Making money as a self-published author

If you are going to have your book self-published, be aware that there are things you have to do yourself. But you have your say over the book’s content, design and pricing. What’s more, you get more royalty than you would from the conventional publisher.

HEN Datuk Ally Che

2014, she chose to become self-published as opposed to going through the conventional publishing platform.

Doing so would give her control over the content of the book, the design and pricing, she explains. "For example, I set the pricing for my first book, which has 260 pages, at RM14.90, and set it at only RM9.90 for the following two books, which have 270 pages and 184 pages each," says Che, adding there is no way a conventional publisher would allow such an attractive pricing.

For 70-year-old Mohd Iban Abdullah, author of the book, Be Healthier – Start Your Own Journey today, it was the need to drive home an important message and leave a legacy. "I decided to write a simple book for ordinary folk to take better care of themselves. Essentially, it does not cost much to be healthier. A lot of people are intimidated by models that they see on advertisements, because the standards are unattainable. "I also wanted to leave something behind, something my family will remember me by," says the retiree, who was a sales agent for a healthcare-related direct-selling company.

While he could have gone to the traditional platform, Mohd Iban was aware that chances of fulfilling his goal would be slim as traditional publishers are notorious for their high rejection rate. "With self-publishing, the rejection rate is probably zero in contrast to traditional publishers, where you face more than a 50% chance of getting rejected. Going through the traditional publishing platform is a painful process for many aspiring authors," he says.

According to Nicky Teoh, publishing director of The Inspiration Hub, a book publishing consultant that helps writers to self-publish their books, almost 90% of the authors have full-time jobs or run their own businesses. "Most authors do it as a passion or hobby, and they do it in their free time," he says.

Teoh’s self-published authors, who are in their late 30s to 50s, are divided into two main camps, he observes. On one hand, some authors are entrepreneurs who specialise in certain topics such as entrepreneurship and property investment. "Some of them do it for the side income and to complement their core business. For example, a property investment guru who conducts property workshops may write a book to share his property investment knowledge. His book will drive business into his core business, like the seminar he conducts," Teoh says.

On the other hand, he has met authors who write out of sheer passion. "Some want to publish poetry, memoirs, biographies, or write about their own heritage. A lot of people who come to us are independent authors, most of them will only publish a one-off book," he says.

Success and failure

Che, who is the founder and president of Universal Reiki Association Malaysia, was awarded MPI’s Best-selling Chinese Book Award in 2014 for her book Reiki, a guide to a Japanese stress reduction, relaxation and healing technique.

With roots originating from the Land of the Rising Sun, reiki stands for universal life (rei) and energy (ki) in Japanese. It is a healing technique based on the principle that therapists can transfer energy to the patient through touch, triggering the natural healing processes of the patient’s body.

Che says her effort as a self-publishing author has been financially rewarding. For her first book, published by The Inspiration Hub, she sold around 10,000 copies and receives passive income in the form of royalty, which is delivered to her via a cheque each month. More lucrative royalty is another benefit of being a self-published author.

According to Che, authors who go through the conventional publishing route would only get 10% royalty from the bookstore for each copy sold. As a self-publishing author, however, Che receives 40% of the original retail price, regardless of whether her books are discounted during sales. What’s more, self-published authors will be able to retain almost 100% of the profit by selling their books directly to readers, adds Teoh.

Che’s books are also her source of active income. Within three days of launching her first book at MPI bookstore, she claims to have recouped her initial investment of RM10,000. However, there’s a caveat as this was mainly in the form of fees she collected for her seminar. After recouping her book, many would immediately sign up for her two-day Reiki programme, which costs RM45,500, Che explains.

However, it is a fallacy to think that self-publishing authors would most likely be successful and get rich with royalties. While Mohd Iban believes there are self-publishing authors who are successful, his own endeavour has not been financially rewarding. His publisher, Partridge Singapore, has six publishing packages that range from RM699 to RM10,199 at the time of writing. Mohd Iban recalls investing in a very basic package that cost him about RM5,000 two years ago.

In return, he received help from the publisher in the form of editing his manuscript, in addition to a cover design, bookmarks.
"The only time we do marketing for our authors is when bookstores approach our authors to feature them in a book festival, like Popular’s Bookfest @ Malaysia," says Teoh. "When the marketing process has started, the authors have to be in charge of the marketing process," he adds. While it’s given that the content has to be solid, what sets apart authors who are doing well from those who don’t lies with marketing, says Teoh.

"Anyone can publish a book, but the marketing work is an ongoing project. If you don’t find time to build your marketing platforms, sometimes your sales will stagnate," Teoh believes an author can recoup his investment "pretty fast" if he is proactive about establishing his own marketing platforms. "They have to tap into online marketing, create a fan page on Facebook or write a blog post.

If possible, approach the right media to get reviews. If they are able to do that, they will generate good momentum on the sale of their books," he says. "I had an author with thousands of followers on her Facebook account. When she announced it to her followers, they were ready to buy her book," he says. Teoh also recalls having a numerologist author who saw her book sales spike after an interview with a leading daily newspaper, and that she also organized classes on numerology and set up a Facebook Fan Page.

If an author is lucky, the book may also get featured as a promotion tool at Popular, which leads to greater exposure to the masses, says Teoh.

Mohd Ilhan Abdullah admits that he hasn’t recouped his investment as he didn’t do heavy promotion for his book. "I bought 200 copies for marketing purposes. I am bad at promoting the book. I sold about RM6,000 worth of the book to my friends, but it was nothing to shout about," he says.

For Mohd Ilhan, the most challenging part was having the discipline to sit down and write regularly. "For those who want to publish the book as their livelihood, they have to establish a daily routine to sit down and write." "I am a personification of what not to do as a self-published author," he confesses. "I wrote only when I felt like it. It took more than a year to see my book published, basically because of my laziness. There was a fair bit of work even though I’ve always been good in English, and writing has always been one of the things I do. For people who are disciplined, and who can be completed, can bring the task well within a year.”

Rewarding in a different way
With challenges, however, come rewards. Che points out that the most rewarding part is when she was made aware that many of her readers’ lives have been transformed after reading her book. Similarly, Mohd Ilhan does not regret choosing to be a self-published author, even though he wasn’t rewarded in the financial sense. "It has been part of my self-development. I learnt a lot about the challenges of being a self-published author, and more importantly, I learnt a lot about myself.

"I learnt that I was not very disciplined when it comes to writing a book, and yet, if I set my mind to do something, I can do it. It wasn’t a wasted effort," he says. "Neither do I expect to strike gold by publishing your own books, Che cautions. "It [can] indeed [be] financially fulfilling, but the actual rewards are more on brand building, establishing authority in your industry, using the book as a great marketing tool, sharing your knowledge and most importantly, changing and transforming your readers’ lives with your book. Of course, the actual rewards can’t be valued in monetary terms. That said, I am writing my fourth Reiki book," she adds."

For more, see page 32.

What to look out for

A Re you an aspiring author who wants to see your book published? Check out this feature to find out what you need to do in order to get your book published. It’s a good idea to look at books that are related to your chosen genre or specialty. You can do this by checking out books that are already available or by searching for them online.

Draining your own donut and cutting holes reduces the cost of publishing

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