



The Rewards and Perils of Self-Publishing

By Kathy Fernandez, Former Executive Director, North Canton Heritage Society, North Canton

So you want to write a book? The aim of all historical organizations is to spread the word about the heritage of your community, and the traditional way to do this is to publish. Not everyone will visit your museum or library, and not everyone has online access or the desire to look at online exhibits. This means that traditional publishing is still the way to reach the widest audience.

The hardest part is getting the thing written in the first place – but assuming you’ve achieved that, here are some of the pros and cons about publishing your material yourself. These are things I’ve learned through (mostly good) experience.

Publishing it yourself:

- The best thing about doing this yourself is that you can control everything: the content, the look of the finished product, the copyright, and the sales. Once you bring someone else into the fold, some of this control is lost. But with control comes responsibility. Just how many copies do you print so that they aren’t sitting there on a shelf gathering dust ten years later? Without an outside editor, who makes sure the grammar and the facts are correct? Are you prepared to promote the book?
- It’s hard to guess how many copies to print, as it’s hard to gauge how popular your book will be. It’s also tempting to over-order because the price per copy goes down the more copies you print. There is no rule of thumb on quantities that I’m aware of. Allowing people to pre-order might help and give you some cash to pay for printing. A pre-ordering publicity blitz will help with future sales too.
- Since you aren’t using an outside publisher, you keep all of the profit and don’t have to deal with any minimums before you receive royalties.
- You can set the price, using a format that reflects the content. The North Canton Heritage Society published a Civil War memoir in booklet form using a local copy service. We used Office Max; FedEx Office also does this. It sells briskly at just five dollars, and we are still making \$2.50 from each copy. If it had been printed in softcover with a perfect binding (where the pages are glued to the spine), it would have cost us twice as much.
- You have to find a local printer that satisfies your needs and meets your budget.

Using an outside publisher:

- An outside publisher like Arcadia (www.arcadiapublishing.com) or a university press can help you generate publicity for your publication. They have sources, such as contacts with external reviewers, who might write about your book in newspapers, magazines, or academic journals.
- A publisher can handle distribution so you don’t have to tote your book around to outlets and handle consignment sales. On the other hand, you may want to do that anyway – the more sales the better! They also handle online sales from their own website and from Amazon, so your book can reach a wider audience.
- An outside publisher can ensure quality, including the look of the book, and provide editorial assistance and editorial review.
- Copyright issues can be both a pro – the publisher can help with the application for copyright – and a con – the publisher can hold the copyright, and even though you receive funds from the book via royalties, you don’t control any future publication of your own work. This is something you will want to discuss in-depth with any publisher.
- In most cases the outside publisher assumes all costs associated with the publishing of the book, so you are not out any money that you might never get back if the book doesn’t sell.

There is a middle ground between doing it all yourself with a local printer or going to professional publisher – using an online self-publisher like Lulu (www.lulu.com). They have services, for a fee, to help with formatting and editing, but you can order hardcover and softcover books, either in quantity to sell yourself, or one copy at a time “on demand.” They even offer e-books, either for free if you do the formatting, or at a cost if they do it. Lulu also prints photo books and calendars. The North Canton Heritage Society has used Lulu to print fundraising calendars with photographs from its collection.

So, get the word out there about the history of your community. As they say, publish or perish! ■