

Thoughts on Self-publishing
by Cristy Fossum
Author of the *Sunday by Sunday* series
www.sundaybysunday.com
cfoosum@sundaybysunday.com

Self-publishing is flourishing. According to Bowker, the production rate of traditional U.S. publishers remained flat from 2008 to 2009. Non-traditional publication, which includes self-published works, grew by 181% in that same time. That's a pretty impressive increase. Why are so many authors choosing to publish their own works? And, a more important question for serious writers seeking commercial success: What is required to set and maintain a high standard for the quality of self-published books?

To answer these questions, I will be sharing my experience, in addition to other sources of information and experience. I am writing a 3-book series, the first two of which I've self-published, and I am currently working on the third. (Details can be viewed at www.sundaybysunday.com where there are also connections to my blog and Facebook page.) When my first book was ready, I had been unable to procure either agent or publisher. (As many of us are experiencing, the current environment for traditional publishing is highly competitive, especially for first time writers. Publishers seem more and more focused on profitability, due to changing market conditions, I suppose, and are unwilling to risk publishing work that might not sell well.) So I, like many others without agents/publishers, decided to take control of the publishing process. As I write, I continue to query and submit, but I intend to maintain the publication schedule I've set, and will self-publish again, if necessary. I will also say that my experience in self-publishing thus far has been very positive (though not yet profitable), and I will weigh carefully any opportunities for "being published" against the advantages of remaining autonomous.

This may be the best place to mention some major disadvantages of self-publishing.

- Self-published works and authors are automatically eliminated from most book festivals, awards and contests (though there are now contests especially for self-published works)
- Major bookstore chains, by and large, will only buy books through distributors, many of which will not work with self-published authors. (Chains may accept self-published works that have local appeal, but I have found the process for this complicated and labor-intensive.)
- Numerous tasks normally done by the publisher fall to the author, everything from applying for copyright and ISBN numbers to storage, inventory, sales, and shipping to approaching bookstores about carrying the books to marketing and promotion to all the business infrastructure under girding these operations including, of course, financial records.
- Investment capital is required.

In other words, self-publishing is hard work—but worthy work, so back to that topic.

The technological advance of digital publishing is undoubtedly the biggest single development underlying the huge increase in writers publishing their own work rather than going through a traditional publishing company. Print-on-demand (POD) companies offer good-to-high quality products printed relatively easily and affordably. The level of services provided by POD companies varies. “Turn-key solution” PODs not only print the books but also obtain ISBN numbers, list the books online, and fill orders. An [Incomplete Guide to Print on Demand Publishers](#) is a great Website with a comprehensive spreadsheet to help you compare and contrast a variety of POD publishers.

My publishing choice so far has been “old-fashioned” offset printing. According to Jason Rich in *Self-Publishing for Dummies* (2006), “If cost isn’t an issue, offset printing is always better, but you’re talking an investment of thousands of dollars – not hundreds.” Because I was able to finance off-set printing and also had a business connection to a local printing company, I chose that option for my first two books and probably will for my third as well.

Now, the important question: When an author decides to self-publish, what can be done to set and maintain high standards so that the final product will be good? Self-publishing is a lonely enterprise, in many ways, and with autonomy comes the responsibility of organizing to maximize quality and success.

Let’s start with the basics. We always need to follow principles of good writing.

- Read voraciously. (e.g. I read a poem recently that nudged my creativity in eight different directions vis-à-vis my writing.)
- Work with great discipline, maintaining a daily writing schedule that fits well into your life situation. (Make it fit.)
- Attend to plot, character, setting, voice/tone, dialogue, and the senses.
- Research vigorously, as needed.
- Be courageous and truthful as you tell your stories.
- Fall out of love with your words so that you can revise effectively.
- Let the work, the story, the characters lead you.
- Get feedback and hone your skills through writing groups, workshops, classes, and editors.
- It is more important for writing to be compelling than for it to be witty, flashy, or erudite.
- Add other important principles that come to your mind.

Maintaining high quality depends on involving others in your publishing process. Think in terms of assembling a team. Which professionals you decide you need depends on your skills, experience, available time, and financial resources. For example, if you have IT credentials, you may not need to hire anyone for IT tasks. If you have PR experience, you may choose to do that task yourself, and so forth. You may be able to barter services, as a cost-cutting measure, or enlist those in your network as volunteers

(remembering that we generally get what we pay for). Depending on time and financial resources, some tasks may simply go undone until a later date. Keeping all that in mind, here is a list of possible team members.

- Editor – A good editor is indispensable. Make sure to find one who is hard-nosed, experienced, and widely read, especially in your genre.
- Printer and/or POD publisher
- Graphic artist – May not be needed if a stock POD cover is used and there are no illustrations.
- IT support/Webmaster. An attractive, up-to-date Website where you can promote and sell your products is important.
- Shipping/Handling personnel – If/when sales volume merits.
- Attorney – Again, this team member may not be needed since establishing an LLC (which may not be absolutely necessary but is highly advisable) is an easy process and contracts and other forms are readily available online. I, however, felt it was important to have a lawyer help me establish my business and draw up a contract between me and a small house publisher—which fell through, at which point I felt confident that I was legally protected.
- Accountant – This team member may not be needed, either, if the writer is comfortable calculating taxes and interpreting tax codes regarding Profit/Loss from Business, Expenses for Business Use of Home, etc. NOTE: SCORE provides retired executives to serve as free advisors for small business owners. Very helpful, in my experience. www.score.org
- Publicist/Book event planner, contact – I do all this myself.
- Business manager – If/when sales and operations merit.

In self-publishing, marketing and promotion efforts fall to the writer. Here are some possibilities for getting out the word about your book/product.

- Website with PayPal or other electronic pay system
- E-mail marketing with listserv to connect with your readers by sending periodic messages with updates, discount sales, holiday specials, where to buy, etc.
- Printed pieces like bookmarks and postcards showcasing book and providing contact info
- Facebook page – I’ve heard several times that this is a must-do but can’t see much impact from my business Facebook page yet. I very much appreciated advice on a recent blog that encouraged writers to do what we are comfortable doing and not be pressured into trying bells and whistles that don’t feel right.
- Blog – Run your own and join the conversation on other blogs. I’m getting this going pretty well and am surprised how much I’m enjoying blogging.
- Media – print and TV/radio. Seek reviews, coverage of events; get in church newsletters, synod e-news, denominational publications, literary magazines. Try for TV and radio interviews, programs.

- Distribution – apply to distributors, get placed in independent bookstores, make books available online

Self-published authors who have a platform from which to promote their products and books generally have more success. I'm finding that sales at events correlate to the overall quality of the presentation. That motivates me to prepare thoroughly and play to the audience with lots of enthusiasm. Logistics are also important; have a good system for selling/signing, enlisting others to help, as needed, and have money to make change on hand. Here are some possibilities for events where you can peddle your wares, depending on your platform.

- Signings/readings at book stores, churches, civic organizations – whatever group is relevant to your topic
- Speaking – banquets, club meetings, family reunions,
- Seminars or workshops related to your genre/topic
- Getting book clubs to read your book can be lucrative. Offer discounts and throw in a visit at no charge. (If not local, ask for expenses or have a phone conference or Skype) Study guides enhance books for this audience
- Present programs, Bible studies, or lessons for retreats, SCS classes, etc.
- Exhibits at festivals, author fairs, etc. Caution: My experience is that I don't sell too many books when I am one of many authors. Sometimes sales don't even cover the table fee. Most books are sold when I am the sole facilitator or presenter.

Establishing and working a platform requires confidence and persistence. A colleague dropped a simple phrase that has made me way more persistent as I approach people and groups about visiting them with my books: "Make 'em say no." Generally, I get the invitation, but not without intensive following through and following up. Try your best not to take unreturned phone calls and emails personally.

Please feel free to contact me about self-publishing concerns.
cfoosum@sundaybysunday.com