

Responsible Subsidy Publishing

Part 2: When and How to Find a Good Publisher

by Deidre Randall

In Part 1 of this article (published in our spring 2010 issue), Deidre Randall explained the difference between genuine subsidy publishers and “vanity” presses. Here she discusses how to recognize a high-quality subsidy publisher and what kind of writer will benefit most from subsidy publishing.

ARE YOU A WRITER who could use subsidy publishing to good advantage? If so, how can you be sure to choose a reputable publisher? Remember, reputable publishers provide services for all aspects of a book, using experienced professionals: editors, indexers, designers, printers, and distributors. For a high-quality book that will be competitive in the marketplace, you need guidance from a seasoned publisher. In-person or phone meetings, conducted throughout your project, should be standard practice for your publisher.

Publishers who vet manuscripts based upon merit or the author’s larger intent are in the reputable category. An author may intend to use a book to draw attention to an issue or to raise money for a charitable cause. The manuscript may need some work, but if its aim is clearly to benefit others, a responsible subsidy house may bring the book on board and work out the kinks.

What Are the Elements of Professional Book Design?

A reputable subsidy house includes professional, individual design of cover and interior; sales and distribution support; marketing services or consultation; personal service throughout the process; and previous experience producing high-quality publications. Beware of printers with “press” in their names; they may offer only limited design services. It’s helpful to know whether you are dealing with a publisher, who may work with many different printers, or with a printer, who may be able to produce a few copies but doesn’t have the larger project view that a publisher does.

Competitive books need a few basic components. The back cover should have an EAN Bookland price-encoded bar code, a printed ISBN, a subject heading, and a price. Blurbs or descriptions and readers’ comments, plus an author bio and photo, are important as well. The front cover should have a title that can be read from thirty feet away.

Simple errors signal to reviewers and readers that a book was not professionally published. For example, a copyright page—with the author’s name, year of copyright, and publisher’s information—should appear in the first few pages of the book (the “front matter”). This front matter also should be numbered correctly, with lowercase Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, etc.). Page 1 doesn’t appear until the first page of the author’s actual text.

What Kinds of Writers Can Benefit from Subsidy Publishing?

In some instances, subsidy publishing is an author’s best choice, such as those who have a targeted list or a geographic area that is hot for sales. If the title can sell directly to readers, subsidy publishing can actually provide more financial rewards

than traditional distribution with a trade publisher. This kind of nonfiction author has a unique opportunity to contact a target market, especially using social media like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. This networking can support preselling, which is one way to guarantee a market for the book. Preselling works best with an incentive, like free shipping.

Public speakers who need a book to support presentations or professions are also good candidates for subsidy publishing. These authors include economists, educators, doctors, attorneys, certified financial planners, chefs, historians, and fitness experts. Good candidates are those who have a clearly identified audience that can be reached directly by e-mail, social media, or good old-fashioned direct mail. These authors may also publish an e-newsletter or write a blog, which can help build a national audience.

Certain fiction authors can use subsidy publishing, but it is a challenge for an unknown author trying to launch a career. Yet fiction authors who already have a connected readership, whether through previously published books or online work, may want to reach out to those readers and can use subsidy publishing to great benefit.

Authors who choose subsidy publishing maintain control of their publication schedules, plus the design and content of their books. With a trade publisher, writers lose control over the schedule and are ultimately at the mercy of the publisher’s vision for a book. Sometimes authors need to get a book published by a certain date, but trade publishers’ somewhat inflexible schedules could bump the book back a season. Staff changes can also affect trade publishers. If the editor who chose your book leaves the company, suddenly no one at the publishing house is your book’s champion. As a result, the book’s publishing schedule may change, and the publisher’s overall vision may also shift.

It takes work to make a book successful, whether you have a subsidy or trade publisher. Your definition of success should be clear *before* you publish. Some authors seek critical acclaim to launch their reputations, while others want to sell a certain number of copies to recover publishing costs, and still others hope to raise awareness of a cause. Whatever the reason, responsible subsidy publishing offers an excellent way for many authors to get into print.

CEO of Peter E. Randall Publisher and BlueLine Publicity, a book-marketing firm, Deidre Randall created the imprint Jetty House, which focuses on books tied to New Hampshire people, places, and history.



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photo by Peter E. Randall