

What to Expect from a Traditional Publisher

What should authors expect from their publishers? One of the first questions authors ask a publisher is “How much do I get for each sale?” However, many other questions may be far more important to ask to determine whether the publisher is right for you.

What Services will the Publisher Provide?

A reputable publisher should lead each phase of the publication lifecycle from initial editorial review and consultation through coordination of printing and sales. Through the publisher’s experience and sound judgment, the authors work is managed, packaged, and marketed with polished expertise. As a result, the publisher serves as a gatekeeper ensuring a professional product and the clout to promote sales in relevant venues.

A Quality Publisher Communicates

During the course of each publishing phase, a quality publisher should communicate with the author through verbal consultation and written reports and correspondence.

Initial consultation should entail what the publisher likes and dislikes about the manuscript, an estimate as to how much effort and time it will take to get it ready for publishing, and what role each the author and publisher should assume. Discussion should include contractual obligations, mutual expectations for sales and marketing efforts, and an assessment of the current book market conditions.

Logistics

After the manuscript has been revised to perfection, the publisher should take command of the logistics to ensure industry compliance with cover designs, barcodes, ISBNs, Library of Congress numbers, spine widths, back cover synopses, front matter, page layout, file preparation, coordination with graphic artists,

printers, Library of Congress, books in print and other book industry indexes, inclusion in distributor databases.

The logistics also include sales fulfillment from warehousing stock to invoicing, packaging and delivery.

Publisher’s Marketing Budget and Strategy

Frank discussions should describe not only the author’s platform and willingness to promote their work, but also the publisher’s marketing budget and connections to distributors and retail outlets. The publisher should be able to reference past successes in getting books into retailers and generating sales. They should be able to elaborate on marketing strategies as well. After all if no one knows the book is available, it won’t sell no matter how good it is.

Publisher’s Connections

The publisher should have some stronghold in one or more of the major markets: big-box chain stores, independent bookstores, library market, academic market, and have some ability to reach the public through television, internet, radio, and/or print media from commercials to press releases and author guest appearances.

Other marketing initiatives include advertisements, participation in book festivals, book signings, book talks, press releases/media interviews, email blasts, social media, in-person networking at associations, meet ups, and/or social events.

In addition, publishers should maintain accurate records of sales and perform statistical analyses to understand where sales have been successful as well as where sales have been lacking. This thoroughness enables publishers to adjust marketing efforts to maximize sales.

What to Expect from a Traditional Publisher

In terms of royalties, you should clarify whether the percentage is based on the retail price or after the publisher's expenses.

The Talk: The Reality of Competition

At some point, maybe even initially, the publisher should have "the talk" with the author. This talk is a reality check to dispel unrealistic expectations from the author.

Authors often believe their work is a breakthrough in the literary arts, will become a *New York Times* best seller, and is destined to be reincarnated into a movie adaptation. Sadly that scenario is realized by few. The rest of the 250,000 authors who publish every year are lucky if their work is accepted by a major book retailer, who review more than 60,000 books a year and select about one percent of those titles.

The crushing reality of competition is evidenced by the common experience of first time authors who send out queries to hundreds of publishers and literary agents only to receive a curse rejection or no reply whatsoever.

If by some good fortune the author gets published by a publisher who invests thousands of dollars into the project, the author may realize a royalty as little as twenty five cents per sale. Therefore, even with some moderate success, the author will have to keep their day job.

The saddest experience for an author is to realize large sales only to be denied royalties because of returns six months later of unsold units, which nullify the original sales. Retailers have the right to return unsold merchandise and get a refund.

The reality is that success is hard and unlikely, but commercial success is usually not the primary motivation for writing literature. Authors find value in creating literary art and

sharing it others. Getting a book published is the most rewarding experience that can be facilitated by a traditional publisher.

The following questions may be ones to ask your publisher, once you get their attention.

How long has your company been in business?

How many employees or contractors work with your company?

How many books has your company published and what have been the sales totals?

Does your company provide financial backing for publishing my book?

Can I see a book contract before signing one?

How long would your company have exclusive rights to sell my book? How long would the term of the contract last?

What are royalties of unit sales based on, retail prices or net profit?

Can I see samples of other books you have published? Does your company ensure industry compliance and take care of all of the logistics such as cover design, barcodes, printing, warehousing, sales fulfillment, and reporting.

What happens if we disagree on an edit or book cover design, or some other issue?

What connections do you have to the book industry in terms of distributors, book stores, etc.?

Have the books your company published been accepted by large chain bookstores?

What would be the marketing budget and strategy for my book?

Would your company coordinate guest author appearances?

How many sales could I reasonably expect in the first year?

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Would I be liable if your company suffers a financial loss with this project?

How often should I hear from your company?
Does your company provide periodic reports of sales and relevant actions?

A publisher should take care of its authors so authors can focus on their craft rather than the business end of the book trade. Authors should expect no less.