

What is POD?

POD is the acronym for Print-on-Demand. It is a relatively new technology that offers an option to offset printing. Print-on-demand developed after digital printing was created. A significant expense in the production of books is the print run, in addition to the storage and retrieval of those books. With print-on-demand a book is not printed until someone requests one. The advantage of this process is books are printed one at a time, as requested, thereby not creating an inventory and avoiding the upfront cost of a print run, as in offset printing. However, the print-on-demand process typically results in a higher per book cost, than if produced by offset printing.

Why is it more expensive to print by POD than offset printing?

Offset printing is designed to print multiple copies, typically 3,000 to 5,000 books at once. Offset printing is accomplished by setting up plates where the inked image is transferred from a plate onto a rubber blanket then onto the printing surface (paper), which results in a consistent high image quality. Offset printing produces sharper and cleaner images and type. Print-on-demand, with digital technology, is used as a way of printing items for a fixed cost per copy, regardless if only one book is printed and completed at a time, or more than one copy is requested. It is estimated that POD book printing costs are in the three to five dollar range whereas offset printing brings the price down to between one to two dollars per book. However with offset printing, in order to get the best price, you will have an inventory of books after the run, whereas in POD you will not.

What is a POD Publisher?

While there are specific POD publishers, that is, publishers that are in business specifically because of the POD technology, there are also traditional publishers that use POD technology. Let us focus on the POD Publishers.

The technology of Print-on-Demand has helped to create a whole new area of publishing. Although, still classified as self publishing (or vanity publishing), it has offered another option to authors that didn't (or can't) get picked up by a traditional publisher, nor can they afford the expense of the cost of fully self publishing. Usually for a reasonable fee (and these vary quite a bit), an author can have a trade paperback printed (on demand), including a listing with the on-line sellers, and all the accolades that go with being a published author. However, the chance of getting this type of published book into a "bricks & mortar" store is still pretty slim, and, of course, the author will have to do their own marketing and promotion.

Why would I publish my book through a POD Publisher?

While there is no one answer, the most obvious answer is that you would then have a published book to sell, instead of continually opening rejection letters.

Really, there are many reasons to publish through a POD. The first and foremost as mentioned above is the ability to have your published book available for sale, without waiting to be accepted. Another reason may be the time element. Assuming you were accepted into “the club” it may take up to three years to have a book on the street. A third reason, would be the audience you are trying to reach. It may be the most efficient way to get a small number of books into print the fastest way possible. The list could go on, but you get the picture. Without question it is a personal choice.

Why would I publish through a POD instead of traditional publishing?

It is always an author’s hope to be picked by a traditional publisher (or an agent that places the work with a traditional publisher), but having another option, gives you the freedom to choose. If you have done the query route and spent the last couple of years opening rejection letters, this may be the next option. Again, as I mentioned before, it is a matter of choice.

If I decide to publish through a POD, what do I need to know?

The most important thing you need to know is that you are on your own. As mentioned before, POD is a form of self-publishing. The first step is to make sure you have your manuscript pass through a professional edit. It is critical that you have the best possible product to produce. The second step is to formulate your marketing plan. How are you going to promote your book? How will you let the public know your book is available? The third step is to pick the POD publisher you will go with. You must do your “homework”. Research the POD you are considering. Specifically, check out their web site, print out and review their contract, which you are about to sign. Order one of their books (one that would be similar to your book) to check the quality of their work. Check the web for information about the publisher, there are sites that review and critique POD publishers and there are a several books about PODs in general. Again do your homework. Once you have picked the POD publisher to go with, make sure you are both on the same page. What do you expect from them? What do they need from you? While you are in this euphoria about being published, always remember you are still the customer. It is no different than launching any other product. You need the best possible product, with a comprehensive marketing plan. Good luck and have fun.

You keep saying POD is self-publishing please explain.

Let us look at the areas of publishing.

Traditional publishing (standard or royalty publishing) is the cream of the crop. You are offered a contract with an advance, potential royalties, and a publisher that promotes (and pays for the marketing of) your book. The Holy Grail all of us authors strive for. The acceptance to the club!

The other side of the dream is self-publishing. You, the author pays for everything. You pay for the editing, the cover art, setup the interior formatting.

You find and commission the printer to produce your book (usually an offset print run of 3,000 to 5,000 copies). You create and execute the marketing plan. You contact the online booksellers and arrange the placement (and pay the fee). You do it all, but you keep 100% of the profit (royalty). The investment is usually in the neighborhood of \$20,000, but again it is all yours.

There is a middle ground called subsidy publishing or co-publishing. Typically the author pays 50% of the costs and gets 50% of the royalties. The author works with a publisher, sharing the expenses of getting a book to market. Typically this venture will run in the neighborhood of \$7,500 to \$10,000.

As you can see in the two samples above, the cost to “self-publish” is quite expensive. However, the advent of the print-on-demand technology opened a whole new window of opportunity.

For a relatively small fee, an author can “hire” a POD publisher to produce their book. That way, the author benefits by having a finished product (the book) available for sale, with very little effort on the author’s part. The author can purchase discounted books that he can then resell for a profit. The publisher makes money on the fee and on the margin placed on each book sold. Because a book is printed as needed there is no inventory to stock, so no overhead expenses. In addition the publisher will cause to have the book available through the online booksellers (and that is usually the extent of the publisher’s marketing efforts). Even so, it is a win win for the author and the publisher. However at the end of the day it is still considered a self-published book, since the author paid to have the book published.

As the industry develops and better quality books (both from the author and the publisher) start to arrive on the scene, you just might see a gradual shift in the acceptance of the print-on-demand model of getting a book to market. However, until then it will still be looked down as no more than self-publishing.

Why are there so many negative articles about POD?

I’m not sure I can answer that specifically, but I have a few thoughts. Certainly, in the early days of the development, there were problems, books falling apart, shoddy business dealings and such, plus all the “purists” always state they can spot a POD book a mile away... I think part of it was the age old stigma of self-publishing, or more specifically vanity publishing. You are not part of the “club” of being traditionally published. A large part is due to the fact almost anything can get published if you pay for it. No more screening, no more checks and balances and I’m sure a lot of books did make it through without a good edit (although that usually hurt the author, but it still added to the criticism). It’s no secret the industry isn’t perfect yet, and may continue to have problems, but I believe the industry is growing and maturing and like the old adage “survival of the fittest” good books and quality publishers will break through.

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If you have a question, please don't hesitate to contact me: don@dpmeyer.com
and I'll try to answer it best I can.