

Growth and maturity in the self-publishing industry

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The self-publishing industry in the United States is alive and well and growing. Over the last several years, a period of rapid growth has given way to a more regular, sustained expansion fuelled by the increased availability of tools to assist authors with the publication, distribution, and marketing of their work. The result is a steady output of quality print and e-books from authors who now have a multitude of options to choose from in guiding their work through the publishing process.

Growth by the numbers

While ISBN registrations don't capture all self-published books, they do represent a significant portion of the self-publishing market. By comparing the number of registrations year over year, we continue to gain valuable insight into a flourishing industry. The Bowker Self-Publishing in the United States report documents this dynamic. It captures the growth rate of the self-publishing industry with a snapshot of activity based on ISBNs registered in the Bowker Books in Print database. The numbers reflect the level of self-publishing activity and reveal trends such as the relative growth of print versus e-book formats.

For 2016 vs 2015, the numbers indicate a continuing growth trend for print (+11%), though at a slower rate than a year ago (+34%). E-books show a slight decline in the number of title registrations (-3%), but this is a significantly smaller decrease compared to the previous year (-11%). E-books accounted for almost 19% of all self-published titles in 2016. Some other statistics of note for the period from 2011 to 2016:

- e-books grew from 88,238 to 148,311: an increase of 60,073 or 68%
- print books increased from 158,972 to 638,624: an increase of 479,652 or 301%
- the combined print and e-book number grew from 247,210 to 786,935: an increase of 539,725 or 218%

What's driving the growth?

In the past, authors have taken great satisfaction in completing their books, only to discover that writing the text was just the beginning. Choosing to self-publish, while immensely rewarding to authors, still requires that all those tasks typically handled by publishers be taken care of by the authors themselves. These might include converting the text to the correct e-book format, so that it

can be read on any of the multiple devices now available to readers. Editing, creating print-ready copies, distributing, registering copyrights, and marketing are some of the other requirements of publishing typically handled by a publishing house.

As a self-publisher, an author either has to assume the responsibility of managing all these responsibilities independently, or partner with others who might handle some or all of them on his/her behalf. Some of the questions faced by every author who chooses to forgo the traditional publishing route are: how do I get my book into bookstores? How will readers find my book? How do I promote my work and myself? How do I handle the financial aspects of publishing on my own?

What has changed, in recent years, is the availability of high-quality help authors can rely on to guide them through the process of publishing and making their titles available to the public. Whether the book is published in print or digital form, or both, there are many organisations that stand ready to offer a wide variety of tools for both seasoned and first-time authors.

The fact is, self-publishing can now depend on a sophisticated and highly accessible support structure. Everyone who has a story to tell has access to a method for sharing it. This has levelled the playing field to an unprecedented degree. Self-publishing has gone mainstream. In fact, the vast majority of self-published titles, as the report shows, are published through one of the many self-publishing platforms now offered on the market. Out of a total of 786,935 self-published titles in 2016, only 54,206 (6.9%) are truly individually published.

As self-publishing matures, the quality of both content and format for many of these titles is becoming indistinguishable from those published by traditional houses. In recent years, the number of independent authors topping prominent bestseller lists has grown substantially – a clear indication that readers are embracing author-published titles. The stigma of 'vanity presses' is gone.

Trends in digital

The focus on quality in digital publishing is clearly evident in the results of a recent survey of authors and publishing professionals. For the fourth consecutive year, Bowker has partnered with Data Conversion Laboratory, a firm specialising in digitisation and content management, to conduct a survey to identify current attitudes and key concerns in digital publishing. With over 1,000 responses received, the results reveal consistent trends. Most notably, we see that content quality and accuracy after a digital conversion are still top concerns. For example, 86% of respondents felt that comprehensive editing was just as important for e-books as for print books.

Readers expect the same level of quality regardless of format, and publishers know this from their own experience, as confirmed by 68% of respondents stating that quality affects e-book sales. When content is not properly converted to digital, it shows, and readers reject it. The time when customers were willing to make excuses for flaws in e-books has long passed, and anyone who is serious about digital publishing should take note and ensure the highest level of quality of their digital titles. While containing cost is certainly a factor in all business ventures, cutting cost at the expense of quality could prove fatal when it comes to e-book sales. If there is one clear message from the survey it is this: quality is king when it comes to successful digital publishing.

Self-publishing as a business

The most successful self-publishers don't view themselves as writers only, but also as business owners. They invest in their business and are willing to hire experts to fill gaps in their own skill set. This entrepreneurial approach to non-traditional publishing is building a thriving new author/publisher service infrastructure. A related development is that more authors are opting for a hybrid approach to book publishing. Rather than committing exclusively to self-publication or going through a traditional publishing house, authors choose the best method for their work,

depending on type of book, sales market, or target audience. It becomes a business decision, with authors exerting more extensive control over their projects.

Key takeaways

The self-publishing industry has been steadily evolving over the past few years, and will continue to provide ever-greater opportunities for aspiring authors. Because of the wide variety of resources available, authors can now get their books published in print or digital form quickly, easily, and economically. With the vast number of distribution, marketing, and publicity options open to them, authors can reach a truly global audience as never before. The future is bright for self-publishers.



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