

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL SELF-PUBLISHING

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN

Since its early days with now-classic authors like Jane Austen and Walt Whitman to its later rise in the early part of the 21st century, self-publishing has proven to be a viable option for authors who want to have control over how and when they get their books into the hands of readers. Self-publishing a book can be as easy as uploading your completed manuscript (edited or not) and creating a cover using a free template through Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) on Amazon. But that isn't the best way to become a successful self-published author.

When you decide to self-publish, you become the publisher and, ultimately, a small business owner. You are now responsible for all aspects of the book, including editing, formatting, cover design, marketing, etc. Like any small business owner, this doesn't mean you have to do every single task yourself, but it *is* up to you to oversee it all from start to finish. If you want to reach as many readers as possible and make money via your books, here are 18 strategies to make your new venture a successful one.



1

Research the self-publishing industry

Before you jump into the indie-publishing pool, educate yourself so you understand both the process and the jargon. Understand there is a lot to learn; be patient and work through it in small manageable increments. This early research will provide you a solid foundation from which to build your career. Furthermore, self-publishing continues to grow and change, making some strategies that worked five years ago obsolete today. Stay current by reading books and articles and signing up for newsletters from leaders in the industry like Joanna Penn (The Creative Penn), Mark Dawson (Self-Publishing Formula), and organizations like Alliance of Independent Authors.

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Content! Content! Content!

It goes without saying, but I am going to say it anyway: *The main component for a successful book, regardless of genre, is great content.* Slapping something together and making it available on Amazon without taking the time to ensure its quality is not going to be good for your readers, your writing career, or your reputation. As a self-published author, you have a responsibility to be diligent in creating the best book possible before releasing it to the world.

Read books in your genre published in the past few years. Although classics are great, readers' and writers' tastes have obviously changed a great deal over the years, so these books are not the best examples of what is currently happening in your genre. Readers have conventions and norms they expect to see in books within the genres they love and read often, and writers need to understand those norms. This doesn't mean you have to follow a set formula when you write, but you need to know what expectations readers might have when it comes to their favorite genres. For instance, in romance, readers trust authors to provide a "happily ever after" ending, or at least a "happily for now" ending. If you label your book as romance and kill off your love interest in the final chapter, readers will be (understandably) upset. Upset readers leave bad reviews, and bad reviews certainly don't sell books. These readers also will be hesitant to pick up a book from you in the future because you've broken their trust in the past.

It's almost impossible to measure your content's quality in a vacuum, so seek feedback on your work from a trusted writing colleague or critique group. These other sets of eyes will see things from a different perspective, catching mistakes or rough patches involving plot, characters, storyline, pacing, etc. Once you've sought feedback from other writers, enlist the help of a couple beta readers who can do one final readthrough to catch any mistakes that may have been missed.

3

Form an effective team

Self-publishing does not mean you have to do everything on your own. Forming a team of professionals is imperative if your publishing goal includes financial success. Think about the parts of the process you can and are willing to do on your own and hire out the rest. The foundation of an effective team should include a minimum of a copy editor, cover designer, and beta readers. Additional team members could be a developmental editor, marketing support, self-publishing support, and formatting.

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Yes, you really need an editor

Regardless of genre, readers expect the books they buy to be free of typos, misspellings, and grammatical errors. Occasionally one or two may get past your editor and beta readers (which happens with big publishers as well), and readers can forgive those rare missteps. But too many mistakes will cause them to stop reading. To avoid this, hire an editor.

There are two main types of editors: developmental and copy. A developmental editor looks at "big-picture" problems in plot, characters, and story flow for fiction and the overall presentation of information for nonfiction. A copy editor's job is to pay attention to line-by-line errors in grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and word tenses. They may catch holes in the story, but their primary focus is the details. I believe hiring a developmental editor is optional, but a copy editor is imperative. Don't rely on yourself to edit your own work. You are too close to it and will miss things. And don't rely on your best friend. Hire a professional.



5

Invest in a good cover

Yes, people do judge books by the covers. And now, with so many books being purchased online, those covers must be appealing in thumbnail size. Based on the colors, images, font choices, and the overall design, a cover creates a mood that causes readers to make an instant assessment and decide if the book is worthy of more of their attention. A high-quality cover signals to readers that the content within will be equally professional, while a poorly done cover signals the writing inside may be of lesser quality. The importance of a great cover is vital to a book's success and well worth the time and money to create the best one possible.

If you are not a graphic designer by trade or don't have experience in this area, hire a professional. They understand elements of design and the components that make an effective cover. There are many great designers out there who have the experience needed to create an amazing, eye-catching cover. Find one who suits your needs and your budget. Here are some places to start:

- » Damonza (damonza.com)
- » 99Designs (99designs.com)
- » Ebook Launch (ebooklaunch.com/book-cover-design)
- » Reedsy (reedsy.com)

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Format your book correctly

The interior of your book can look amateurish or professional based on how it is formatted. This step is crucial in the process and is key to the book's success. But until you do it a few times, the process can feel extremely tedious. (Hang in there, it does get easier.) Print books require a PDF file to be uploaded to platforms, whereas eBooks allow for a few options (DOC, EPUB, or MOBI file). The challenge with formatting is usually in the eBook files, not print ones, simply because there are so many different types of devices people use to read their books, such as phones, tablets, and computers. The file must adapt to each device, and that's where formatting problems tend to arise.

One incredibly easy option for formatting both eBooks and print books is Vellum, which generates all the different files for you once you upload your Microsoft Word document. You do have to go through and make minor adjustments, but the viewer panel allows you to see exactly how the final version will look in each of the formats. The downside is it is only available for Macs, but it is definitely worth the investment if you are a Mac owner. For PC users, don't fret: There are options for you as well, such as these free tools available at:

- » Draft2Digital (draft2digital.com/blog/beautiful-formatting)
- » Reedsy (reedsy.com/write-a-book)
- » PublishDrive (converter.publishdrive.com)
- » KDP (kdp.amazon.com, search "Prepare Your Book" in the help topics)

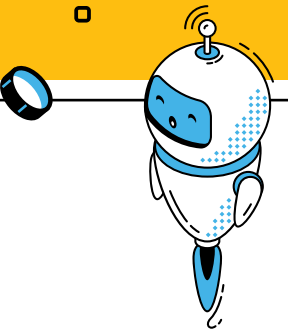
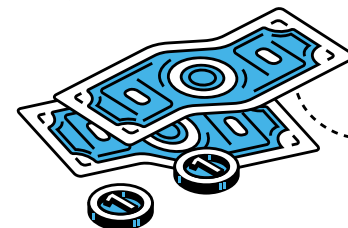
If you are experiencing problems with the formatting or simply don't want to deal with it, you can always hire someone to do this step for you.

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Understand eBook and POD platforms

The two main formats for publishing your book are print and eBook. One option is to hire a traditional printing company and stock your own inventory. With this approach, you are responsible for buying a minimum amount (typically 250-1,000 copies) as well as shipping charges. But that's not an author's only option: Print on Demand (POD) technology has changed the self-publishing game entirely because with POD, you don't have to keep an inventory of books. If you upload your files to a place like KDP or IngramSpark, when someone orders your book, it is printed and sent directly to the customer. These companies handle printing and shipping directly, leaving you more time to focus on writing and marketing. eBooks work the same way, except instead of a print book being sent, a digital file is sent that can be read on an eReader, phone, tablet, or computer.

KDP and IngramSpark are the primary platforms used for POD. KDP is free to upload to, and IngramSpark charges \$49. These platforms are also available for eBooks, but there are other options as well. You can go directly to Apple, Barnes & Noble, and Kobo and set up an account with each. Or you could use an eBook distributor like Draft2Digital or BookBaby, where you upload your file at no cost, and they make the book available on all eBook platforms, including libraries and other subscription services. They take a small percentage from each sale, and the rest of the money goes to you.



If you want your book to be available through both of these platforms, then you need your own ISBN.

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Research ISBN options

The International Standard Book Number (ISBN) is the number that identifies the title and also the publisher to be contacted for ordering purposes. Furthermore, the different formats of a specific title, such as the hardcover, eBook and audiobook, each need their own unique ISBN number as well. KDP offers them for free but identifies KDP as the publisher and can only be used on its platform (AKA Amazon). IngramSpark offers them at a discount for \$85 but identifies you as the publisher. If you want your book to be available through both of these platforms, then you need your own ISBN. If you plan to publish more than one book and have them available on Amazon, through bookstores and libraries, the best option is to get your ISBNs directly through Bowker. Authors can purchase an individual ISBN for \$125 or 10 for \$295. These ISBNs do not expire and allow you to be identified as the publisher. Bowker (bowker.com) is the only company designated to sell these individual ISBNs (IngramSpark works with Bowker to offer the discounted ISBN numbers), so do not be tempted by any other company offering to sell ISBNs to authors.

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Weigh the benefits of KDP...

When it's time to publish and make your book available to the world, decide if you want your eBook to be distributed wide (which means worldwide through various platforms) or go with KDP Select on Amazon. By choosing KDP Select, you agree to sell your eBook exclusively through KDP for 90 days. During this time, you cannot have it available on any other platforms (Apple, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, OverDrive...). The advantages of this program are the option to offer a Countdown Deal and a Free Book Promotion (for a limited time) on Amazon. Your book will also be available through Kindle Unlimited (KU). With this program, readers pay a monthly subscription and have unlimited access to all the KU titles. You are committed to KDP Select for 90 days, and after that, you can decide to continue or stop.

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...Versus launching on all platforms

The other option for publishing is "going wide," which means you have your eBook available on as many platforms as possible. Your book will still be available on Amazon, but it also opens your options to library markets and other subscription-based models besides KU and provides a wider worldwide reach. More markets mean the potential for more readers. The approach also provides other opportunities for promotions. When you go wide, you don't have the option to run the two types of KDP promotions mentioned earlier, although you do control the price and can change it at any time. Going wide allows for promotions through other platforms like Kobo and Draft2Digital.

11

Understand how distribution works

Many authors dream of seeing their books on the shelves of bookstores. Although this is not an unreasonable goal, you need to understand how bookstore inventories are managed. When a bookstore needs to place an order for a book, it goes to a big distributor like Ingram (IngramSpark is the smaller self-publishing branch of the larger Ingram corporation). This allows the bookstore to place one order and deal with only one company. For bookstores to make money, they need to buy books at a wholesale rate from Ingram, which is typically 40%-55% off the retail price. They can then turn around and sell the books for retail price and make a profit. Books that don't sell are sent back to Ingram or destroyed.

If you want your books to potentially be available in a bookstore, you need to have them available through a distributor like Ingram, which you can do through IngramSpark. You need to discount your book's price at least 40% and make your book returnable. Granted, this doesn't mean every Barnes & Noble is going to stock your book; it only means it is *available* for them to buy or for customers to special order. If the book doesn't sell, it is returned to you, and you are charged for the shipping. Because of the large discount you need to offer, you may not make a big profit on each book, and if it is shipped back at your expense, you may even lose money.

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Contact local bookstores

Traditional publishers dominate the shelf space in big bookstores like Barnes & Noble. Independent bookstores, on the other hand, are more open to stocking books from self-published authors, especially if they're local. If your title is available through Ingram, it makes it easier for indie bookstores to order and stock your book. (The maximum wholesale discount offered through KDP is 25%, which is not high enough for bookstores, therefore they aren't willing to order books through this platform.) Some bookstores offer consignment programs where they will stock your book, and if it sells, you get paid your 60%, and the bookstore keeps 40%. They typically keep it on the shelf for a couple of months. Some stores charge fees to small publishers to help cover their costs and the time it takes for employees to add your information into their system.

If you want to see your book in your local bookstore, make an appointment with the book buyer. In addition to finding out how to make your book available, share ways you plan to promote it and drive customers to the store. (Although bookstores want to help authors, they are businesses, too, and need to turn a profit to stay open.)

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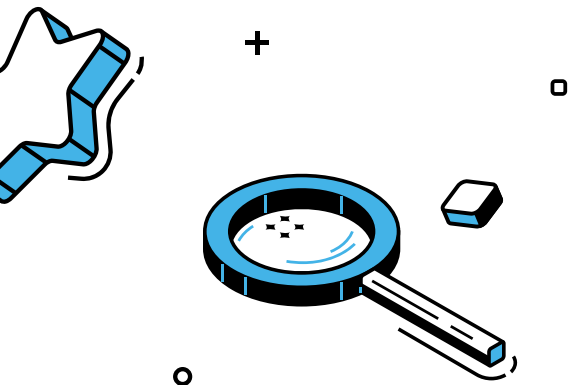
Look at your marketing connections

Marketing is an essential element to a successful self-published book, but it's not as difficult as you may think. Once you make your book available on Amazon, Apple, Kobo, Barnes & Noble, etc., then you must let people know it's there, or it will get lost in the millions of books already available for sale online. When developing your marketing plan, think about where you already have connections. Take a few minutes and write down all the people and groups you know. For example, family, college friends, a church group, a service organization like a Rotary Club, colleagues...keep writing until you can't think of any more. Next, write down the ways in which you connect with these people. Is it on social media? Email? Newsletters? U.S. mail? The hope is that you will see you already have lots of connections. You can begin your marketing by reaching out to these people and share about your upcoming book release. It also doesn't hurt to ask if they will help you spread the word.

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Explore virtual marketing options

For many authors, social media is the first and only marketing avenue they think about. But there are other creative options as well. Think about your strengths and what appeals to you. If you enjoy using one or more social media platform, sure, build those up and use them to connect with readers. If social media makes you break out in a cold sweat and you'd rather spend time writing, then start your own blog or be a guest on other blogs. Magazine articles are another way to gain exposure because your bio can be included at the end. Plus, you get to do what you love – write – and hopefully get paid for the piece. If you like interacting with potential readers, consider speaking, teaching classes, being a guest on radio, television or podcasts, or getting a booth at a farmers market or arts festival. The key is to find activities that excite you. If you force yourself to start using Twitter because you feel you have to, you won't enjoy it – and it will show. Pick a few activities and do them well, which will be more effective, and less exhausting, than trying to do everything.



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Use ads effectively

Self-publishing has become more of a pay-to-play-venture in recent years. If you want your book to get attention on Amazon and rise in rankings, paid advertising is essential. For your author Facebook page, it is not enough to just post about your book; paying to boost those posts or running ads will yield better results. Paid advertising on social media platforms, Amazon, and newsletters like BookBub, Fussy Librarian, and Bargain Booksy can be effective ways to reach new readers. These can seem like a huge undertaking with both time and money, but with the right guidance and information, you can learn to create and manage successful marketing campaigns that will drive readers to your books and won't break the bank. Many resources are available to help you learn how to use paid advertising effectively; Bryan Cohen's trainings for authors and Dave Chesson's Kindlepreneur resources are places to start to get great information.

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Analyze ad campaigns

It's not enough to just place ads and then wait and see what happens. It's important to pay attention and watch how they are performing. Set aside time each week to dig deep and analyze which ads are doing well and which ones aren't. Create a spreadsheet to track where you spend money and how the ads perform. Each of the publishing platforms (KDP, Kobo, IngramSpark...) provide daily sales numbers, allowing you to check if a particular campaign is having any impact on your sales.



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17

Track your ROI

ROI is your return on investment. As with any business, track what you spend and how much profit you get in return. If your goal for an ad is to increase your newsletter sign-ups, calculate how much you spent for each new subscriber. If you paid \$10 and received five subscribers, it cost you \$2 per person. If you end up with 100, then your cost was 10 cents. If your goal is to sell books and make a profit, analyze how much you spent on an ad and how much money you made in book sales that week. If your goal is to sell books and make a profit, analyze how much money you made in book sales that week and subtract the amount you spent on ads. This will show you if you made a profit and provide the information to let you know if that ad is performing well. Being mindful of your ROI is the only way to ensure you spend time and money wisely.

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Play the long game

Self-publishing is not a get-rich-quick venture. Like any small business, it takes time and money to grow your business and turn a profit. If your goal is to make money from your book sales, then you can't rely on the sales from just one book. Keep writing and publishing more. The authors who find success are the ones who continue to publish more books because the more books on the market, the better the chances one will become a hit. Once that happens, readers want to read other books by that author. Those who understand this is a long game continue to evaluate what they are doing, make adjustments, and keep going. If something doesn't work, don't fret over it. Fix it, if possible, and move on.

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Once again: Self-publishing is a business. And as with any business, you get out of it what you put into it. Take the time to learn about it before you set off on your own indie publishing adventure. 📖

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