



Self-Publishing and Distribution: Jacqueline Simonds of Beagle Bay Books

New self-publishers have a lot of trouble figuring out how book distribution works. Jacqueline, a self-published author, has a unique view on distribution, and carries books by a number of self-published authors.

Here's a chance to get the story on book distribution from someone who is on the front lines every day. This is a great opportunity so I hope you'll follow along for both days. It's well worth it.

Jacqueline also sent along this note:

First, it must be noted that Beagle Bay, Inc is winding down its distribution services. As I will explain a little further into this, we feel that for most self-publishers, using Ingram's Lightning Source International Print-on-Demand and Direct Distribution is a great way to leverage a start-up publishing company. Our business model has always been about helping small publishing start-ups, so we are making the transition to an all-consultation company.

So although you may not be able to use Beagle Bay to distribute your book, we get to reap the wisdom Jacqueline has gained as a long-time publishing professional with a deep understanding of the self-publisher's situation.



Not many kids dream of becoming book distributors when they grow up. How did you find yourself in this business?

Ha! No, I never imagined myself as a distributor!

All I wanted to do, back in 1999, was to get my novel, *Captain Mary, Buccaneer*, into print. But back then, there was no Johnny Depp and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and no publishing house could imagine why an adult would want to read about pirates. Particularly, a woman pirate.

So I learned the ins and outs of self-publishing. Fairly soon, we were approached by someone with another women pirate novel, and we published that. Then we published 3 more books.

We were lucky enough to get into the book industry when Ingram and Baker & Taylor (the two biggest wholesalers) were testing the waters with the big new wave of self-publishers. They allowed us to play on the same playing field as the big guys. But by 2002, Ingram decided they didn't want to deal with anyone with fewer than 10 books and \$20,000 a year in sales with them. We squeaked in, but a lot of people were thrown out.

At the same time, a lot of smaller distributors went under. This left a lot of self- and small publishers with no distribution (and sometimes having to buy their books back from a bankruptcy court). One such person was a friend of one of our authors, and convinced us to distribute her good-selling travel book. We took it on. And then someone else heard about that. And then someone else...

Voila! We were in the distribution business!

Can you explain the difference between a distributor and a wholesaler?



A wholesaler acquires books from publishers and distributors and sells them to a retailer. Basically, wholesalers aggregate goods so that a retailer has broader access to – in this case – numerous book titles.

A distributor takes on many publishers to get their books into as many wholesalers (and retailers) as possible. For self-and small publishers, this is an important function. Retailers and wholesalers tend to ignore a one-book press. Retailers especially hate writing multiple checks to tiny little publishers (and given that the owner is often the bookkeeper & cleaning person, you can see why they do). Getting into a distributor allows you to leverage your tiny company so that it has as much access to the book trade as, say, Random House. (Note that access does not mean sales.)

Distributors take in pallets of books from the publisher, do all the accounting, inventory management, shipping, and accepting returns.

Distributors discount the book at 65-70% off list price. This breaks down as such: 10-15% of the list price goes to the distributor; 15% goes to the wholesaler; 40% of that discount goes to the retailer. [In most retail businesses goods are marked up 100-1500%. This is why bookstores are failing. There's simply not enough margin.]

Wholesalers may take as few as 1 copy of a title to fulfill orders from retailers. Shipping "onesies" is too expensive to sustain. This is why your title mixed with others by a distributor helps lower your costs.

For a lengthier discussion, please see my webpage about the pros and cons of each here: [New Self-Publisher's FAQ](#)

Can you tell us a little of your experience with subsidy publishers?

I have little experience with subsidy publishers. A book produced via a subsidy press cannot be distributed to the author's fiscal gain. That's because the per book (unit) cost is so high, there's no room for the 70% charged by a distributor.



The two other problems I have run into with clients who have used subsidy press services are that a) the subsidy press owns the ISBN (so the metadata points to them, instead of the actual publisher/author), and b) at one point, two subsidy presses locked up authors into 20-year contracts and a written release had to be acquired. I don't think that's the case anymore.

Unless you are only producing 10 books for your family, I would avoid a subsidy press.

Is traditional distribution right for today's self-publisher or start-up small press?

For almost all self-publishers, I recommend that they reject the traditional distribution model.

Traditional distribution demands that a publisher print AT LEAST 1000 offset printed copies, arrange storage with a distributor and take returns. That's a lot of upfront money to tie up on a risky venture. Although we all hope to sell scads of our wonderful, terrific book, hoping is not really a good business model.

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A more conservative business model is to produce the book via Ingram Wholesale's Lightning Source International, the largest digital print-on-demand facility in the world.

The pro: While as a digital printer, their prices are very competitive (most subsidy printers use LSI, so why not just go to the source?), they also offer distribution to the book trade: other wholesalers, libraries, bookstores and e-stores.

The con: Because it is digital, the per book printing cost is higher, but there is no shipping to a warehouse (and the fees that entails), then shipping to a destination. The book is only produced when there's an order, and shipped at no cost to that destination (unless you are ordering a quantity for yourself). So the higher cost balances out.



If you select the distribution model, they will charge 55% off the list price of the book to ship to wholesalers & stores. You will also need to accept returns, if you intend to make the book available to bookstores.

Not aiming at bookstores or libraries? It's probably smarter to go to Amazon's CreateSpace (affiliate) and have the book done there. Then it will be available on Amazon (and they can send you copies). You can specify no returns and only a 20% discount.

Your business model is the only way you can make these choices. If you know absolutely (not just hope, but have the pre-orders/demand) that you can sell 3000 copies of your book in the first year, then you need to do the traditional distribution route (get a distributor, print the books offset). This method is a lower cost per unit, but a higher cost per distribution. If you expect to sell directly to your customer (and that includes Amazon), then there's no reason to do anything else besides CreateSpace.

Most start-up self-publishers are wise to select the LSI printing route. This gives the book the optimum chance to succeed in the highly competitive book world (1 million books per year are published – and it's not a meritocracy). If the book doesn't succeed, then the publisher has exposed her/himself to a lower risk/loss. If the book does take off (sells more than 1000 in 2 quarters), the publisher can always switch to the traditional method of distribution and printing.

What kind of books do you distribute?

We started with women's historical adventure fiction. Then one day we realized that the non-fiction was outselling the fiction 10-to-1. So we stopped accepting fiction.

We changed to Women's Issues – which is broad enough to cover a lot of bases (I like what I like and love to work with new publishers on a great book). We also have done a lot with travel (who does most of the travel planning in a household? Right. Women).



What are the criteria you are looking for when deciding whether to take on a publisher as a distribution client?

Like many distributors, we only take a book 4-6 months before it is published. We do this because we assist in getting the book into pre-publication reviewers (like Publishers Weekly and Library Journal) for a chance at a review that can build strong sales at the book launch. Libraries especially do not buy unless they see a review in Library Journal or Booklist – and this can mean 1000 or more books sold. So it's worth the hassle of getting galleys and sending the book out 4 months before the publication date.

I want to see books that have a new, needed approach to a subject. Understanding the audience is a key factor here.

The two key things I look for with a new book are:

What's it about – and who does it serve? If the book is just another naval-gazing self-absorbed memoir, I don't have time for it –and neither does the industry. If the book was produced in the absence of any research or understanding of the facts, I have no interest. I want to see books that have a new, needed approach to a subject. Understanding the audience is a key factor here. If the author/publisher can tell me, "this book addresses the 18-34 age group of women who have burning questions about how ____ affects their lives – and what to do about it" I'm all ears. It doesn't hurt to have a blurb (endorsement) or foreword by someone pretty big in the field.

The other thing that I look at is the marketing plan. How is the author/publisher going to make the world aware of this book? As I've mentioned before, the book trade is not a meritocracy. Just because your book is the very best on the subject, it doesn't mean a mediocre book by someone published by Random House wouldn't completely obliterate your title. How can you reach your audience/customer directly in a way Random et



al can't? I want to see concrete steps and work you've already done to make that happen, even before the book is out.

In cases where publishers are moving from a digital to an offset print model, I would want to see sales trends and how the publisher was going to sustain and grow those numbers.

Which self-published books are most successful in your kind of distribution?

I used to think I had an idea of what kind of self-pubbed books sold and which didn't. Since then, I've seen people succeed wildly with books I wouldn't have given 10 minutes to. The single common factor to success was great marketing and the author never, ever gave up.

In general, though, I'd say that poetry, memoirs and novels are the very hardest things to succeed at. Non-fiction – and topics that fill a niche not being currently served – is the best path to success. It's not easy finding that sweet spot.

What kinds of marketing or promotion do you do on behalf of your publishers?

Marketing is a function of the publisher. Distributors may place the publisher's book(s) in that season's catalog (but may charge a fee), represent the book at trade shows and presentations to wholesalers and bookstores.

As mentioned before, we also make an effort to get the book reviewed by pre-publication reviewers. This is a key step for library sale.

But that's the book trade. As we all know by now, bookstores don't buy books. They rent them on the off-chance they will sell. If they don't sell in 2-6 weeks, the book is returned. Frequently in unsalable condition.



The publisher has to make sure they are reaching their reader/buyer and driving them to bookstores (for traditional distribution) or Amazon or their webpage (for non-traditional).

Do you think publication dates and launches continue to be relevant to self-publishers?

Well, you need to start somewhere, so a specific launch date is a good place to start—or officially start. Of course, in today's marketing, you will market the book months before the book is actually available. But think of the book launch as a baptism/celebration of birth. Doesn't mean you can't have had baby showers and housewarming parties beforehand!

Where the self-publisher/small press has as an advantage over traditional publishers is the ability to grow their brand. Most big publishers give a book 6 weeks to make it. If it fails, it'll be backlisted for 6 months, then the excess inventory pulped (although they now go to e-books and print-on-demand to keep the title in play).

Smaller publishers can work at making their book a success even if sales are so-so at launch. I've seen several books that did OK in the first few months, then dropped off. Then 2 years later, sales were stronger than ever. But the strength lay in the author/publisher being willing to change up their marketing and being persistent. Giving up doesn't sell books. Period.

What's the future of Beagle Bay in terms of the move to ebooks? Is that a threat to your company?

I'm guessing your question has to do with the idea that if there are e-books, that means there is no distribution business for me. I don't really see that. While I think that many books will go to an e-book-only model, I think that paper books will be around for a long time. We see e-books as a win-win for our publisher clients, since they can now reach their customers in many platforms.



We see the digital age as an exciting expansion of opportunities for publishers of all sizes.

Certain books are best as e-book-only, don't you think? Things that are time-sensitive and need frequent updating should not be in a paper book. It serves the customer best if information can be updated. This suggests a subscription-based model, rather than just a one-off book sale.

Most books with more permanent information will benefit from having several platforms. Not just e-books, but audio and perhaps limited video (how-to books are a natural for this). We're in a customer-centric model now, where the buyer wants to customize how they receive their information.

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How does your background as a self-published author help (or hinder) your work with your clients?

I know exactly how my clients feel as they enter book publishing. It's a really steep learning curve, the deck is stacked against you, and right now we're in a huge paradigm shift where anyone's guess on the future may be right (or horrifically wrong).

But I also get the exhilaration of having written a book. The hope that you can succeed against the odds. The (charmingly insane) notion that you can conquer the world.

Been there, done that, optioned the movie (and had the rights stolen). I walk beside my clients and understand what they are going through.

What are the most common mistakes you see with self-published books that authors could avoid?



The most common mistakes are cheapness, no understanding of basic business and stubborn disregard for the reality of the book business.

Those who are cheap think that they can put out an unedited, untypeset book with a clip-art cover and expect to compete with the big publishers—and sell millions. This is setting oneself up to fail. I've seen books with bad covers sell, but when they got better covers, they really took off. You have to think competitively: why should your reader/buyer accept your inferior product when they can get the same information (or something close to it) which is better quality (for less money)?

If you have never been in business, you have this idea that you can publish a book and sell it for the price that is on the book. This disregards the basic truth about business: if you are relying on anyone else to sell the book, then they must make money on the product to make it worth their while. I hear self-publishers whine all the time: Why do I have to give a discount? Well, you don't if you are selling directly to your customer. Otherwise, wake up and learn how to do business.

Capitalism drives the market. Charge what others are charging in your subject matter—or less, if you can.

Similarly, I get a lot of people who think that they can charge \$30-50 for a trade paperback. You can, but you won't sell many. Capitalism drives the market. Charge what others are charging in your subject matter—or less, if you can. Yes, this does mean that you'll only make pennies per book. That's why it's important to focus on selling volume (a lot of books).

Lastly, I see a lot of people who flail into the book business with no idea of how it is structured and thinking that they should have instantaneous access the same way Random House does. I've seen people scream at Marcella Smith, the small press buyer at Barnes & Noble, that she HAS to put their books on her shelves. Um, no. She doesn't, and the book industry doesn't.



Again, it's not a meritocracy. It IS capitalism. Books on bookstore endcaps are there because the publisher spent money (\$300-1500 depending). The big publishers spend a LOT of money on advertising. What are you doing to get to your audience into the store to make it worth the bookstore stocking your book (it doesn't have to cost gobs of money)? And do you really want to mess with bookstores in the first place? Learn as much as you can about the book business before investing your hard work, time and money into it. You'll still be surprised.

What tips would you offer to new self-publishers who intend to make money with their books?

Don't bother to publish unless you are willing to commit to the project 100%. Make sure you are in it to win, not fail.

Dream big, dream well as you write. But when it's time to publish and sell the book, become a hard-nosed business person. This is a really hard thing to do for many creative people. You may need to partner with someone to make everything happen.

This isn't Field of Dreams – if you publish it, they will not come. Know who your audience is (and it is NOT "everyone who likes to read"), how to reach them and how to get them to buy your book/product. Henry David Thoreau is often misquoted, here's what he said:

"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

Don't rely on hope to sell your book. Do the groundwork to make it happen!

Was there a Beagle in Beagle Bay?

We named the company after our fabulously barky beagle, Bertie. He thought the phone rang for him, and most callers heard him barking in the background. Here's his picture. Bertie died in 2009. We adopted Lewis late last year. Although less vocal than



his predecessor, that's a relative measure for a beagle. Lewis likes to bark at people at the door.

What's up with the pirate flag?

Originally, it was part of the marketing for my novel, *Captain Mary, Buccaneer*. Then it became sort of a company attitude, "Take no prisoners! Do or die!" Which seems more extreme than we are.

Also, as part of the marketing for *Captain Mary* and our other woman pirate book, *The Witch from the Sea*, we aimed to become one of the go-to sources on the web for information about pirates and women pirates. When we discovered that there are a half-million pirate re-enactors in the world, we branched out into a historical clothing bibliography. At one point, we were an important source for historical clothing research. But I haven't updated that section of our site in some time.

Thanks for the opportunity to talk about distribution and self-publishing!

And I want to thank Jacqueline for being so generous with her time and experience. There's a huge amount of information in this interview that can really help you understand how books get sold, and give you some realistic direction about your own book projects.

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