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Meet the MasterMinds: Dan Poynter on Publishing

Dan Poynter is an authority on self-publishing and low-cost book promotion. A frequent speaker, prolific best-selling writer, successful publisher and publishing consultant, Poynter has written 29 books, and hundreds of articles and reports. His books include ***The Self-Publishing Manual***, ***Writing Nonfiction: Turning Thoughts into Books*** and ***The Parachute Manual***.

Poynter has served as vice-president of the Publishers Marketing Association, worked as a freelance writer, and was a magazine editor for ten years. He is a hang gliding and parachuting buff, and has been president of the Parachute Industry Association, chairman of the board of the U.S. Parachute Association and president of the International Hang Gliding Commission.

The Publishers Marketing Association presented Poynter with the Benjamin Franklin Award for Lifetime Achievement for his many years of helping people to market their books. He has been coaching writers and publishers since 1969, and has experienced every phase of the writing-publishing business.

MCNews: How do you find time to travel, serve on boards, operate your business and do all the writing you do each year?

Poynter: Through organization, discipline and machinery. The trick is to do two or more things at one time. For example, while driving, I often compose articles, ads or book sections on a rubber-backed clipboard I have in my car. Turn off your radio and make use of commute time.

I carry my current manuscript around in a binder to take advantage of unexpected free moments throughout the day, I take a cellular telephone when I go for walks in the hills around my home, and I have a notebook computer to work on promotion and to check my e-mail when on the road.

MCNews: How should a consultant go about choosing an area of focus for a book?

Poynter: You must be a **participant** in something through years of experience. Write what you know, and capitalize on your expertise. Surely someone will pay to know what you know.

When I get the spark of an idea for a book, I explore the market: I visit bookstores, see what is available on Amazon.com and research sales figures. Then, I draft the back cover sales copy of the intended book to focus on who my audience will be and what I will give them. I want to write a book that will help a lot of people, but I do not want to write on a subject already adequately covered.

MCNews: How do you get some certainty about the marketability of a book before you invest a huge amount in the project?

Poynter: To have confidence that your material is good, the secret is Peer Review. Ken Blanchard, co-author of *The One Minute Manager*, says "I don't write my books, my friends write them for me." He explains that he jots down some ideas and sends them off to friends for comment. They send back lots of good ideas that he then puts into his manuscript. Ken is being very generous, of course, and what he is describing is Peer Review.

Smart non-fiction authors send each chapter of their nearly complete manuscripts to at least four experts on that chapter's subject for review. What you get back is terribly valuable: your experts may cross out that part you thought was cute but was really embarrassingly stupid, and they sometimes even correct punctuation, grammar and style.

When your book comes out, you don't have to wait for your readers' reactions because you know the book is right. After all, it has been reviewed and accepted by the best. And, there is another valuable reason for peer review: you have more than a dozen opinion molders telling everyone about your book—and how they helped you with it.

MCNews: Once you've written a book, what are the publishing choices, and how should an author evaluate them?

Poynter: When I started publishing in 1969, there were just 3,000 publishers. Today, there are 55,000, and at least 8,000 new ones are established every year. There are seven large trade publishers in New York, 300-400 medium-sized publishers and over 54,000 small publishers.

Large New York publishers are like department stores—they have something for everyone. Their variety may not be great but they have at least one book on every subject. But, often no one on the staff knows much about the subjects of the books. So, large publishers often have to send manuscripts out to expert "readers" to tell them if they are credible.

New York publishers market books the way Hollywood sells films: they test a new product for audience reaction and if the results are positive, they invest heavily in promotion. If the initial reaction is negative, they withhold the promotion money and let the product die an early death.

Some authors may think a large New York publisher is more prestigious, but a small to medium-sized publisher will usually sell more books. Smaller publishers tend to specialize in one or two niche areas. The owners and staff are often participants in their books' subject matter, and so are closer to their subjects and their customers.

Smaller publishers also get to press sooner, so our information is fresher and more up-to-date. Big publishers take 18 months to turn a manuscript into a book. Smaller publishers can have a book printed in two to five weeks. And, we keep our books alive longer. Larger publishers have three selling seasons per year. They bring a book out for a few months and then it moves to the backlist—it's history.

The smaller publishers market their books like breakfast food or tooth paste: They bring out the new product with a lot of promotion and establish a market share. Then they proceed with modest promotion and continue to sell the book to increasingly larger markets year after year.

MCNews: What's the best way for an author to find a small publisher?

Poynter: The secret is to match the manuscript to the publisher. Authors should check their own bookshelf for smaller publishers who do good work. Then, go to a public library and look them up in *Books in Print*, a reference listing all of the 1.3 million books that are currently available for sale in the U.S.

When calling a specialized publisher, authors will often get through to the top person. These publishers know what authors are talking about and they are always very helpful. They will be able to tell instantly whether the proposed book will fit into their line.

MCNews: You've written a lot about another alternative—self-publishing. What are the pros and cons of self-publishing?

Poynter: A publisher is the one who puts up the money. If you invest your own money in the printing of your book, you are a self-publisher. An author should self-publish to save time, make more money and to keep control of the product.

Some people should self-publish and others should not. Would-be entrepreneurs should remember that writing is an art, while publishing is a business. Many people are unable to do both well. If you are repelled by the crass commercialism of selling your own product, you should stick to the creative side and let someone else handle the business side.

The economics of publishing are an important consideration. A regular publisher will give an author a royalty of 6% to 10% of the cover price. If you self-publish, you should get over 35%. So, the question is whether or not the publisher, with his connections and distribution system, will sell four times as many books as you can. More than 95% of the time, the answer will be negative.

MCNews: Does self-publishing or using a small publisher change the book writing process?

Poynter: New printing techniques let anyone produce books faster and cheaper, and these techniques are changing the way books are written. Gone are the days of manuscript boxes holding boring sheets of paper with double-spaced lines in Courier typeface.

Today, authors "build" their books; writing is just part of the assembly. Building a book is like building a speech with PowerPoint®. In addition to the printed word, you can add digital photos and scanned drawings to your manuscript as you write, pull information from the web, add resource URL's to your text, search encyclopedias for background information, art sites for illustrations and quotation sites for quotations.

With this New Book Model, your manuscript looks like a typeset book from the start. Then with a click of the mouse, you can convert the word-processing file to Adobe Acrobat PDF and you are ready to send the disk to a POD (print on demand) or PQN (print quantity needed) printer for one or a small quantity of softcover or hardcover books.

MCNews: What is the single, biggest mistake new authors make?

Poynter: The most common mistake is failure to promote. They focus and expend their energy on writing and production, and then fail to tell the world they have books. It does not matter if you sell to a New York publisher or publish yourself, the author must do the promotion. Publishers do not promote books.

MCNews: What are some of your tips on promotion?

Poynter: The traditional way to promote a new book is to send out 500 review and opinion-molding copies of it. But, if you are not printing a large quantity of books on spec, you can't promote the book the traditional way. You can use broadcast email to invite reviewers and potential buyers to come to your web site to see/try/buy your book. Or, we can set up a Press Room at our web site for you. It has all the promotion materials you expect to find in a media kit.

Whenever possible, you should use electronic means to promote a book. Promoting electronically is much faster and it allows you to avoid brochure printing and postage fees. This is promoting @ the speed of email.

Book promotion is less expensive and more successful when you use book reviews, news releases and, if appropriate to the book, a limited amount of direct mail advertising. Book reviews are editorial copy, and that is far less expensive and far more credible than space advertising.

Multipurpose/re-purpose your core content into other products: repackage the same information for various markets, such as magazine articles resulting from book chapters, or book chapters used as the basis for conference workshops or a series of magazine articles packaged into a book. Speak on your subject, record the speech and sell the audiotape. Some of your customers want your information in book form, some want to come and hear you live and some want the audiotape. Give them what they want and need.

Never spend money on advertising when you can get publicity free. Put your advertising money into your cover. Put your time and effort into review copies and news releases. Use the free publicity to find which magazines are right for your book. Then spend your advertising money there. Always test before you spend money. Too many publishers start with big ads and blow their promotion budget in the wrong places.

MCNews: How do you see the future for the smaller and self-publishers?

Poynter: Very positive. It is estimated that over 300,000 book-length manuscripts go unpublished every year. The New York publishers concentrate on the potentially huge sellers. Unless you have published successfully before or are a political or Hollywood personality, your chance of even having your manuscript read by a New York publisher is close to zero.

But remember, 8,000 new publishing companies are established each year. Most of these people have not had their manuscripts rejected by larger houses. They have weighed the risks and rewards and have decided it is better to publish their own work.

In the future, most books will not be manufactured until **after** they are sold. Putting a lot of ink on paper is now just an option—a good one if there is a large prepublication demand. But, because PQN and POD are cost-effective and produce high-quality books, there is no longer any reason to print thousands of copies of a book on spec, hoping to sell the inventory.

Another prediction for the future of publishing is that bound books will soon be as dead as the trees they are printed on. Except for coffee-table books and other books as an art form, most books will go electronic. They will go to floppy disk and CD-ROM first, and next they will go on-line.

The cost of electronic information delivery is decreasing, while the cost of storage and physical delivery of paper books is increasing. In the near future, most reference works will be offered in CD-ROM and downloadable form as well as in print. Non-fiction books will be next. We are moving from a print culture to an electronic culture at the speed of technology.

Visit Dan Poynter's web site at www.ParaPub.com for information on his books, newsletter, his numerous, useful reports on writing and publishing, the book promotion workshops he hosts, and his other services.