The Self-Publishing Revolution

Guy Kawasaki & Shawn Welch

"The only really necessary people in the publishing process now are the writer and reader."

—Russell Grandinetti, Amazon

Cause and Effect

This manifesto explains the advantages and disadvantages of self-publishing and why self-publishing is such a big deal. Technology has enabled publishing to take three big leaps:

→ **Publishing 1.0:** In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg created the printing press and more people could read the Bible. Whereas woodblock printing was capable of 40 pages per day, a Renaissance-era printing press churned out 3,600 pages per day. This caused a rise in literacy and threatened the literate elite. Believe it or not, in 1637, England restricted the number of print shops.

→ **Publishing 2.0:** Three companies—Apple, Aldus, and Adobe—enabled anyone with a Macintosh, laser printer, and PageMaker to print newsletters, newspapers, and books. Until

desktop publishing entered the picture, the best case for solo writers unaffiliated with a publisher was a typewriter and a photocopier or duplicator.

→ **Publishing 3.0:** Amazon, Apple, and Barnes & Noble enabled writers to create and sell books electronically as well as print paper copies on demand. Anyone with a computer, phone, or tablet can read these books. The imprimatur of a large publisher means less and less. "Buzz" about a book means more and more.

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The problem isn't that traditional publishers are dumb or evil. There are plenty of smart and nice people in the industry—probably more than most industries because a love of reading motivated their career choice.

The problem is that traditional publishing grew up in a world with limits and logistics such as shelf space, access to printing presses, editing and production expertise, and shipping of physical books.

In the old, constrained world, somebody had to select, print, and distribute what was worthy of royalty, shelf space, and killing trees. That somebody was an employee of a traditional publisher; he served as a filter, finisher, and arbiter of taste. Several thousand traditional publishers added this kind of value for hundreds of years.

Shelf space for ebooks, however, is infinite, and anyone who can use a word processor can write and publish a book. These changes don't mean that books are better—no more than a democratic political system guarantees better leaders—but at least the system is more accessible.

The Three Ds of Self-Publishing

Even if you like the heft, smell, and feel of printed books, the advantages of ebooks are here to stay. While printed books may never die (an ebook of Annie Leibovitz's photographs won't cut it), we're not going back to a time when there are no ebooks.

Companies such as Amazon and Apple, along with programmers and geeks, have produced three fundamental curve jumps in publishing:

1. **Democratization.** Anyone with a computer and a word processor can publish a book, and anyone with a computer, tablet, or smart phone can read a book. Writing and reading are no longer the provinces of the rich, famous, and powerful.

2. **Determination.** Authors can determine the success of their books, and readers can determine the quality of what they read. There's no one else to blame for a poor publishing experience if you're an author and for a poor reading experience if you're a reader.

3. **Disintermediation.** Entities that do not add value wither and die. The distribution of books from authors to readers is more direct, immediate, and inexpensive than ever. Gatekeepers must add value or face their demise.

If you're going to succeed in self-publishing, you need to believe in these changes at the core of your existence.

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Advantages for Authors

Enough about the big picture of publishing, let's get down to the nitty-gritty details of the advantages of self-publishing for authors:

- **Content and design control.** Unless you're already a successful author or a huge celebrity, control of your book is an illusion when you're working with a traditional publisher. When you self-publish a book, you control what's in it, how long it is, and how it looks. On the other hand, if you don't like your book, you have no editor or editorial board to blame.

- **Longevity.** Traditional publishers stop marketing a book when the month-long introduction ends or it stops selling—whichever comes first. There is little input from the author. As a self-publisher, you control this decision. By using a print-on-demand vendor and publishing an ebook, you can keep your book in print forever—or at least as long as it takes for readers to discover your book.

- **Revisions.** Traditional publishing can take months to fix errors because publishers print revisions only after they've sold the current inventory. When you self-publish a book, you can revise it immediately with online ebook resellers and even change the version that's being printed on demand.

- **Money.** Traditional publishers pay authors 10 to 15 percent of proceeds of the sales of a book to distributors. Amazon, by contrast, pays a 35 percent or 70 percent royalty. Apple pays 70 percent, and Barnes & Noble pays 65 percent. Self-publishing also enables authors to sell directly to customers—reaping the profits that distributors and retailers would have gotten.

- **Direct connection.** Self-publishing enables authors to maintain closer connections to their readers if they sell books directly. This is a powerful advantage if authors and readers want to interact and if authors want to sell future works to their readers.

- **Price control.** Authors exercise little control of the pricing of their books when working with traditional publishers. Self-publishing enables you to change the price of your book whenever you want. All you have to do is go to your account with Kindle Direct Publishing, iBookstore, Nook, and/or Kobo and input the changes.

- **Time to market.** A traditional publisher takes nine to twelve months to get a printed book to market, and it will not release the ebook version earlier than the printed version. By using a print-on-demand company, you can get your book to market in a couple of weeks. You can get an ebook through Kindle Direct Publishing in forty-eight hours.

- **Global distribution.** Traditional publishers use a wait-and-see attitude toward global distribution of a new book. They wait to see if the book sells well in the local market and if other publishers want to buy foreign rights. Self-publishing enables you to achieve global distribution of your ebook on day one. Kindle Direct Publishing, for example, will sell your ebook to customers in one hundred countries from the start.

- **Control of foreign rights.** When a traditional publisher sells the foreign rights of your book, it takes a percentage of the sale. If you self-publish and sell these rights, you'll make more money because you're not sharing revenue with a traditional publisher. You must weigh this advantage, however, against the difficulty of finding (or being found by) a foreign publisher, negotiating a contract, providing artwork, and collecting royalties.

- **Analytics.** Unless you're bugging your traditional publisher for information, the most you'll learn about your sales is your twice-a-year royalty statement. (Shawn's lucky; he gets a royalty statement four times a year from his traditional publisher.) If your traditional publisher subscribes to BookScan, it can provide retail point-of-sale sales results for your printed book. BookScan, however, does not include ebook sales, and it only tracks approximately 75 percent of retail print-book sales. Most online ebook resellers provide real-time or near real-time sales results, and many print-on-demand printers can provide similar information. This enables you to gain insight about how your sales and marketing promotions are doing.

Also, when you conduct experiments with pricing, you can see the results immediately. We should also tell you that members of Amazon's Author Central can view BookScan numbers without an affiliation with a traditional publisher.

- **Deal Flexibility.** Traditional publishers only sell to resellers except for bulk sales of printed books to large organizations. Anything outside of this—for example, selling five hundred copies of the ebook version of Enchantment—is difficult for traditional publishers. As a self-publisher, you can cut any kind of deal with any kind of organization. For example, you could sell a site license for your book to a large company for all its employees.

The Disadvantages of Self-Publishing for Authors

You may be thinking, "There's got to be a catch," and there is. While the advantages of self-publishing are many, there are disadvantages, too:

- **Advance.** There are only two kinds of authors: those who have a big advance, and those who want a big advance. A six- or seven-figure advance is a thing of beauty. It enables you to focus on writing, hire a nanny, and buy a MacBook Air. It's also proof that the publisher is serious about your book. And if your advance is large enough, you can cope with a publisher who can't directly sell five hundred copies of your ebook.

The problem is that as a self-publisher, you not only won't get an advance, you also are responsible for all the costs of publishing your book, such as editing, cover design, layout design, and production.

- **Editing.** Self-publishing can be a lonely path. In particular, you might not have an editor who is a mentor, advisor, and psychiatrist. Don't kid yourself—a good editor will make your book better. You can get all kinds of feedback from friends and relatives, but this isn't as good as what you can get from a professional editor.

- **Team.** In addition to an editor, a traditional publisher throws many people at your book at the same time. You may not have 100 percent of their attention for a long period of time, but you do get help. These folks can include an editorial assistant, technical editor, copyeditor, art director, publicist, and sales force. As a self-publisher, you'll still need to do what they would have done—or hire independent contractors instead.

- **Marketing muscle.** We'll address how to gain marketing muscle on your own, but it's unlikely you'll have as much as a traditional publisher. This is important if you want big-name publications, blogs, radio shows, and television shows to review your book. If you make your book a success, then you can attract these organizations later, but it's nice to have them pushing your book from the start.

- **Prestige.** After the creation of desktop-publishing tools in the mid-1980s, there was a flood of self-published books. In those days, "self-published" meant that you couldn't find a real publisher because your book was crappy. The stigma and suspect nature of self-publishing are far less than in those days, but they still exist.

- **Distribution.** As long as people are flying from airports and shopping in Costco, books printed on paper will sell. Publishers use a sales force to get books into these outlets. You won't have a sales force working for you, so the probability of seeing your book in the San Francisco airport is low.

- **Foreign rights.** Traditional publishers have established relationships around the world with other publishers so they can help you get your book translated for other markets within a year of first publication. It's much more difficult for authors to do this by themselves, although, as we mentioned, you can simultaneously ship your untranslated ebook version into dozens of countries on day one.

Plan C

Plan A for many authors is to write a pitch, get an agent, sign a publishing deal, receive an advance, and write a bestseller. Plan B, when Plan A doesn't happen, is to self-publish. You may achieve success with Plan B and write happily ever after, but there is also Plan C.

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In this scenario, you implement Plan B and use your sales results to prove to a publisher that people like your book. Then you sell the rights to your book to the publisher (fully cognizant of the frustration you'll encounter but salved by an advance for it, plus some prestige). In software terminology, you can think of the self-published version of your book as a paid beta test.

Maria Murnane is an example of Plan C. She's a PR person who moved to Argentina from Silicon Valley. Part of her income in Argentina came from playing professional soccer (I'm not making

this up). While not practicing or playing soccer, she wrote a novel called Perfect on Paper, which fictionalized her trials and tribulations as a single professional in Silicon Valley.

After a four-week search, Murnane found an agent who "loved" her book. Then she spent six months revising it for the agent. Her agent submitted the book to seven big traditional publishers, all of whom rejected it. Eventually even her agent fired her—via this e-mail:

I do feel that we're going in circles about this at a point. We are coming upon a year, which should be the term of our agreement. There are still some publishers (Red Dress among them) that you are free to approach with the book as it is, and because we haven't exhausted the possibilities, you may yet find your match with another agent. I think at this point it would be best to terminate the agreement and allow you to explore your options. I just don't think there's more I can do for you with this novel.

Undaunted, Maria revised her book for another five months. Then she took it to a writers' conference, where more people turned it down. Finally Maria's father convinced her to self-publish the book. Being the PR person she is, she undertook her own marketing program and earned more than one hundred five-star reviews on Amazon and sold more than one thousand copies. This might not seem like a big number, but keep reading.

Around the same time, Amazon launched Amazon Publishing, and it negotiated the rights for Maria's book. Since then the book has sold in the low six figures and has enabled Maria to live in New York as a writer. She has published two additional books: *It's a Waverly Life* and *Honey on Your Mind.*

Maria's example provides three valuable lessons: First, rejection doesn't necessarily mean your book isn't good. Second, rejection doesn't necessarily mean you should give up. Third, you may have more than one book in you, so you can use each book to build your customer base and get closer to success.

Plan C is an attractive alternative to relying on only Plan A or Plan B. It has the advantages of self-publishing (speed to market and freedom of content and style) and the advantages of traditional publishing (lucrative advances, foreign rights sales, and prestige).

This is why AmazonEncore, an imprint of Amazon Publishing, is pure genius. It acquires successful books from self-published authors and adds Amazon's clout to take them to the next level. It is, if you will, an institutionalized Plan C. (You can find more on Amazon Publishing and AmazonEncore in chapter 21 of our book APE: "How to Navigate Amazon.")

Artisanal Publishing

In the past, writers who were rejected by traditional publishers resorted to publishing their own books—this was called "vanity publishing." Many people attached a stigma to these books and, truthfully, the stigma was justified because many early self-published books were not properly edited and produced.

However, one generation's stigma is another generation's opportunity. When was the last time you decided to read a book because of who published it? What influences you more: the name of the publisher or reader ratings and reviews?

You need to get over feeling stigmatized if you can't find a traditional publisher. Perhaps these publishers have done you a favor by forcing you to think different [sic] and think outside the hardcover. The story of John Audubon may help allay your doubts.

Audubon created his epic work, *The Birds of America*, in the late 1820s. At the time, New York publishers already included such houses as the Harper Brothers, G. P. Putnam, Charles Scribner, and John Wiley. However, Audubon self-published his book using a subscription model, five illustrations at a time: one large bird, one medium bird, and three small birds. Each subscription consisted of 435 plates.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, most authors published their books at their own expense—Walt Whitman, for example, self-published (and typeset!) Leaves of Grass. Self-publishing could change from stigma to bragging point—maybe we could change the term to "artisanal publishing" and foster the image of authors lovingly crafting their books with total control over the process.

What would you rather read: a mass-produced or artisanal book?

Finally, you'll love this: during Audubon's time, the New York publishers based much of their business on pirating the works of Charles Dickens, Emily Brontë, and Thomas Babington Macaulay. So today's gatekeepers are yesterday's pirates. It was not until 1846 that George Palmer Putnam instituted the royalty system that's still in place today. Before then, publishing was mostly self-publishing.

Summary

The advantages of self-publishing far outweigh the disadvantages for most authors. You can use self-publishing as the end goal or a means to a traditional publishing deal. Keep in mind the concept of artisanal publishing as a new, cool form of publishing—you heard the term here first! 🔖

Info
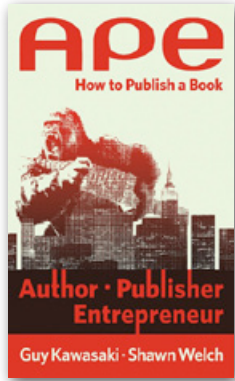
ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Guy Kawasaki is the author of *APE*, *What the Plus!*, *Enchantment*, and nine other books. He is also the co-founder of Alltop.com, an "online magazine rack" of popular topics on the web. Previously, he was the chief evangelist of Apple. Shawn Welch is the author of *From Idea to App*, *iOS 5 Core Frameworks*, and *iOS 6 for Developers* as well as the developer of several iOS apps. Previously he worked as a senior media-editor for Pearson Education. He also helped pioneer many of Pearson's earliest efforts in iPad solutions. Welch has a BS from Kansas State University.

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