A Short Introduction to Independent (self) Publishing

It has never been easier to publish your book yourself. This is a simple guide on how to do it based on my experience.

Frequently called 'self' publishing' this process is better called independent publishing as it is impossible to do everything yourself; for example, you cannot print and distribute your book through the book trade without professional partners. Independent means independently of a conventional publishing house where there are professional staff who need to be paid and are really interested only in books that are going to sell in large numbers or where the author pays them a fee to do it.

I am not a publishing professional but a former oral and maxillofacial surgeon who independently published my first book Dentist on the Ward, in 2010 and subsequently a new edition each year. Also I have published an undergraduate textbook, three memoirs of retired oral and maxillofacial surgeons, five transcripts of edited witness seminars held at the British Dental Association, a re-publishing of a nineteenth century history monograph with some chapters added by myself, and a travelogue.

There is a significant amount I do not know about the publishing industry, as I am not a professional. However I have done it myself and can guide you in the right direction. I am an amateur and I have no fiscal interest in selling any particular service.

What has made it possible to publish yourself?

1. Online selling. You will already know a lot about Amazon who were the pioneers and are the biggest bookshop in the world but there are also many others.

2. Computers and the software needed to format a book (more of that later).

3. E-books which can be read on a desk, laptop or tablet computer, a smartphone or an e-reader.

4. Digital printing.

In the beginning there was litho printing which remains the most widely used method of book printing. It provides the cheapest and best quality colour reproduction but it has a set up cost which makes it cost effective only for a large print run of several hundred and possibly thousands of copies. A publisher has to estimate how many copies they will sell and then get them printed and pay for them. When and if they are all sold they need to make another decision as to whether they can sell another print run or the books become 'out of print'.

In the 1990s digital printing came along. Here the book is printed from two Portable Document Files (PDF), one for the cover and one for the interior. There is no set up cost but the cost per copy is greater and colour reproduction is inferior to litho but improving so that in practice for most books you would be hard pressed to tell the difference.

So from the 1990s publishers could buy a large print run of litho books and if any more are required they could revert to digital. No book needs to be 'out of print' ever again.

The minimum number that can be printed digitally is one. This means that books can be 'print on demand'. This does not mean that the customer has to wait for the book. My book Dentist on the Ward (and my others) are listed on Amazon in the 'buy box' usually as 'in stock'. In this case it means not physically in stock but if you are in Amazon Prime and order before 4.00pm they will print it in Hemel Hempstead and deliver it the next morning. If not in Prime it may take another day or two. If you are in the USA or elsewhere internationally they will print it locally to you and deliver it.

Digital printing machines vary from something looking like a largish photocopying machine with someone standing next to it taking out the printed book interiors and stacking them on a trolley to enormous machines stretching most of the length of a factory floor the size of a small aircraft hangar with enormous rolls of paper rolling through at 30 metres a minute with ink being sprayed onto them such as at the Lightning Source factory at Hemel Hempstead. Lightning Source are the biggest digital printers in the UK and USA (more of them later).

Advantages of independent (self) publishing

This technique is particularly suitable for non-fiction books aimed at a specialist audience such as medical history or clinical medicine. It is cheap (if you know what to do) so very specialised books can be produced which might otherwise might not see the light of day. Once you have written the book you know it will be published and it can be quick so that an e-book could be available to buy on Amazon within a couple of days of the text being finished and checked and the print book a couple of weeks.

At the end of the process your book will be available throughout the book trade, you will be able to order 'author copies' to sell yourself, you and will be able to order copies to ship directly to customers who have ordered from you, the book will be available from most if not all online selling web sites and can be ordered by libraries.

Occasionally you might come across someone who for nostalgic reasons wants to pay the maximum price for an inferior service and buy from a bookshop. Your book will be available for the bookshop to order from them but unless you have made a direct approach to a local independent bookshop it will not be in stock in bookshops.

Tools you need to independently publish your book

You almost certainly already have a computer and an internet connection. You will also need a credit card to pay for a printed proof and software.

Software.

You will need a style based word processing programme. That is a program that can designate different parts of the text into different styles such as heading, text, quotes, footnotes etc. Microsoft Word is such a programme. I do all of my writing on Word and if your book is entirely or mostly text with a few images this is all you will ever need. For an e-book it is all you would ever need.

If the book is complicated, such as my books Dentist on the Ward and Core Oral Surgery for Dental Students, you will need a Desktop Publishing Programme. These books have text, images, tables and diagrams. Word alone may not be adequate.

Professionals will use expensive programs such as Quark or Adobe In Design which are either sold as subscriptions or cost hundreds of pounds. However a simple program such as Microsoft Publisher or Serif Affinity may be suitable for an amateur and can be bought for a one off reasonable fee as a download. I have not used these as I use Serif Pageplus which I would recommend but it is no longer available. For image manipulation I use Adobe Photoshop Elements which is a cut down version of Photoshop and does all I need and can be bought as a download for a single fee.

Commercial partners you need to complete the publishing

Once you have decided on the project you will need a partner or partners to sell, print and distribute your book in both print an electric forms. There are two routes you can follow.

1. There are a significant number of 'self-publishing' companies who will turn your manuscript into the finished article so that it is on sale. These companies know that the majority of independently (self) published authors will sell only a limited number of books so in order for them to cover their costs and make a profit they charge the authors a fee for their services. These are usually several hundred or thousands of pounds often sold as packages each with a greater level of service included. I started with one such company over 10 years ago and it was a disaster. I won't mention the company because it was a long time ago and they might have improved now. Rather I would recommend that you don't use any of them because there is a better way where you have more control and can do it at significantly lower cost.

2. My recommendation is to use the biggest companies, KDP, Ingram Spark and/or Lulu. These charge nothing to set your book up, or very little, and their business model is that it costs them nothing for you to set the book up as it is done online without human involvement and then they make their income from taking a fee each time a book is ordered from the hundreds of thousands or millions of books they have stored as PDF files on their servers.

I use KDP (Kindle Direct Publication) Amazon's printing and distribution company for books sold through the Amazon web sites and Ingrams printing company Lightning Source for all other sales. These are accessed through their web portals. The Lightning Source web portal is Ingram Spark. I have also have used and recommend Lulu.

If you use these companies they are not the publishers, you are. They don't read what has been written they are just 'platforms' for publication. Just as your internet service provider is not responsible if you download illegal material these companies are not responsible for defamation, plagiarism or infringement of copyright of writing, images or design, you are.

Nielson's

Firstly you will need to know about Nielson's and Standard International Book Numbers (ISBN). Nielson's is a large international data company. In the UK and elsewhere, but not everywhere, Nielson's book data manage ISBNs. To sell any book through the book trade (except in one circumstance) it will need an ISBN which will be displayed on the second page of the front part of the book and on the back cover with a bar code.

You buy ISBNs from Nielson's book data by registering with them online as a publisher and buying a number. These used to be sold as a minimum of 10; I am on my second group of ten but now they can be bought individually but at a greater cost (at the time of writing £89 for one, £164 for 10 or £949 for 1000!).

Once the book is finished you log into your account with Nielson's and fill in all the details of your book and assign it to the number. It should include a JPEG image of the front cover, its dimensions, number of pages, number of images, cost, where it can be obtained from etc etc. All the book trade will then be informed electronically about the book and will know where to get it from. Nielson's sell many additional services such as electronic ordering tools and promotion which you will almost certainly not need.

You will need a different ISBN for a hard and soft back book and any new edition or if there have been significant changes. You won't need an ISBN for an Amazon Kindle e-book but you will for an e-book sold through any other channels.

Ingrams and Lightning Source

For a book to be distributed through the book trade it will need to be in stock at a book wholesalers. This is where the web sites, libraries and book shops get their books from; generally they don't buy them directly from the publishers. The book wholesalers are volume concerns; they are not generally very interested in stocking a few copies of a single book from

a self-publisher which might not sell for months or at all. However there is an easy solution to this.

Ingrams is a United States family owned book wholesaler. They own Lightning Source which is the largest digital printing company in the United States and in the UK. Their European headquarters is in Milton Keynes and they print most of my books and distribute them throughout the book trade. I also sell many copies of Dentist on the Ward each year to post graduate deans and course organisers and when they order from me I order from Lightning Source on line and the books are printed within two days and despatched to my customer who gets them within seven working days of ordering from me.

Lightning Source was set up as a service to the publishing industry but a few years ago they set up Ingram Spark, a web portal for small and independent publishers to get the Lightning Source Service. It is through this web site that I get their service.

Recently I noticed some negative feedback online about Ingram Spark. It is obvious from some of the comments that the complainant did not understand the system but I can only say that I cannot fault the service I have received which has been accompanied by the most cost effective printing cost and on the two occasions I have had a problem their response was swift and helpful.

Kindle Direct Publication (KDP)

This is Amazon's printing and distribution company for books. Using it is the best way to get your book listed swiftly on Amazon and doing it directly means there are no middle men and you will get the best royalty. KDP has the facility for 'expanded distribution' so that the books will be available throughout the book trade as well as on their worldwide websites. However I do not enable this facility as I have been told it doesn't work in the UK and more importantly because I am using Ingram Spark for this whose printing cost is cheaper for my colour books.

You will see Createspace mentioned on web sites about publishing. This was Amazon's print book printing and distribution company which is no more; it has ceased and its function taken over by KDP which was previously only e-books but now provides an integrated service for both print and electronic.

The agreement the author has with both Ingram Spark and KDP is 'non-exclusive' which means you can use both together as I and many others do. Amazon does do an optional exclusive deal for eBooks however. KDP will provide you with a complimentary USA sources ISBN number for your book but if you accept that you will only be able to distribute the book through KDP which is the nature of ISBN numbers, not KDP's doing. You can't use a KDP ISBN for Ingram Spark as the book will only be registered as available from KDP.

KDP is simple and efficient. Once I click on my book on KDP for it to be published it appears on the Amazon web sites as 'in stock' in about 15 minutes. I have only once had a problem and that was sorted efficiently by a phone call.

Lulu

Lulu is a web site based in the USA but operates throughout the world. The web site is easy to navigate and is possibly the easiest way to publish a book and make it available throughout the book trade and on web sites. Although based in the USA it uses a local partner to print and distribute so it is essentially a middle man between the author and printer/distributer. When I have used Lulu I have found the printing to be top quality and the instructions on the web site easy to follow. Lulu will provide a USA sourced ISBN number which makes things easier.

If I wanted to easily publish a specialist book I expected to sell few copies of it would be my first choice. However there are two situations I would not use it and go direct to Ingram Spark and Kindle Direct Publication. These are if I was keen to make the maximum income from the book because it is essentially a middle man and needs to generate some revenue and the other if the book is in colour and I wanted to sell it. For a personal memoir in colour that would not be for sale and I only want a few copies it is fine as the quality has, in my experience, been excellent but the printing is too expensive to sell. Lulu deals with eBooks as well as print and the books I have done become available on Amazon in about three weeks.

If you are not confident about the process there are tutorials and videos and links to professionals who you can pay to do part of it for you. There are templates for cover formatting.

Needed for the book

1. Title. A unique, short, snappy title.

2. Subtitle. Which should explain what the book is about. The title and subtitle together should contain 'keywords' that would appear in an online search by someone who might be interested in your subject.

3. An interior file usually in PDF format but if it is entirely or mostly print a Word file would be fine. The file should start with the 'front matter' which starts with the title page followed by the copyright page which should have the ISBN number on. This is normally followed by an introduction and table of contents. If you number the pages this should be in Roman numerals and blank pages should be counted but have no number on them.

Remember when selling online that the buyer will be able to see a 'look inside' feature on Amazon (where about 70% of books are sold) and eBooks will typically allow people to have a taster of the first three chapters so the beginning of the book should set out clearly what they are going to get if they buy the book.

After the front matter is the main text of the book. It should start on a right hand side page and be numbered with Arabic numbers and the first page should be 1 so the right hand side is always an odd number.

Appendices always go at the back and it is desirable to put boring things like acknowledgements and details of sources at the back rather than occupy valuable space at the front which should be for material which will attract a potential customer to buy.

4. A cover file. Almost always in PDF.

5. Blurb about the book. This normally goes on the back cover but will appear on web sites and is the most important text in the book. It should be brief and should give information about the contents of the book and should be an inducement to buy. It should not be a blatant advertisement or be inaccurate because you don't want people to buy it who will be disappointed as they can legally return it if they have bought it online and don't like it.

How to make a cover file

This can be complicated or very easy.

It is obvious that the front cover should have the title, subtitle and author's name and should be exactly the same as on the title page and copyright page inside. The blurb should be on the back cover normally with an image of the author and a brief note of their qualification for writing the book. The ISBN with a bar code, should also be on the back cover.

The size of the cover should be the size of the book and its spine put 2 or 3 mms extra at each margin. This extra is 'bleed' which is because the cover will be printed larger than the

book and then cut back to match the size of the interior; this is because there is a small margin of error in the printing size and avoids a white margin around the outside.

The width of the spine will be a function of the number of pages and the width of the paper.

There are three ways to make a cover:

1. Design it yourself. After you have loaded up the interior file to Ingram Spark, KDP or Lulu the web site will either provide a template to make the cover on or tell you the dimension of the cover.

2. Use a stock cover from a template. This can be done at KDP or Lulu or you can buy one elsewhere. KDP and Lulu will put the text into one of their stock designs and you load up a cover image, and image of the author and blurb and a cover of the correct size will be created into seconds.

3. Hire a cover designer. This can be done from web sites such as KDP, Lulu and elsewhere. You email them the template or measurements provided after you have loaded up the interior file.

Making an eBook

There are two systems for eBooks. ePub is the industry standard for eBooks used by every eBook seller except Amazon. You can created an ePub file from a Word file but as there are very many eBook sellers you will need an intermediary to distribute them. Ingram Spark or Lulu will do this. Two of the biggest are Smash Words and Book Baby.

Amazon uses its own system which is easier and better. You can create the file needed from a Word file using free software from the KDP web site 'Kindle Create'. You then load up the file and an image of the cover. Amazon sells more eBooks than all of the other eBook sellers together.

After file creation

After uploading the files Ingram Spark, KDP or Lulu will automatically check there are no errors in the files and when you start it is inevitable you will have made some mistakes. The software will point these out for you to make corrections and upload the file again. Once that is OK a human will check them. Ingram charges $50US for that and then you can get a proof printed or see an e-proof online.

When all is done you set your price within the limits the platform you are using allows and click for the book to be distributed. If using KDP the book will appear on Amazon in a few hours.

ISBN and Legal Deposit

If you have registered with Nielsons and are using your own ISBN you should then go into Nielson's Book data web site and register all the details they ask for about the book and link it to the ISBN. This will then be passed on to the book trade.

You should then post a book to the British Library which is a legal requirement. This might be useful in the future should anyone copy your work and there is a copyright issue as it proves when you published the work. You might be asked to provide 5 books for the Agency of the Legal Deposit Libraries located in Edinburgh.

If you use a free ISBN number provided by KDP or Lulu it will have been sourced in the USA and will not be known to the British Library or legal Deposit Libraries. Remember if you use a KDP or Lulu ISBN you can only have the book printed and distributed by them. If you use Ingram and KDP (as I usually do) you will need your own ISBN. If you use a KDP provided

ISBN the book will be badged by Amazon as 'independently published' so it will be obvious that the book is the work of an amateur. If you use your own ISBN you can badge the book with your own 'imprint' name. There are over 20,000 registered publishers in the UK and no-one will know your imprint is not a professional organisation.

Mistakes

For your book to look professional it must be without spelling, punctuation or formatting mistakes. I commend The Chicago Manual of Style as the bible of book style, presentation, spelling and grammar in the English language.

Further Information

There is loads on the Ingram Spark, KDP and Lulu web sites with links to very many YouTube videos on independent (self) publishing and you could join the Alliance of Independent Authors which has a lot of guidance and information together with lists of professionals that can help if you need it and discount codes for various services including for Ingram Spark which charges a fee for checking you file.

Once the book is published there is no guarantee anybody will buy it if you don't publicize it. I would commend not giving away free copies; rather get some leaflets printed and when your friends and relatives ask for a free copy tell them you don't keep any stock and tell them to buy on Amazon.

New services and improvements in technology are constantly evolving which usually produce improvements in service or cost for publishers. This means information in print or on-line can quickly become out of date.

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