

E-publishing Books: the *skinny* and the meat
By Jeanetta R. Chrystie, Ph.D.

Even as a self-confessed “techie,” I admit to starting out as a skeptic of E-publishing.

“Why,” I reasoned, would anyone want to carry around an e-book reader or laptop computer to read a book? Particularly since a small paperback fit nicely into pocket or purse, didn’t need “booting,” and wouldn’t run out of power at a crucial point in the plot due to my lack of forethought in not also lugging around freshly charged batteries.”

So what changed my mind? Faculty and other co-workers in technology and education began e-publishing research and lecture materials. Friends and fellow members of Toastmasters International began e-publishing on CDs for sale to audiences at their speaking engagements, and as on-line inducements to gain more speaking engagements. Then my husband announced he was going to buy me a PDA for my birthday, to go choose what I wanted.

Lost opportunities turned into curiosity. Curiosity turned into racing for my spot on the moving caravan. When I found e-books for my new PDA, easily downloaded from the Internet and stored on the PDA’s flash memory, I was firmly hooked.

Traditional vs. electronic publishers

In case you are wondering about the differences between traditional publishers and electronic publishers. The quickest answer is format (and usually) distribution channels).

E-books are available in download, disk, CD and Print-on-Demand formats. POD has the advantage of cutting out warehousing of disks or CDs. Downloadable E-books are quickly becoming the most popular form of distribution.

Downloading E-books not only saves warehousing expenses and headaches, it provides an all-important intangible called “immediate gratification” for the buyer. No waits for the mail or trips to a store. Just a few mouse clicks and it jumps into their computer. A few more clicks and their can be reading their newly purchased e-book, often in less than 15 minutes from when they first noticed it on you or your publisher’s web site.

E-publishing has three primary types of publishers. The “best” from many author’s point of view are the non-subsidy, royalty-paying e-publishers. Authors pay no fees, up-front or otherwise. The e-publisher provides free in-depth editing, distribution and payment handling.

The second type are “cooperative” subsidy, royalty-paying e-publishers. There are still no up-front author fees, but there are usually fees for those basic services such as editing.

The third type are full-fledged “vanity” or subsidy, royalty-paying e-publishers. They not only require up-front fees, they hide like wolves behind the term “self-publisher.”

Everyone wants to know about royalties. E-publishers vary widely, from 24% to 80% royalties! The current standard royalty rate is 30%, still significantly better than traditional publishers – particularly for new authors.

Few e-publishers pay advances. Why? Advances were created to provide subsistence level income for the author slaving away long-term on a traditional book, sometimes for two or three years. E-books can usually be released within weeks or months of contract, so where's the need for a sustenance advance?

Advantages and Disadvantages

The most frequent complaint is that there isn't a great deal of money in e-publishing for the average author just yet. That is expected to change. Stephen King stopped his chapter-by-chapter e-book "The Plant" because his "honor system" of read and then pay wasn't working out. However, he admitted to being open to picking up after chapter six and completing it in the future.

Barnes & Noble launches its digital imprint in Spring 2002 with "The Book of Counted Sorrows" by Dean Koontz. They are also actively seeking new talent. In an attempt to attract new e-book readers, all Barnes & Noble e-books are to be priced under \$8. They will provide distribution and sales tracking for authors.

Microsoft announced on January 6, 2002, a cooperative agreement with on-line bookseller Barnes & Noble for the latter's e-books to be compatible with Microsoft's Reader software. Microsoft has also made deals with such publishing powerhouses as Penguin Books to convert their print titles into electronic books.

A dozen advantages of e-publishing lure authors as intriguing incentives. Turnaround times are much quicker. The good e-publishers offer simple, author-friendly contracts. Authors retain control of their books, often without revisions or restrictions. The shrinking shelf-space crisis in bookstores can't eat at the profit margin of e-books.

Agents are completely unnecessary (so you keep that 15% of royalties too). You get to keep your first-choice of title, unless that e-publisher already has a title by the same name. Book covers, for CDs or alternative print versions are done to your specifications—you can even draw them yourself if you are an artist.

E-publishers don't try to "own" their authors, you can submit your next e-book anywhere. Your e-books are available anywhere in the world. They are available for purchase 24 hours a day. They are also available—quite possibly forever, not just until another book outsells yours. Consequently, e-book authors have more opportunity to become bestsellers because there are no time limits.

PostScript

There are two excellent books I recommend for those considering e-publishing. The first is Karen S. Wiesner's 2002 Edition, **Electronic Publishing: The Definitive Guide** (see

www.karenwienser.com). It's comprehensive treatment of e-publishing topics and related considerations is well worth the \$24.95 paperback price or \$12.00 download price.

Another is **Your Guide to Ebook Publishing Success** by James Dillehey. His web site (www.00ebooks.com) mirrors his own success in e-publishing.

There are two other types of e-publishing which deserve brief mention. Submitting articles and poetry to on-line electronic magazines and newsletters is another huge topic. Like e-book publishing, e-publishing in on-line periodicals carries its own benefits and drawbacks – a long topic for another time.

A lesser known e-publishing venue is that of “blogs.” Blogs is a techie term for Weblogs, those eternal electronic diaries, rant and rave on-line essay depositories, and travel blow-by-blow accounts of people's vacations and mishaps. Several inexpensive software tools offer “bloggers” (those who blog on the Internet) easy ways to blog without knowing any web publishing languages. Another future article topic for authors eager to “boldly go.” Let me know if you're interested in learning more...