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Print on Demand Publishing

Traditional Publishing - Piles of Paper

In traditional publishing, the physical manufacture of a book is a long, labor- and material-intensive process. The desired end result is the physical object we call a book. The real end result is toilet paper.

Why toilet paper? That's not a comment about the quality of a given book but a reference to the fate of many of the copies of that book.

Suppose Giant Publishing House, Inc. publishes your book (lucky you!) and suppose furthermore that GPH Inc. has enough confidence in your book's commercial potential to order 100,000 copies of the book from the printing company GPH Inc. uses. The printed copies end up stored in GPH Inc.'s warehouse while everyone waits for the orders to come in. (Presumably, there were also some prepublication orders, and the number of such orders will have caused GPH Inc. to increase or decrease the initial print run from 100,000 to something else. But in most cases, that's not important here.) That warehouse is probably a rented space, so in effect GPH Inc. is paying rent to store the copies of your book - a fact the folks at GPH Inc. are well aware of. They're also very aware of tax laws under which those stored copies are taxable inventory. So there are (at least!) two good reasons not to keep the 100,000 copies in that warehouse for very long. Not to mention that GPH Inc. is bidding for a book by Established Huge Name Author. If they win the bid, they'll do a first run of at least a million copies of his book, and they're going to need lots of warehouse space to store his books for a while.

Orders for your book start arriving from bookstores. Actually, they arrive from Ingram, a huge book distributor from whom bookstores actually order your books. GPH Inc. ships off tens of thousands of copies of your book to Ingram, which distributes them appropriately among its own warehouses, from which they are delivered to bookstores.

Oh, dear. Only 65,000 copies of your books were sold through bookstores and all other sales channels. 35,000

remain in the GPH Inc. warehouse. After a month or two, another 25,000 are returned by bookstores for full refunds. (If they're hardcovers, they're returned. If they're paperbacks, only the covers are returned. The books have been "stripped". It's painful to think of that happening to your book, isn't it?)

Suddenly, GPH Inc. has a huge pile of paper with your name on it. That pile is taking up space and costing warehouse-rental money and potentially adding to the company's tax bill. If your book was a hardcover, you'll probably be offered the chance to buy a lot of copies at a cut rate. (There should be a provision for this in your contract.) Some of the copies you don't buy will go to remainder houses, companies that buy up such books and sell them by mail at a bargain price. Many of the unsold copies (most, if the numbers are on the order of those hypothesized above) will end up being pulped, sold for recycling into other paper products.

Such as . . . toilet paper.

Print on Demand Publishing - O Brave New World!

Imagine a monster machine hidden away in a back room in a bookstore, quietly and efficiently printing and binding copies of books **one at a time as they are ordered at a desk at the front of the store**. Nothing is stored in warehouses except for blank paper waiting to be turned into books. Nothing is returned to the publisher. You don't have to imagine copies of your books screaming as their covers are torn from their living bodies. Nor do you have to contemplate those beautiful pages becoming sheets of toilet paper.

In practice, it doesn't work like this quite yet.

There is a company, Sprout, that is putting such Print on Demand machines in bookstores, but that's still something rare. However, Ingram, the major book distributor mentioned above, has created a subsidiary called Lightning Source (originally called Lightning Print) to produce books by Print on Demand. Lightning source has two locations in the U.S. where machines like the one described above print and bind books as they are ordered by bookstores. The finished books are then delivered to the bookstores through the existing Ingram distribution system.

Even though this isn't quite the ideal situation described above, this existing POD system from Ingram's Lightning Source means that there are no copies of your book stored in warehouses, no unsold books returned to the publisher for a refund, and perhaps best of all, no unsold books pulped and remanufactured as toilet paper. Oh, and tree killings are minimized.

Here's how it worked for us. We sent our novels to Wildside Press via e-mail in the form of attached Word files. Wildside then did some formatting work and produced PDF (Adobe's Portable Data Format) files, which they sent to Ingram. Ingram stores those files and the graphic files for the covers on their hard drives, and when an order for one of our books comes to Ingram, the POD machines magically convert those data files into a bound copy of a literary masterpiece which is then delivered to the bookstore.

Note that the final result is still a physical book. You can hold it and read it and treasure it forever, just as you would, say, a fine edition of a work by H. G. Wells or Jane Austen.

It Ain't E-Books

Unfortunately, a lot of people seem to confuse Print on Demand books with e-books - books that exist only as words on a computer screen (or on the screens of special handheld devices designed for the purpose of reading e-books). E-books are a different topic entirely, and at least right now, you won't find anything about them on this Web site.

Or Self-Publishing

There seems to be a lot of confusion out there about this. People think that Print on Demand publishing is the same thing as self-publishing. It isn't.

It does seem to be the case that many self-publishing companies and vanity presses (there's a subtle distinction between those two that's far too subtle for me to fathom) have moved to Print on Demand for various business and practical reasons. And many new vanity presses have sprung up offering to publish your book via Print on Demand. However, legitimate publishers, so far mostly small ones, have also been switching to POD for the same practical reasons. That doesn't make them less legitimate publishers. They're simply legitimate publishers that have decided to use a different technology to produce their books than they were using before.

Remember: POD is a technology, a way of producing physical books, not a type of publishing business.

The Drawbacks

Yes, there are some. Mainly, there are two: price per copy and bookstore clerks.

When Giant Publishing House, Inc. orders those 100,000 copies of your novel from their usual printer, they get a good price per book because the printer enjoys economies of scale on such a large order. That simply doesn't apply to a POD book, which is printed one copy at a time. That is, the actual manufacturing cost per copy for a POD book doesn't change whether an order comes in for one copy or for 1,000 copies. So on the average, POD books tend to cost a bit more per copy than similar, mass produced books. But see the next section, The Future.

These are still very much the early days of Print on Demand publishing, and far fewer bookstore clerks know about it than should. So if you approach one of them in a bookstore and ask for, say, that brilliant new mainstream novel [Apart from You](#) by Leonore Dvorkin or that gripping new science-fiction novel [Pit Planet](#) by David Dvorkin, and if you explain that the book is not actually shelved in the bookstore but can be ordered by the clerk through Ingram, you might get a blank stare. Or the clerk will check one or two of the bookstore's databases and won't see the book listed and will say vaguely that it must be out of print. You'll explain that it's not out of print, it's new, but from a small press, and Ingram might consider it a special order or a back order. Eventually, we hope, you'll succeed. But see the next section, The Future.

The Future

Even Giant Publishing House, Inc. is interested in Print on Demand. They really hate having to deal with those warehouses and tax laws and returned copies and refunds. Eventually, the spreadsheets on the PCs in the giant GHPInc. corporate headquarters building will indicate that the financially proper time has arrived, and GHPInc. will make the switch to Print on Demand publishing for its mass market books. That time is probably very close.

Even without this switch, as more and more small publishers climb aboard the POD bandwagon, the numbers of books being produced this way will increase and some economies of scale will come into play. The end result will be that the cover price of POD books will no longer be all that noticeably higher than that of mass-market books.

The more common POD books are, the less confused bookstore clerks will be when asked about them.

Indeed, some people are predicting a time, not far off, when bookstores will have only sample copies of books on their shelves. If you thumb through a book and like it, you won't buy that copy. Instead, the bookstore will order one up for you via POD. From the machine in the back of the store, let's hope. Some people even predict that there won't be true, physical sample copies but rather virtual ones, ones you read on a screen - e-books, in effect, serving as sample copies for physical books that will be produced for you by Print on Demand.

This will help put small publishers on the same footing as big ones. It will also put smaller writers on the same footing as the famous ones. But perhaps this is projecting very new and uncertain trends just a bit too far into the future. Certainly it's an exciting time for writers. Print on Demand (and eventually e-books) will probably transform literature even more - and more rapidly - than Gutenberg did.

Note: This essay was originally written in July, 2000 and updated in May, 2002. Given the speed at which the POD field is changing, parts of it may be out of date by the time you read it. So read quickly!

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