **Lulu** respectively. But once you replace the ISBN, you're good to go. (If you used a template for your cover, you should prepare a new cover as well.)

Advantages of Traditional Publishing

Let's take the steps in the same order. First, the fact that a publisher accepts your idea and acquires your manuscript means that the publisher believes it's marketable to a sufficiently wide audience: That can be very reassuring!

At least with some publishers, you'll get an advance. That's money up front. Since this is the library field, it's probably not going to be a *lot* of money.

Your manuscript will be edited — typically at three levels, although these may be combined. A line editor will go through it with a critical eye and suggest changes, sometimes as small as a word and sometimes as large as rethinking whole chapters or, in the worst case, scrapping the project entirely. A copyeditor will make sure everything's consistent and that your grammar is good. A proofreader will
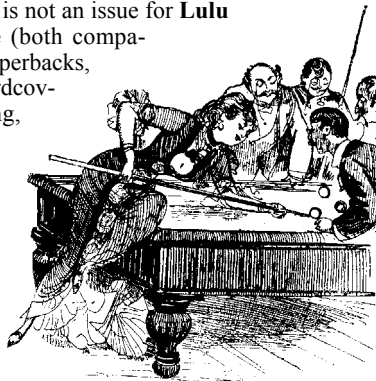
make sure things are spelled right and typos haven't crept in. Some writers find line editing and copyediting intrusive. I've always found editing valuable: with only 20+ books and 500+ articles to my credit, I believe my words can always be improved.

Your book will be professionally designed and typeset — which *might* mean it will have a more polished look than you'd get through self-publishing, although that's not a given.

You'll benefit from a professional cover design — at least most of the time. Look at the cover of *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing*: I believe it's a great concept carried out superbly by a first-rate cover designer. I could *not* have done nearly as well.

The publisher will market your book — which involves knowing who should get review copies and sending them out, inclusion in the right catalogs, approval plans if you're lucky, ad mailings in some cases, and all the rest. (The publisher will also handle printing, binding and order fulfillment — but so do **Lulu** and **CreateSpace**.)

For me, the primary advantage of traditional publishing is that last one (although good covers are also nice). It's the reason I'm likely to turn to a traditional publisher if I can make the case that the book will sell well enough and if I can tolerate the delay in getting the book to market.

Marketing Issues and Publishing Delays

Here's where things fall apart, at least for me. The best I can do for my **Lulu** books is publicize them in my e-journal *Cites & Insights*, on my blog, in other social network spaces, and in library lists. You can't do serious marketing using library lists such as PUBLIB: It violates their terms of service; and, in some cases, your messages will be rejected. I did one PUBLIB announcement of *Give Us a Dollar and We'll Give You Back Four (2012-13)*, which should have been my biggest self-published book. It would clearly have been inappropriate to do more. I'm not on the speaking circuit; I don't have thousands of people hanging on my every word; I wasn't willing to spend a few hundred dollars up front to print multiple copies, try to find the right review outlets, and send them review copies.

The results? Even though I set the price low and offered eBook versions at an even lower price, this book — designed to help even the smallest public library tell its story to funding agencies — has sold 67 copies in its first five months. That's about one-tenth of the minimum I was hoping for (there are nearly 9,000 public libraries in the U.S.). I have no doubt that the right library publisher could have sold at least 600 and quite possibly thousands of copies of the book. *If* the publisher thought it was worth doing and *if* the delay in publishing what's distinctly a time-sensitive book didn't prevent it from working properly.

Delays in publishing can be a real issue. My most recent manuscript for a traditional library book publisher went to the publisher in March 2012. It was through all editorial processes by September 2012. As of this date (April 2013), I'm still waiting for it to appear. It was based on large-scale, somewhat time-sensitive research done in the late fall of 2011. By the time it does emerge, the research will be more than a year old. That may or may not be a problem for this particular book. I would regard it as a major problem for a book like *Give Us a Dollar*. It doesn't have to be that way; but, when you work with a traditional publisher, you have little (if any) control over the scheduling.

Decisions and Unknowns

The final answer can only be: It's complicated.

If you're an experienced writer, have honest friends, who will review your work, or be willing to pay for an editor (and possibly a copyeditor as well), if you use my template (*The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing* points to it) or build your own and if you pay attention, you can produce a professional-quality book and get it into self-publication rapidly. If you're good at marketing and publicity, that may be the way to go.

If you're *not* so good at marketing and publicity, if your words need professional help, or if you're not willing to deal with the detail work of getting layout right, then you should stick with a traditional publisher. 🐦

Self-Publish or Perish!

by **John D. Riley** (Regional Sales Representative, Busca, Inc.) <jdriley@comcast.net> *www.buscainc.com*

What is so great about getting published by a mainstream publisher? First of all, you have to locate a literary agent; or they won't even look at your manuscript. No more "over the transom" surprise blockbusters. Plus locating a literary agent is almost as hard as finding a publisher once was. Perhaps publishers are wary of looking at your book for fear of a law suit if they publish something similar in the future, or they might just feel inundated with stuff and want the books vetted by someone in the industry. Did I say industry? Publishing is first and foremost a business, and your book will be looked at only if it has commercial potential.

Once your Great American Novel or History of Bean Sprout Farming is finally released, your publisher will love you for about a week before focusing attention on the "Next Big Thing." **Mark Pendergrast**, a former academic acquisition librarian and acquaintance, wrote a fascinating social history of **Coca Cola** entitled *For God, Country, and Coca Cola*. His publisher dutifully put it in their seasonal catalogue, sent out review copies to the trade, and had their reps show the book to bookstore buyers while on their rounds. After that weeklong blitz, he was on his own. His publisher had moved on to promote the next book in its list. **Mark** tried visiting bookstores to promote his book at his own expense. He even had to buy copies of his book to show to prospective buyers. His profit per book sold was under a dollar. If you get a chance, buy a copy. It's a great read, and he even gives away the "secret formula" for Coke (hint: it involves neroli oil) .

Another drawback to publishing with a commercial publisher is that they own the copyright to your book until it goes out-of-print, but o.p. is actually a thing of the past as print-on-demand will give your publisher indefinite rights. But if you self-publish, you retain all rights to your book. Another consideration is commercial publishers generally will not issue simultaneous print and e-versions of your book, but you can.

Bob Holley, the editor of this special *Against the Grain* segment, asked me to recount my experiences as a self-published author. I published my first book in 2004, *Else Fine: Little Tales of Horror from Libraries and Bookshops*. I distilled my forty years of work in bookstores and libraries into a series of short stories. Fiction gave me the freedom to encapsulate many different experiences and speculations in one narrative. I found it much more fun and creative than a straightforward history or autobiography. Writing fiction was a new experience for me, and I really took to it with zeal. I also found that writing on a word processor was liberating, much in the way that digital photography allows you to try many angles and points of view before you commit to print. I have since written three books of fiction (with another one in progress).

I fell into self-publishing almost by accident. I might have remained one of those frustrated writers who wallpaper their homes with rejection slips from commercial publishers and agents. Fortunately it turned out