

Authors need to find a dolphin in shark infested waters

By David Zelder

When I decided to retire early from the pressure-cooker world of senior management I decided to increase the effort of bringing my writing to a wider audience. Throughout my business career I had, of necessity, undertaken many writing tasks. This would range from board reports, magazine articles and internal newsletters to advertising blurb and other marketing material.

Fiction, however, is another thing, but at least I had the experience of taking a piece of white paper and expressing my thoughts in the characters that I began to write on there. However, whilst beavering away at my PC and often my laptop, a quotation kept clouding my thoughts. It went something like *“Any moderately intelligent person can write a book, but it takes a genius to sell one.”*

So, as early as 2008, I started investigating the market, looking at agents, publishers and reading such publications as “Writing magazine”. I started sending off for brochures, both hard copy and electronic to find the route I would need to pursue to get my work out into the public domain.

When I was in business, I would never countenance fiddling, dishonesty, lying or cheating. My last fulltime role was CEO of a large plc and I had to move out a number of people who indulged in such practices, including filling their wives cars up on the company credit card or taking a bunch of mates to a Twickenham rugby international and sending the £1500 to the company.

Thus I soon began to view the information contained in the brochures with an enquiring mind, some might say suspicious mind (yes, I’ve got the song by Elvis, thank you). I bought a copy of The Writer’s Handbook and started writing to agents and publishers listed in there.

All this time the words in the novel were creeping up to my target level of around 90,000 and I was still fishing in the dark looking to get it published. Then I read a copy of Writers and Artists Yearbook and my attitude changed, I became more focussed and realised that I needed to look for the dolphin swimming against the tide in a sea full of sharks. I read the exposé on vanity publishing by journalist Johnathon Clifford, who won the Daily Mirror good service award for exposing the sharks in the industry. Go to <http://www.vanitypublishing.info/> and have a look for your selves.

By the time I had got to this point I had already received several 4 page letters from the many sharks who pretended to help those authors who wished to self publish. The letters were usually 3 pages of fulsome praise for my work, and then the 4th page requested a cheque for amounts ranging from £6,800 to £3,000. Up front payments for work of unspecified quality and you

end up with a truck load of books with no marketing support and no means of order fulfilment.

I had also attended a talk by the NWUK member David P Elliot which was an eye opener as he too had been swimming with sharks and had decided he needed to be in control of his own destiny. That sounded like it was where I should focus my energies.

I met many authors and talked to them about their publishing experiences. It was like reading a horror story by Edgar Allan Poe. Some I spoke with were earning 20-30 pence for each book sold. Others had books that were produced in a fashion that they looked home made, and yet had cost the author a fortune. In most cases, the company who had printed the book kept most of the money from book sales, despite receiving £000's from the writer up front. Yet the naïve author believed they had self published. How wrong they were.

So my mind was made up, as I did in my business career, so too as a writer I would have no truck with crooked publishing firms. I would be in total control and maximise the earning potential. So here in summary is the route I took:-

- I sought out a publishing services firm that did not ask for up front fees
- I only signed an agreement on the basis that **I was the publisher**
- I own every book that is printed and keep the £8.99 retail price
- The only time I may give some of that away is to suppliers like Askews for library supplies, or a trade price for a retailer. But for all direct sales I got 100% of the revenue
- I insisted on visiting the premises and meeting all the key staff. I looked at printing presses, guillotines, packing, and storage capability. I did a search on the company at Companies House to see if they were clean. I refused to deal with American companies who, as soon as you made an enquiry, hassled you day and night, and would not take "no" for an answer
- Many so called publishing companies are brass platers, so I dismissed those from my negotiations. If they said they were a printer and publisher I went to see what they actually were. If all they had was brass plate on the notice board outside a business centre (no lease, easy in easy out) then that meant they were sub-contracting the printing and everything else. Which means you would be paying 2 margins. No thank you.

So after a year searching I found what I was looking for :-

- No up front fees. I pay when the work is done
- First class book design and formatting by the company's own in house department

- No pressure to order 10,000 books, or 1,000 or 500. Honest discussion and advice on a reasonable quantity to order.
- In house production with modern equipment, quality presses etc
- Long established and well respected in the industry
- Professional in house order fulfilment directly linked to the “bookshop” button on my website. The client clicks through, they pay the full retail and the P&P with a credit card and the book is despatched immediately. Each month-end I receive payment at full retail for all books sold that month. They, of course keep the P&P and I pay a small fee for 6 month’s storage and handling.
- Whatever professional marketing support you need is provided on a menu basis. You choose and pay for whatever elements you need.

My final subject to bring to the reader’s attention is the margin achieved. Many writers I have spoken with, including NWUK members believe that they only need to sell 166-200 books to break even. They are basing this on having paid for, say, a POD company to print the books for £1500. So, £1500 divided by £8.99 is 167 books to break even.

WRONG!!

The cost of the books is but a small part of the outlay. The writer needs to factor everything into the price tag for publishing, including:-

- Expenditure on all your ink cartridges
- Paper for your proofs and any other stationery
- Cover design
- Copy editing
- Proof reading
- All the travel costs associated with the book, including NWUK meetings etc using 40p per mile and any meal costs as well
- Any promotional cost, roller banners, postcards, posters, bookmarks, printed pens etc
- All the postage to send the MS to agents publishers etc
- Investment in your website, design and hosting; see mine at www.davidzelder.co.uk
- Any subscription costs for memberships, e.g. NWUK
- If you are a real self publisher then you need to add in the cost of your block of ten ISBN numbers
- Only when you have added all these costs together and then the production costs can you then divide that final total by £8.99 and even then that is assuming that **YOU** are the publisher. If you are not the publisher then the book will remain an expensive hobby and you will never recover your investment.

My book is now selling and each time it goes out I receive the full £8.99. This is because my research over the last 3 years uncovered the following gems:-

- <http://www.vanitypublishing.info/>
- www.yps-publishing.co.uk
- <http://www.thamesway.net/index.html>

It breaks my heart so many talented writers are still swimming with sharks. You do not need to, just do your homework. I did, and love seeing the cheques and cash amounts of £8.99 coming in. That way I will recover my investment and can afford to pay part of my revenue to The Royal Marines Charitable Trust Fund.

Thank you for listening. You can have a go at me if you want, just be aware I'm merely trying to help.

Feedback welcome to david@davidzelder.co.uk

David Zelder
Lincoln
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