The Joys and Hazards of Self-Publishing on the Web

By ALAN FINDER

Not long ago, an aspiring book writer rejected by traditional publishing houses had only one alternative: vanity publishing. For $5,000 or $10,000, or sometimes much more, he could have his manuscript edited and published, provided that he agreed to buy many copies himself, often a few thousand or more. They typically ended up in the garage.

Digital technology has changed all that. A writer turned down by traditional publishers — or even avoiding them — now has a range of options. Among them are self-publishing a manuscript as an e-book; self-publishing through myriad companies that print on demand, in which a paperback or hardcover book is printed each time it is purchased; and buying an array of services, from editing and design to marketing and publicity, from what are known as assisted self-publishing companies.


Digital publishing and print on demand have significantly reduced the cost of producing a book. The phenomenal growth of e-readers and tablets has vastly expanded the market for e-books, which can be self-published at little or no cost. Writers who self-publish are more likely to be able to control the rights to their books, set their books’ sale price and keep a larger proportion of the sales.

But one thing has not changed: most self-published books sell fewer than 100 or 150 copies, many authors and self-publishing company executives say. There are breakout successes, to be sure, and some writers can make money simply by selling their e-books at low prices. Some self-published books attract so much attention that a traditional publishing house eventually picks them up. (Perhaps you’ve heard of the novel “Fifty Shades of Grey,” which began its life as a self-published work?)

Still, a huge majority of self-published books “don’t sell a lot of copies,” said Mark Coker, the founder and chief executive of Smashwords, a no-frills operation that concentrates on self-published e-books. “We make it clear to our authors.”

Some people have no problem with that; they want only to print 50 or 100 copies of a memoir or a family history at a relatively low cost. But others continue to dream big.

There are two basic kinds of self-publishing companies, both Web-based:

ASSISTED SELF-PUBLISHING These companies focus primarily on producing hardcover and paperback books. They offer many services, separately and in packages, including editing, copy editing, proofing, marketing, public relations, access to social media and even strategies for drawing search engines to a book.

With the rise of e-books, virtually all of these also will publish a manuscript digitally, and many have their own online bookstores.
At Lulu, for example, you pay nothing upfront. Each time a print book is sold, you receive 80 percent of the proceeds, beyond the cost of manufacturing the book. For $450, Lulu offers an editing package for books longer than 7,500 words (which is most books). Lulu will have a designer create a book cover for $130, and it provides groups of services like editing, design and formatting, starting at $729 and going as high as $4,949.

At CreateSpace, a division of Amazon, the process for producing a print book is similar. You go to the Web site, sign up for an account and follow the steps to prepare a print book for publication. If you sell your book through Amazon, you receive 60 percent of the proceeds, minus the cost of printing. Optional services include copy editing, which starts at $120, and converting a print file to an e-book for Kindle, $69.

Half a dozen packages, the most expensive of which costs $4,853, provide services like comprehensive editing, cover and interior design, promotion and publicity assistance and a video book trailer.

Relatively similar services can be found at many other Web sites, including Aventine Press; Self Publishing Inc.; Hillcrest Media; and iUniverse, Xlibris and AuthorHouse, which are among the imprints owned by Author Solutions, a company purchased last month by Penguin, a traditional publishing house, for $116 million.

Be sure to carefully compare prices since they can vary considerably, especially on printing and sharing in the sales.

**E-BOOKS AND NO-FRILLS WEB SITES** Smashwords is one of the low-cost Web sites that publish only e-books. As with similar sites, you can publish a digital book free, and then put it on sale at many online retailers, including Smashwords's store, Apple's iBookstore, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and Sony.

Proceeds are split this way: You get 60 percent of the book's sales price, Smashwords receives 10 percent and the retailer gets 30 percent. (If you sell through Smashwords instead of a big retailer, you retain 85 percent.) Mr. Coker, the site's founder, said it did not offer any services because he wanted to encourage do-it-yourself e-book publishing. Instead, the Web site provides lists of inexpensive independent contractors who can help with formatting an e-book or designing a cover.

Scribd got its start as a sharing site, where people distribute writing of all kinds free. The site now has an online store, where you can follow instructions to publish a manuscript as an e-book; when it is purchased at Scribd's store, you get 80 percent of the proceeds.

Apple, Barnes & Noble and Kobo also provide platforms for publishing an e-book and selling it at their stores. The details vary. Apple, for instance, gives you 70 percent of the proceeds for sales at its iBookstore; Barnes & Noble provides 65 percent of the list price of e-books priced from $2.99 to $9.99 that are sold on its online store. Although Google does not have a self-publishing platform, its store is open to self-publishers, with 52 percent of the proceeds going to the writers.

You can usually, though not always, put an e-book up for sale at many online stores, not just at the one owned by the company through which you published the e-book.

Some self-publishers strongly recommend spending money on help with formatting both print and e-books; this process can be complicated, time-consuming and frustrating to do yourself, though by no means impossible if you are patient and
frustrating to do yourself, though by no means impossible if you are patient and technologically adept.

They also say you need to study carefully the details of each company’s contracts; some charge very high markups for printing hardcover and paperback books, offer a lower share of the sales or make it difficult and expensive to leave a self-publishing company if you become dissatisfied.

“It really is buyer beware out there,” said Ron Pramschufer, president of Self Publishing Inc. “Don’t get into the publishing business without learning something about publishing.”

A number of blogs and books on self-publishing can help you understand the business’s many complexities and distinguish transparent, well-run companies from those that benefit themselves far more than their authors.

The single toughest part of self-publishing is getting attention for your book. Nearly 350,000 new print titles were published in 2011, and 150,000 to 200,000 of them were produced by self-publishing companies, said Kelly Gallagher, vice president of Bowker Market Research, which conducts an annual survey of new books.

The quality of self-published books varies widely, “and people don’t know what’s good and what’s not,” said David Carnoy, an executive editor of CNET.com, which provides news and reviews of new technology.

Mr. Carnoy self-published a novel, “Knife Music,” in 2008. It sold enough copies that a traditional publisher eventually bought it. Among his suggestions for selling your book: devise a creative marketing campaign, try one new tactic a day, and study the strategies used by successful self-publishers and imitate them.

“The biggest thing you have against you in trying to sell your book is that people don’t know about it,” he said.