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Approaching Agents & Publishers while Self-Publishing

by Dan Poynter

Many nonfiction book writers ask *how* to approach an agent or publisher. Today the question is *when* to approach them. Traditionally, writers had to decide between selling out and self-publishing. Their considerations were often reduced to money, time and control.

Money. If your publisher prints 5000 copies, the book sells for \$19.95 and your royalty is 6% of the cover price (12-14% of the net), your earnings will be less than \$6000. If the book sells and goes back to press, you may do well. Otherwise, it is not worth the many hours at the keyboard for \$6000. According to *Publishing for Profit* by Tom Woll, most initial print runs are 5,000 copies.

In self-publishing, you invest the money but you do not have to share the net. You get it all.

The Publisher is the person or company that invests in the book.

Speed. It takes a large publisher 18 months to move a book through its system of production and distribution. From the time you deliver the manuscript, it will take a year and a half before books are on the shelves in the stores.

You can have a book printed in 2-5 weeks. You must consider: Do you want to wait an eternity to get paid? Will your information expire in 18 months? Will someone else beat you to the market with the same information? Do you want to let a publisher delay the publication of your book?

18 months? You can make a baby faster than that!

Control. Some of the larger publishers have surrendered to their bean counters. Many of their books are on pulp paper, the margins are narrow and

the type is small. Your publisher may leave out some of your illustrations to save money.

As the (self) publisher, you can design the book to convey your information to your reader in the best-possible way.

**A poorly-produced book lacks credibility.
People won't buy the book and will never be exposed to the message.**


Covering your bases. Today, with the computer and digital printing, it is possible to approach publishers *and* publish yourself. You can print 500 copies very reasonably (144 pages, 5.25 x 8.25, soft cover for \$1,500). Then you can send the (example) book to agents and publishers.


**Those who circulate a proposal, query letter or manuscript
are treated like a writer.
Those with a book are treated like an author.**


You will also send copies of your book to magazines for review, to book clubs for adoption and to foreign publishers for translation and publication.

Sidebar

Self-Published Books that were "Discovered" by Publishers

 *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters. Over 25,000 copies were sold directly to consumers in its first year. Then it was sold to Warner and the publisher sold 10 million more.

 *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield. His manuscript made the rounds of the mainstream houses and then he decided to publish himself. He started by selling copies out of the trunk of his Honda—over 100,000 of them. He subsequently sold out to Warner Books for \$800,000. Over 5.5 million copies have been sold.

 *The One-Minute Manager* by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson sold over 20,000 copies locally before they sold out to William Morrow. It has now sold over 12-million copies since 1982 and is in 25 languages.

📖 *The Joy of Cooking* by Irma Rombauer was self-published in 1931 as a project of the First Unitarian Women's Alliance in St. Louis. Today Scribners sells more than 100,000 copies each year.

📖 *What Color is Your Parachute* by Episcopal clergymen Richard Nelson Bolles. It is now published by Ten Speed Press.

📖 *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun* by Wess Roberts sold 486,000 copies before selling out to Warner Books.

Sidebar

Self-Publisher Overcame Rejection

He was a 34-year old advertising executive in Salt Lake City. He had two daughters, age six and four. He loved them very much—he told them so every day. But he wanted to express his love more permanently.

So, every night after he and his wife put the two girls to bed, he sat in the kitchen and wrote. After six week, he had completed 87 pages. He took them to a copy shop and reproduced 20 copies for family and friends.

They read his work and passed it on. After three weeks, 160 people had read his work. He was even contacted by a bookstore—they had customers asking for the "book".

Encouraged, he approached some publishers—and, of course, he was turned down. Not to be discouraged, he scraped together \$5,000 and printed 9,000 copies. Then 19,000 more. By the end of the year, he had sold over 250,000 copies.

And then, the publishers came looking for him! Simon & Schuster offered him \$4.2 million—and he took it.

That was Richard Paul Evans and the book was *The Christmas Box*. It hit the top of the *Publishers Weekly* bestseller list and was translated into 13 Languages.

I teased him with "Rick, you were doing so well self-publishing and you sold out. Well, we all have our price. Your price is \$4.2 million. (I suspect my price is a bit lower)."

Authors and promotion. Some authors do not want to publicly flog their books. You may be looking forward to the day when your work is recognized and you won't have to promote it. You may wish to be a celebrity and above all this crass commercialism. Be advised that Frank McCourt (*Angela's Ashes*) spends some six months each year making appearances on behalf of his books. He is a best-selling author because he promotes his books.

Whether you sell out to a (NY) publisher or publish yourself, the author must do the promotion. Publishers do not promote books. They have the books manufactured and they place them in bookstores. It is up to you to let potential buyers know your book is available.

There are four stages in the life of a book: writing, publishing, distributing and promoting. Giving birth to a book is like bringing a child into the world—you have an obligation to raise it. Fortunately, the book is not a twenty-year commitment and you do not have to send it to college. But, you do have to promote it.

You will write and promote your book and your publisher will produce and distribute it. You can deal with typesetters, printers and distributors yourself to get your finished book into the stores. You might as well self-publish.

Publishing increases the value. No one can be an expert in every book—some 100,000 titles are published each year. Everyone specializes or, at least, has a track record with certain categories of books. If you are turned down by an agent or publisher, that is not a reflection on the ability of the writer or the quality of the work. That agent or publisher just does not get it. With this New Model, if industry people fail to recognize the need and market for your book, it does not matter because your book is launched. It is out for review, it is be considered by book clubs and evaluated foreign publishers. If an agent or publisher "discovers" your book after you have proven it in the market, it is now worth more. For examples, see the sidebars.

This New Book Model is the best approach for you, your book and your writing future. Send your finished book to agents and publishers. Do not send a proposal, query letter or manuscript. Don't let the agents and publishers hold you back.

 **Writing periodicals:**

Dan Poynter does not want you to die with a book still inside you. You have the ingredients and he has your recipe. Dan has written more than 100 books since 1969 including *Writing Nonfiction* and *The Self-Publishing Manual*. For more help on book writing, see <http://ParaPub.com>.

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Dan Poynter, the Voice of Self-Publishing, has written more than 100 books since 1969 including *Writing Nonfiction* and *The Self-Publishing Manual*. Dan is a past vice-president of the Publishers Marketing Association. For more help on book publishing and promoting, see <http://ParaPub.com>.

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Dan Poynter has written more than 100 books since 1969 including *Writing Nonfiction* and *The Self-Publishing Manual*. He is past-chair of NSA's Writer-Publisher PEG and the founder of the PEG newsletter. For more help on book writing, publishing and promoting, see <http://ParaPublishing.com>.

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