

Is Print-on-Demand Publishing Right for You? SPECIAL REPORT

Stephanie Gunning, "The Publishing Insider"

How effective are the so-called print-on-demand publishing services? What are their advantages for the self-published writer? Are these choices right for you?

In recent years, a number of companies have set up online publishing services for writers. These services represent advancement both on working privately with a printing company to generate a book intended for the marketplace and on outlets for "vanity" projects that aren't intended to be marketed to the general public.

Such companies include: BookSurge.com (connected with Amazon), iUniverse.com (connected with Barnes and Noble), AuthorHouse.com, and Lulu.com.

I phoned my friends Carol Hoenig and Cherise Thorne to ask about their firsthand experiences. What was good? What was bad? What would they advise an author to do or say when pursuing on-demand publishing? Some key factors emerged.

Carol published her novel *Without Grace* through iUniverse because she knew needed to build a publishing track record in order to attract a mainstream publisher for future works. She was pleased with the manufacturing and design of her book cover, and with the customer service. Her career history as an author event coordinator for Border's Bookstores helped her in marketing the finished book. She says, "Being published by iUniverse or another on-demand company can give you an edge in seeking agents and publishers. But if you don't know how to market your book, you might want to buy into the star category right away, as that improves how your book is handled by iUniverse. You will naturally be placed in that category after sales of 500 books, but be aware that it isn't easy to sell 500 books. It could take a while unless you pay the extra fee."

Print-on-demand service is quick and easy, and relatively affordable. You do the writing and the company provides professional know-how--editing, design, manufacturing, an ISBN, and placement in their online store. That means someone can shop for you by hyperlink and be mailed a copy of the book. But don't expect your book to be found in physical stores. By using standardized templates, you save money and effort. However, you could make mistakes.

Cherise Thorne chose to go with the least expensive option from Book Surge. That meant the paper of the cover was thinner than she would have preferred and thinner than books you would normally find in bookstores. She had a few problems with the finished template not looking exactly as it did on the computer screen, and also encountered hidden costs in remedying a computer file mistake. Someone inattentive in quality control made a mistake and mailed her a book that was the wrong size--although the service then immediately corrected it, which she appreciated. Overall she describes the process as "a growth experience."

Cherise loved that the finished book was posted on an amazon web page right away after the proofs were corrected. She loved that she had proofs four weeks after submitting her cover art and interior design files, and that she had finished books

two weeks after that. She did not opt for the editorial service, because she had already worked on her manuscript with me. If she had to do it over she says, "I would upgrade to have decent paper. Now I would ask my sales rep different questions."

What lessons can we draw from these two women? First, understand your own abilities to market and to handle computer files. You are trading convenience, speed, and low cost against a full-blown publishing process. If you are likely to be disappointed because you have too high an expectation, be honest with yourself about it. You may need to upgrade and spend more money to receive the assistance you truly require and want. Often we get what we pay for.

Second, remember to slow down and ask as many questions as you can possibly think of in order to do it right. Rely upon your customer service representative to fill in the gaps. Are there hidden costs? How many errors can I make and still not be charged extra fees? How much personal attention can I expect? Do you edit? Design? Market? When preparing a jacket for me, how many choices do I get? What would it take for you to promote my book aggressively? What is your production timeline? And most importantly, could you send me a copy of someone else's finished book, manufactured using the same template and paper as I've selected so that I can have a "high-touch" experience rather than a "virtual" experience of how my book based on these decisions will turn out?

One of the nicest things about print-on-demand besides the speed with which a book is produced is that they only print when someone orders. There is no inventory lying around. If you find a typo or have a change of heart about mentioning a resource, in the very next time the book is ordered the text can be improved. These services are excellent if you want to have a few hundred copies of your book to sell at the back of the room when you lecture, or if you want to give them as gifts to your favorite clients.

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