

Responsible Subsidy Publishing

Part 1: When is POD a Vanity Press?

by Deidre Randall

MANY PRESSES print books for a fee, but *responsible* publishing services are less easily found. How does an author select a responsible service?

Subsidy publishing is sometimes called self-publishing, because authors pay to produce a book. But in reality “subsidy publishing” means that the author is paying for an inclusive and a professional service, while “self-publishing” means going it alone: hiring editors, designers, printers, and distributors and trying to determine if each service is of high quality for a fair price.

“Vanity publishing” is often confused with subsidy publishing or with self-publishing. But a vanity publisher generally publishes anything submitted, as long as the bill is paid. In contrast, a responsible subsidy publisher selects manuscripts according to criteria such as quality of the writing or the social importance of the subject. Although some traditional publishers use print-on-demand (POD) technology, vanity publishers are often called POD publishers because they frequently use the POD process. So what’s the real story behind print on demand?

Faster and less labor intensive than offset printing, POD technology can produce small numbers of copies quickly. It eliminates the need to maintain inventories or risk large print runs. Many responsible publishers use POD technology to create small print runs or to reprint titles requiring only a small number of copies each year. Books with few or no images are the best candidates for POD. The technology itself is a wonderful advance, but its use by vanity publishers has given POD a bad name.

Print-on-demand publishing is booming. A May 28, 2009, article in *Publisher’s Weekly* reports, “The production of traditional books rose 1% in 2007, to 276,649 new titles and editions, but the output of on-demand, short run and unclassified titles soared from 21,936 in 2006 to 134,773.” Kevin Weiss, CEO of Author Solutions, which now owns AuthorHouse, iUniverse, and Xlibris, says that on average there are 150 copies sold for each title published. The Book Industry Study Group reports that the vast majority of self-published or POD books published in 2007 sold less than 50 copies each.

The literature POD publishers offer to prospective authors cites similar numbers. AuthorHouse reports selling more than 2.5 million books in 2008, which sounds like a lot but averages out to a mere 54 sales per title. In the *New York Times* in 2008, iUniverse VP Susan Driscoll admitted that most iUniverse authors sell fewer than 200 books. (In contrast,

titles produced by our small subsidy publishing house, Peter E. Randall Publisher, sell on average 500–3,000 copies within the first two years.) Given these statistics, it’s important to understand exactly how, or if, a publisher assists with sales. Authors should also know that many book reviewers will not touch books from POD publishers, and many bookstores and wholesalers will not carry physical copies of these titles, since they are seen as not returnable.

Also, vanity POD publishers offer a completely online experience, promising convenience and low cost. The process, however, is removed from individual human contact, and the level of service is minimal. Books are not usually vetted, so these companies publish anything that comes in. Authors are responsible for generating sales or buying their own books and reselling them. The author discount guarantees the company a profit, so these companies experience little to no risk when publishing unedited, untried manuscripts. Whether the author can actually sell these copies and recoup costs is another matter. (Contrast this discount policy to that of our subsidy house, where we work with authors to make sure the cost per book is low enough that authors can recover their costs if they sell their books. Our authors own their books, and we do not take a percentage of their sales income.)

POD vanity presses offer additional services for a fee but only as add-ons, or luxuries, instead of essential tasks. To offer copyediting as an “additional service” is unconscionable. It’s common knowledge in the industry that every writer needs an editor. To imply otherwise is to exploit writers unschooled in the publishing process. It’s important to note that the *author* is responsible for editing a manuscript *before* submission to a vanity POD publisher.

A reputable subsidy publisher includes essential services such as copyediting and design as part of a reasonable basic fee. Learning to recognize the elements of professional book design will help writers decide if a subsidy press produces books that can stand proudly next to those of trade publishers.

In the next issue of *NH Writer* Deidre Randall will discuss how to recognize high-quality design and services and which authors are most likely to benefit from subsidy publishing.

Deidre Randall is the CEO of Peter E. Randall Publisher (www.perpublisher.com) and Blueline Publicity (www.bluelinepublicity.com), a book-marketing firm. In 2007 she launched a new imprint, Jetty House, which focuses on books tied to New Hampshire people, places, and history.



Deidre Randall

photo by Peter E. Randall