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What Every Author Should Know Before Publishing an eBook

With more publishing freedom comes more responsibility

By Jennifer Pullinger – March 26, 2012



Authors don't need traditional book publishers anymore. Or do they? Almost daily, we see headlines proclaiming the demise of 'dead tree' books. "At some point the e-book will become the publishing market's primary engine," was one such headline from a recent feature in *The Guardian*.

One of the advantages of self-publishing an eBook, says *New York Times* best-

selling romance novelist Barbara Freethy, is the potentially larger piece of the profit or royalty an author gets compared to what they earn with a traditional publisher.

"You can also put your books up more frequently, so when you finish a book and it's ready to go, you might not have to wait a year and a half. You can control your price and you can also have flexibility. You can change the cover if it's not working, that type of thing," she said. Think you're ready to take the leap? Beware. With more creative control and the potential for more money comes more work and responsibility. Here's why:

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Many writers are creatives and dreamers, but they're not always the best businesspeople. If you opt to publish your eBook on your own, forgoing the editorial and design expertise as well as marketing, distribution and sales support that traditional publishers offer, then you should be prepared to outsource or do all of this work yourself. That includes managing the bottom line and return on investment.

Since 2011, Freethy, who has been published by Pocket Books, NAL, and HarperCollins, has sold 1.6 million eBooks, primarily by securing the rights to all of her backlist titles after they went out of print and then re-releasing them as eBooks. Authors who publish their own eBooks should expect to work harder and wear a lot of hats, "because you are basically running an entire publishing company," she explained. "Everything that the publisher was doing for you as an author, you are now doing for yourself as a self-publisher."

"There is a ton of work behind it, and the author has to really become a business owner and a marketing expert. And you are your own art department. You have to hire out your own editors, hire out various parts that would be given to you if you were working with a traditional publisher," she said. If you prefer to focus on the writing and the writing only, then self-publishing may not be for you.

"Everything that the publisher was doing for you as an author, you are now doing for yourself as a self-publisher."

You need a platform before you publish.

Do yourself a favor: Build your platform ahead of time, well before you release your eBook. This applies whether you are publishing on your own, through a digital publisher, or through a traditional publisher, who will also publish the print version of your title. Your platform is the means by which you reach your audience. That could be a Facebook or Twitter fan base in the thousands, a frequently updated blog with compelling content and lots of commenters who hang on your every word, or a strong, vetted email list of supporters. This way, you don't have to rely as heavily on, for example, a good review from the *Washington Post*, a feature in *O* magazine, or a spot on *Good Morning America* to make or break your work.

If you don't have a platform, then you will need to make connections to someone who can be a "big mouth" for your work. Sarah Mae, author of *How to Market and Sell Your e-Book* said, "I watched a TED Talk the other day about YouTube and how videos go viral, and really what happens is it's not the video. It's about an influencer, or they call tastemaker, who happens to mention it and then all of a sudden, bam! It goes crazy."

"For example," she continued, "the 'Double Rainbow' video that went viral, they were stagnant on YouTube for months and months, and then one person who happened to have influence or a platform tweeted it, or Facebooked it, or blogged it, and all of a sudden then it goes everywhere. So, if you don't have the platform, you are going to need a strong ally or know some people who do have platforms who go to bat for you or just happen to like it."

Social media is for making connections, not selling your book.

The skills to build your marketing platform aren't hard to come by, said Catherine Ryan Howard, author of *Self-Printed: The Sane Person's Guide to Self-Publishing*. "I don't think you need to have any innate knowledge; I certainly didn't. I started off from scratch and learned as I went along," Howard said.

She did, however, suggest that eBook authors take a nuanced, measured approach to how they use social media to spread the word and build relationships with potential readers. Remember,

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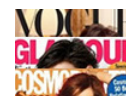
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social media is supposed to be a two-way exchange, not just for loudly broadcasting what you are selling. "Authors who worry too much about marketing come off like insurance salesmen who've just knocked at your door during dinner, and no one buys their book," she said.

No matter what route you go, authors are used to doing much of the heavy lifting themselves when it comes to marketing. "We've all had encouragement to put up Facebook pages, and to Twitter, and to develop interactive websites, and to build a mailing list, and so these skills every author is learning, whether they are self-published or are traditionally published," said Freethy. "Very few publishers do this for them unless you are Steven King or somebody at the very, very top. Every author is doing a lot of the marketing themselves," she says.

"If you don't have a platform, then you will need to make connections to someone who can be a 'big mouth' for your work."

Success could hinge on your relationships with distributors.

Direct access to electronic retailers is one of the bonuses of the self-publishing eBook market, said Freethy. "In the beginning, you had to work mainly with aggregators like Smashwords, which still a lot of people do. But each of the big retailers has either opened up a self-publishing portal or they are about to."

The Amazon Kindle Store, Apple iBookstore, Barnes & Noble Nook Store, Diesel eBook Store, and numerous other e-retailers are out there, while places like Smashwords and Createspace help do the distribution for you. "My philosophy has been to go direct to every retailer, because then you can develop a personal relationship and then you have really quick control. You can change your price in an hour if you want to," said Freethy. "That kind of flexibility you don't have when you are working through a publisher. They can do that, but you have to convince them to do that and that's not always easy."

Profits and bestseller status are still hard to come by.

Howard advises authors who are considering publishing their own eBooks to not abandon the traditional publishing marketplace just yet. "The majority of books by far are still purchased in brick and mortar bookstores, and it's near impossible for a self-publisher to get on the shelves in any kind of meaningful way there," she cautioned. "Personally, I am using self-publishing as a foundation, to prove myself as a writer and a marketer, in the hopes of one day securing a traditional publishing deal."

"The publishing industry are the experts as far as book production goes, and although I think it's easy to get carried away in the current climate what with all the sensationalist headlines," said Howard, "but you have a much better chance of actually selling copies with a publisher behind you."

And don't expect success to happen overnight. Self-published eBook authors face the same crowded marketplace as traditionally published authors. "I think that it's a mistake for authors to think that they can just write one book, put it up, and it could be a bestseller," said Freethy. "That could happen, but just like in traditional publishing, that's rare. Writers have to develop a career. They have to write more than one book. When readers like one book, they want the next book. So, sometimes I hear people get discouraged, 'Oh, I put my book up and nothing happened.' You have to keep writing and you have to keep developing your career."

NEXT >> [MP Making an eBook, Part 2: Marketing](#)

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