

Some Straight Talk: What You Really Need to Know about Getting Traditionally Published

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IN TODAY'S PUBLISHING WORLD, YOUR TWO PRIMARY PUBLICATION ALTERNATIVES ARE:

ALTERNATIVE #1: A Traditional Royalty-Paying Publisher

A Traditional Publisher is one who, first and foremost, by definition, pays for all aspects of each of its books' production — from initial Manuscript Acquisition, ISBN Assignment, Content Editing, Revisions, Copy Editing, Book Layout Design, Graphic Art Cover Design, Printer/Manufacturing Setup, Wholesale and Retail Distribution Access, Logistics, Returns Management, Royalty Management, to the ongoing Promotional/Marketing expenses.

To do all of this well and meeting premium commercial production standards is a non-trivial investment of several thousands of dollars before ever getting to the additional Printing costs of the books themselves, regardless of print volume or the specific printing technology employed.

ALTERNATIVE #2: Any of many available forms of Self-Publishing, Subsidy Publishing, or Vanity Presses

If you, the author, personally pay for any of the items listed in Alternative #1 above as a Service, then you are participating in some form of Self-Publishing. However, there are many Vanity Presses out there in the market today who attempt to "spin" Subsidy Publishing as something very close to, or synonymous with, Alternative #1, traditional publishing, in hopes of fooling you into believing it's OK to consider yourself "A Real Published Author" by using their services and buying their various "packages" or "programs."

The real primary distinction between Traditional Publishers and Vanity Presses are their Revenue Sources. Traditional Publishers seek to generate revenue from the sale of a significant volume of books to actual retail book buyers: consumers. Vanity Presses don't really care if any actual books are sold, but rather seek to generate their revenues from Author fees charged to produce the books (with any actual sales being purely incidental).

Although, it is critical to understand that "causing a book to exist" has absolutely nothing to do with "causing a book to be sold." And without the latter, the former is irrelevant.



The Alternative #1/High Road versus Alternative #2/Low Road Dilemma

Your fundamental problem is clear, and all too common among ambitious unpublished writers. Your situation is that all the Traditional Publishers out there, big and small and everything in between, have all rejected your work, time and time again, and you really don't want to go down the Self-Publishing route, which you know, fairly or unfairly, lumps you into the category of all the wannabes who could never get their work accepted by a legitimate publishing house of any size.



You probably also realize that to produce a truly high-quality commercially viable and competitive product (i.e. your book), takes many specific professional skill sets and talents far beyond just having written the book—skill sets and tools and resources you most likely don't have—and nor do many others who have tried to short-circuit the traditional acceptance process, as evidenced by the generally appalling quality of most self-published works you've seen in the past.

What's worse, you've also seen that most self-published works tend to be grossly overpriced (non-competitive) and non-returnable (which traditional brick & mortar retailers insist upon and therefore are of no interest to them whatsoever), further making the finished product that much more commercially non-viable. And in today's struggling economy, price sensitivity and availability are critical.

On the other hand, in all fairness, there are many works that are very well-suited to be produced by Subsidy Publishers instead of Traditional

Publishers—such as many non-fiction works with very small niche market appeal, some educational texts, manuals, business publications, marketing tools, etc. There are also many elderly people who wish to enshrine their memoirs and life's experiences in a published work, for their posterity, where no viable commercial market exists for the work. Vanity Presses are ideal publication venues for those type of works.

But that's not what we're talking about with you. Is it? No, you've written a book, a novel-length work of fiction that you believe in your heart-of-hearts is *very* commercially viable and could very well have the potential to be a big seller, maybe even a *bestseller* some day, if only *someone* legitimate, who produces top-quality books, would take a chance on it and give you a break. Sound pretty accurate?

Why All the Traditional Publishers Really Reject You

This is the question you've wanted honestly answered for years. You suspect a grand conspiracy against you personally. You know your stuff is as good if not better than a lot of what you've read and seen published. So why *not* you? Is there just too much competition out there?

Actually, competition is part of it. But the real reason is something far simpler: **Risk**. You represent an Unknown, and therefore **Unacceptable Business Risk**.



Think about it: To submit your work to any Traditional Publisher, you are asking that publisher to make a significant investment of their money in your project. No business person in their right mind would ever do so if they weren't convinced that making such an investment will produce a worthwhile Return on Investment (ROI), i.e. a profit and not a loss (with breaking even being utterly unappealing as well).

That's the general high-level concept. In practice, however, the reality of what's really going on is far more insidious with almost a certainty of rejection stacked against you.

What you probably don't know is that all of the major publishing houses decided a long time ago that they would never intentionally publish genuine "nobodies" ever again, with very few exceptions. This has to do with what is known as mandating a "**Guaranteed Sell-Through.**" Basically, that's an expected minimum number of copies of a book that are absolutely certain to be sold, no matter what -- and that being a number far in excess of the cost to physically produce the finished book.

You see, in an industry with over a 50% Return Rate of unsold books, this was its strategic cure for "Unacceptable Risks" and financial losses. And even though, according to *Nielsen BookScan*, less than 2% of all books printed ever sell over 5,000 copies, for the big publishing houses, this means that most of them don't want to touch anything they don't believe will sell at least 100,000 copies or more. So you're talking about a minimum investment of several hundred thousands of dollars to millions. You'd never make such an investment on an unknown, unproven product if it was your money.



Over time the situation has only become worse. In fact, all the major book retailers like Borders, Barnes & Noble, Books-A-Million, etc. have instituted internal ordering policies, restricting them to only ordering and stocking the Top 100 or so of the most popular and consistently selling titles. Realize what that means: many major New York houses used to individually produce many times that many titles each year. They literally *can't* anymore. There's no retailer who wants anything but the best of the best (sales-wise) taking up room on their shelves.

So who gets those precious rare production slots at all the big houses? Naturally, either the VERY established authors with huge fan-bases, whose books consistently rank in the top 100 again and again; or very famous people.

This principle is simple to understand: If you already have a large preexisting audience (known as your "Platform" in the biz) that you can leverage and count on to buy your book, then you have a very strong argument to make about some level of a **Guaranteed Sell-Through.** That's the secret.

Unfortunately, if you have no such existing large audience at your disposal, and you are currently a "nobody," then you have a big problem. Your manuscript alone cannot automatically argue for a high degree of Guaranteed Sell-Through, no matter how wonderful you or anyone else thinks it is.

In fact, according to industry statistics, the vast majority of Self-Published books rarely sell over 100 copies. That isn't even enough to cover the production and labor costs to bring it into existence. That's also why the Vanity Presses don't care, since they're making their money in author fees.

INSIDER SECRET: factoring in all the pre-production labor costs, plus higher Cost of Goods (COG) rates for digital printing or factoring in average Return rates for offset printed books, regardless of the production technology used, a book really needs to sell almost 2,000 copies just to achieve breakeven

and not lose money. Sales of 3,000 to 4,000 copies can be considered a moderately successful title that turns a small profit, with anything over 5,000 copies in sales putting it in the top 2%. However, with no existing audience and starting from scratch as an unknown, your chances aren't considered to be that much better than the Self-Published authors (averaging less than 100 copies sold). But even sales of 1,000 copies is still a losing financial proposition for a publisher. And therefore, this is why even the small publishers have said No to you. For in reality, whether you pay for a book's production or a real publisher does, if the book can't sell enough copies to cover its costs, it's a bad investment.

This is also why we at ArcheBooks Publishing **REQUIRE** all submissions to be accompanied by our **Author Evaluation Form** (downloadable below). Its main focus is on helping us make a determination of your existing audience (Guaranteed Sell-Through) and future audience potential. Quite simply, if you leave an answer blank or answer "No" to most of the questions on that form, you can be pretty certain we're going to say "No" to you, even before looking at what you've written, no matter how good it might be. And so would everyone else. And now you know why.

So what can you do?

You only have a very finite number of practical options to consider when it comes to getting published:

- 1. Already have a viable preexisting consumer Audience, and make that known to a Traditional Publisher -- the path of least resistance. The bigger your audience, the bigger the publisher you can have.**
- 2. Convince a Traditional Publisher that your work is so good all by itself that even though you don't have an Audience yet, your book is worth the Publisher taking on 100% of the financial risk of producing your book. Don't count of this happening with any major publishers, only Small to Medium Sized Publishing Houses (SMPH).**
- 3. Go Get an Audience first, and then seek Publication**
- 4. Go the Indie-Movie Producer/Investor Route**
- 5. Found your own publishing company and publish your book yourself (a very expensive, difficult, and time-consuming option)**
- 6. Give up your Traditional Publication ambitions and just Self-Publish with a Vanity Press**
- 7. If none of the above work out, just forget the whole thing and stick to your Day-Job**

Options #1, #5, #6 and #7 are self-explanatory, and very likely either aren't applicable to you or are not desirable.

Option #2 is the most common one routinely employed, but, unfortunately, works less than 1% of the time, which is why over 99% of what's written is rejected -- and rapidly approaching 100% of the time for the reasons previously discussed.

Options #3 and #4 are alternatives that you can actually consider trying, either of them or both of them. But realize that neither of them can guarantee a successful outcome, but may be able to help. They are discussed as follows.

#3 - Get an Audience

Ultimately, the burden of proof lies upon you and you alone, the author, to substantiate to a Publisher that your book has any commercial viability and therefore the quantifiable potential to generate any tangible sales results. If you can't make that argument convincingly, predicated on Guaranteed Sell-Through plus a credible Marketing Plan, and your justification having nothing to do with how great you think your writing is or how other similar books have done, then your chances of getting a "Yes" these days from a Traditional Publisher are slim to none -- literally less than 1%.

But there are glimmers of hope in terms of creating audiences for your work in advance of publication attempts, in ways that you might not have thought about.

Do you have thousands of [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) friends/followers? How many connections do you have on [LinkedIn](#)? Social Networking is a mechanism to reach a lot of people and connect with them. If any of those people would buy your book, that's a relevant fact.

Do you have an active website and/or blog for your writing (with samples)? How many visitors does it get? Do you belong to any large organizations? Do you do any public speaking or teaching? Do you write a syndicated column or newsletter, and if so what's the circulation size? You get the idea.

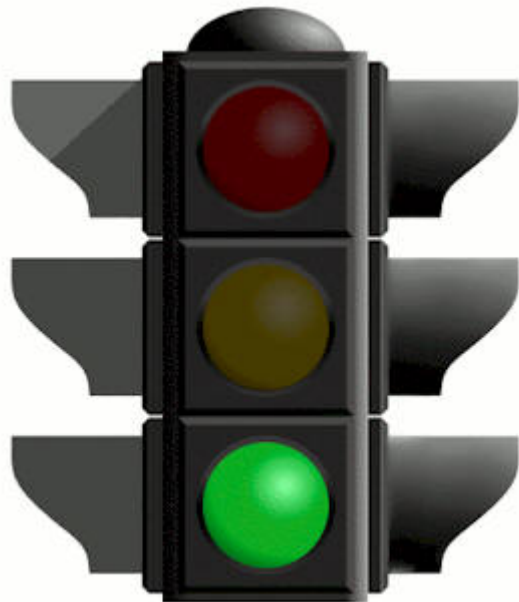
At the end of the day an Audience is an Audience -- regardless of exactly how people come to learn and remember your name. If a publisher wants to see that you have an audience before saying Yes -- then *go get one!*

#4 - Go the Indie-Movie Producer/Investor Route

If none of the other options above work for you, then there is one other possibility for you to consider, if you're in a position to do so.

That is, you might find yourself in the situation where you don't have a large existing audience yet, even though you are perfectly willing to go out there and work hard to develop your audience, but it just remains to be done. However, you face the Catch-22 dilemma of needing a top-quality published book to go sell in order to begin building that audience, but yet you don't want to do it with a schlocky, overpriced self-published product. If so, then you can consider doing what a lot of small independent film-makers have done for decades -- those who have also been rejected time and again by the major studios and movie production companies -- and that is to find **investors** and/or **sponsors** who believe in your work -- and *then* go pitch a publisher.

Fundamentally, as discussed above, the primary reason why most publishers, both large and small alike, have said No to you isn't necessarily an "artistic" reason having anything to do with the quality of your writing itself, but rather it's due to a basic "business" reason -- i.e. your work represents an unacceptable financial risk. The good news is that in the general business world, the topic of Risk Management is well understood, and doesn't have to always be a show-stopper if properly addressed.



From a Publisher's perspective, there are 3 basic ways of dealing with adverse Business Risk:

1. **Accept** it - in this case, for you, it means convincing a publisher to bear all the risk themselves (either via the whole Guaranteed Sell-Through thing, or with a true "Slam Dunk" project, i.e. Options #1 or #2 above)
2. **Assign** it - normally this idea refers to Insurance Policies, which don't really exist in terms of being able to pay a third party insurer to guarantee some degree of publication sales results, and therefore isn't really applicable here.
3. **Mitigate** it - which can come in the form of many creative ideas, but the basic idea is to devise strategies and mechanisms to make some or all of the risk go away, or at least have it reduced to an acceptable level from the perspective of the publisher.

Publishers fund their publication projects as individual project investments, with very specific estimations of their costs and expectations of returns calculated. The sources of project funding by a publisher can be quite varied: everything from cash on hand, to commercial bank lines of credit, to credit cards, to business loans, to trade credit from vendors, to asset liquidation, to government and non-profit organization grants, as well as (surprise, surprise) coming from third-party investors. That's just doing Business 101.

Please note, the idea of involving third-party investors is how a lot of movies get made, and that's also how some books get published. Creative "Joint Business Ventures" happen all the time, and the participating investors are rewarded with a portion of the profits, which in this context would come in the form of royalties paid out as they are generated via actual sales. Again, these are just basic business practices you'd find applicable to any product or service in any industry.



The bottom line is pretty simple: If the main reason everyone is telling you No, is because no one is willing to risk investing several thousands of dollars by themselves in all the pre-production costs to pay their editors, book designers, graphic artists, marketing staff, admin and legal, etc., but yet other third-parties might be willing take on some of that risk and thereby mitigating some or even all of the publisher's primary objection - then how might that fact affect the publisher's acceptance/rejection decision?

In the movie business, a film's Director is known as the "Auteur." If a Director only has what he believes is a great screenplay in hand that he wants to get produced (i.e. turned into an actual finished product for consumption by a paying audience), he's welcome to go "pitch" every producer in town (the people with money) to try and get them to help pay for making his film. However, if part of his pitch is to also highlight the existence of one or more existing backers (potential Associate Producers) of the project who he has already lined up, thereby diversifying the investment risk of who he's pitching, he has a much stronger argument than some other guy pleading with hat in hand asking for 100% backing. Make sense?

And what about commercial sponsors? Is it totally inconceivable for a company to contribute some of their marketing/advertising dollars to support an entertainment or informational project (your book) that provides favorable exposure of what it is they offer to a broad consumer market? Paid product placements in movies is standard operating procedure these days. Who says it can't happen in a book?

Or what if your book speaks to a major social issue or cause that some charitable organization or even the government is willing to help raise awareness of it by contributing to your project's development? Use your imagination.

So you might consider an alternative pitch in your Book Proposal, along the lines of:

"Mr. Publisher, if you like the quality of my work and would otherwise be inclined to accept it for publication on its merits, but as a new author, if due to my lack of a preexisting audience upon which you could base a reasonable expectation of strong sales and an acceptable return on your publication investment, and if that factor results in your decision to therefore have to pass on my project for that reason, then I would like to make you a proposition. Specifically, in order to help mitigate your initial product development risk, I would like you to know that I have secured the commitment of additional interested parties who not only believe in the strength of my writing but also in the value of this project, and who are willing to invest in it on a Joint Venture basis. If that business model is acceptable to you, it will not only represent a more secure investment on your part, but it will also afford me the opportunity to go out and demonstrate my ability to develop a viable commercial audience for my work, which I'm confident I can do, and am very eager and able to do."

That's a strong pitch. Now, will every publisher out there be open to consider doing something like that? No, of course not. But might some? Maybe. It's a business decision, nothing more. And in this horrible economy, any reasonable businessperson must prudently consider all relevant factors about any meaningful business decisions they make.

So how much money might need to be raised and invested to make a strategy like this fly? Maybe a little? Maybe a lot? Who knows exactly until you start talking about it? Depending on the quality and scope of the book being produced, pre-production costs can easily reach \$5,000 in labor alone before any of the actual Printing/Manufacturing costs are considered at all. But that's a subject for a project-specific discussion and potential negotiation, isn't it? But isn't opening up a dialogue and being in a negotiation better than receiving an outright Rejection?

Compare that logic to a standard query/proposal, where you're effectively saying, "Mr Publisher, I want you to invest at least \$5,000 of your money in my project, even though no one has ever heard of me, purely on the basis of *hope* that at least 2,000 people will somehow learn about my book and will decide to buy it." And this is said in the context of understanding that since you're not a Top-100 author yet, no bookstores or other retailers are going to be ordering your book right off the bat -- i.e. all your initial sales would be the product of Online and Guerrilla Marketing. To which, when asked by the publisher, "What assurance can you give me that at least 2,000 people will buy your book?" you don't have a satisfactory answer. Ergo: Rejection.

On the other hand, if your work is truly strong enough and compelling enough all by itself, such that a publisher would have accepted it and funded it completely themselves anyway (perhaps having no desire to share the profits with anyone else), i.e. confident that at least 2,000 copies (and hopefully a lot more) will be sold, then nothing about making such a creative offer precludes them from telling you that. In other words, they could turn down your joint venture option, but still accept your book for publication. Even with such an alternative on the table, a publisher can still think it's a bad idea and say No.

The point is that you are attempting to find a way to introduce a third alternative into the equation other than just an all-or-nothing Accept or Reject decision. As previously noted, this approach is certainly no guarantee of success, just a possibility to perhaps improve your chances, maybe a little, maybe a lot. As they say on TV, "Individual results may vary!"

Right now you might be thinking: "But wait a minute. Didn't you say earlier that if the publisher isn't paying 100% for production, then that's just another form of Subsidy Publishing?" Yes, and that's still

true. However, the distinction is if *YOU*, as a private individual, are personally paying for a book to be published as a service, then yes, that is indeed Subsidy Publishing by definition. But that's not what we're talking about here. And that's because if any Traditional Publisher who has already subjected a book submission to professional editorial evaluation and scrutiny and has a desire to take on the project, but elects to do so by working with a third-party entity to fund a portion of the project and thereby better managing his cash-flow and diversifying his direct risk of loss, that doesn't have to have anything whatsoever to do with you as an individual or a penny of your own personal money. Rather, you just might be in a position to be the catalyst that puts all the pieces together and helps makes it happen.

Moral of the Story:

If you already have a big audience, then getting a publishing contract is pretty easy. If you don't have an audience yet, then either you're willing to go build one in advance or hopefully your work is strong enough to stand on its own and at least one publisher out there would be happy to take it on 100%. But if you've discovered that none of these situations apply to you, then a little business creativity on your part could potentially serve to remove a significant business obstacle standing in the the way of your publication goals. If that strategy is not a viable option for you to consider, or if it's simply undesirable, then you always have the other six options available to you. It's absolutely your decision. But those are your only choices.