



Free Guide

to Self-Publishing in Kenya

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"The good news about self-publishing is you get to do everything yourself. The bad news about self-publishing is you have to do everything yourself"
Lori Lesko.

It could be one of your resolutions this year to publish a book. That's great especially because, overtime, we have been told that publishing a book is the best way to live for many years after your death. In addition, we have also been told that the more we don't write the more we stand to be manipulated and to short change the next generation as it happened to us.

Your publishing ambitions are valid, and rightly so, even better if done this year. However, a challenge awaits you, and perhaps you have heard this more than once.

A friend of mine had invited me early last year to attend his book launch. Even though I was not able to attend it, I did what many people of good will are expected to do, I paid for a copy which he graciously signed and sent to me.

Thereafter, he greatly wished for us to meet and have a discussion, so when I found myself in Eastlands, where he lived, I asked if we could meet and share. I was so shocked to find 934 copies of his books in his house, a bedsitter. The books were arranged in a box next to his bed. More shocking was an accident he had had in his house a few days before our meeting where he had forgotten to close the tap. The result was about half of the books being completely destroyed by water. He further told me that he had spent Ksh. 49,730 for the book launch which took place at a City hotel but he only managed to raise Ksh. 7,400 as combined sales.

I had so many questions as a result of this incident. Why would a self-published author print 1,000 copies of his book, without any clear marketing channels?

Just where can a self-published author sell their books? Why are there so many books as dead stock? How about the book launch, is it necessary and how can one go about it? After this incident, I remembered an email I received from a lecturer from St. Paul's University who had been conned while trying to publish her book. She later sent an email to Writers Guild Kenya, inquiring if we could help her with the legal process to get justice. Too bad, we couldn't help since the conning was done so meticulously.

And the last of such cases is a friend of mine whom I met last year. In our conversations, she kept mentioning that she had published a book. However, she was never ready to show the book. When she finally gave me a copy, I realized it was badly done. She mentioned having used Ksh. 123,000 to publish it with a publisher based in Rongai.

From the foregoing instances, when I took time to reflect at the end of 2017, I thought I should share what we have learnt in the years we have worked with Writers under Writers Guild, Kenya. The writing of such should be done fast, before you start actualizing your resolutions this year to publish.

"The future of publishing is about having connections with readers and the knowledge of what those readers want" **Seth Godin.**

What is Publishing?

Well, before we jump to self-publishing, let's start by understanding what publishing is. Ideally, this is getting ideas from your mind (where they have been staying for so long), to a medium which can be accessed by readers. The most common avenue is books, though the internet now provides other avenues such as blogs. The focus of this writing would be books published for general consumption.

However, with a growing need to publishing, shrinking economic gains and other dynamics such as internet boom, there has been need to come up with other flexible models to satiate these dynamics. The most common of this model is self-publishing.

The publishing process

Conventionally, publishing has been done through this process: a writer writes a draft (a Manuscript) on a specific issue, then scouts for a publisher, whose interest is in that area, the manuscript is then sent to the publisher, who evaluates its viability and whether it is really of the interest targeted. If such manuscripts have the mentioned potency, the publisher then commits the resources to publish the book (at their cost), then the writer awaits to receive royalties (of an agreed percentage of net sales of the book) at the end of a financial year.

As mentioned above, once the publisher has agreed to turn the manuscript into a book, there are processes the script undergoes before it can turn to a book, ready for consumption.

(i) Evaluation of the script

This is where the publisher tries to determine the problem which the book tries to solve, and how it aims to achieve that or if there is a story, in the case of fiction. It is at this stage where the publisher determines changes which can be made to the book to make it communicate such needs better.

(ii) Editing

This is perhaps the most important stage of the process. This is where a professional Editor looks at the content against the wish it would want to achieve (above), and recommends changes or adjustments to make it clearer. An Editor is like a midwife, he or she lets you actualize your goals with clarity. Depending on the nature of your book, there can be one or more than one editor handling your script.

(iii) Proof reading

This is the invitation of a 'third party' to have a look at the contents of the Manuscript again, just to ascertain that the wish is matched with the adjustments made by the Editor, if any. The Proofreader also ensures that any errors which might have escaped the Editor are handled. Since Editors are human, expecting perfection from them is inherently ambitious. All that can be done is reduce such errors.

(iv) Cover Design and Layout

During the Editing and Proofreading (depending on different Editorial Guidelines of Various Publishers), there is back and forth discussion on the best cover concept to best express the wishes of the writer and what he or she wishes to communicate. Some publishers do this in collaboration with the author, others don't (the choice of a publisher matters). It is also at this stage where the layout concept of the book is discussed and actualized.



(v) Book Approval and Unveiling

Again, this entirely depends on the publisher you choose. Some publishers do not have an elaborate process to ascertain the quality of all the foregoing processes. Others have a structure where the book is approved by senior management team before being released in any way the publisher and the author chooses (through a launch or normal unveiling in company premises).

(vi) Distribution and Marketing

This is where the rubber meets the road. If you have ever heard people complain that many Kenyans don't read, this is when you will get the real meaning. Marketing and getting your books in the hands of the readers is probably more tasking than taking dowry to a community where it is not accepted. Some publishers have arrangements with booksellers to display and sell their works.

So, the simple definition of conventional publishing is that the publisher pays for all these processes and does not demand for any upfront payment from the writer. They bear the cost and the writer gets a percentage from sales in form of royalties. For one to get this arrangement with the publisher, their content must really be good or (unfortunately), a 'name' that sells.

In the case of self-publishing, the author pays for all these publishing costs and any other costs that may emerge and manages the processes alone.

What are the Advantages of Self-Publishing?

- (i) Freedom to publish what you want. You will not have a publisher who will delete or replace your initial concept for another which furthers their interest. With this freedom, your 'crazy' idea can get a chance to get to the reader.
- (ii) Speed-If you are in a hurry to get your book published, conventional publishers are the worst people to count on. They take their time(at least most of them), and rightly so, because they claim to have a lot of work and other manuscripts to handle. While we understand them, if you are in a hurry, self-publishing will greatly help you.
- (iii) All the money is yours-If you self-publish, all the proceeds from your book belong to you. This is the beauty of it. Unlike conventional publishing, where you earn a royalty(which rarely go past 10% of net sales yearly), here you get it 100%. That's good news right?
- (iv) You have a voice-because you are the one paying for the publishing, you generally have a voice on all the matters relating to your book. You can voice your ideas on the designs, editing etc. You could suggest when you want the book launched, how you want it done, who you want invited etc. You generally have a voice in all aspects concerning the book.

What are some of the disadvantages of Self-Publishing?

- (i) Cost constrains-As you saw above, all the costs relating to the publishing will be on you. And they can be quite a lot (depending on the people you engage through the process). Since quality publishing can be expensive, there can be that temptation to work with 'cheaper' people who compromises on many things to get the book done. This is the first and biggest mistake made by many people (further discussion below).
- (ii) Poor Quality-Because of lack of accurate and timely information regarding publishing, there is the temptation of settling for whoever you get. This leads to production of poor quality books and makes a mockery of the publishing process. It makes your book hard to market and unattractive to even your friend. This stains your name as a writer and even subsequently, even if you publish a better book, people will never trust you (because you already broke their hearts with poor quality).
- (iii) Information asymmetry-This simply means lack of flow of information from where it is to where it is needed. There is a lot of that in the Self-publishing industry and we have taken this step to reduce it. Publishing needs very crucial decisions, and the accuracy of such decisions needs sufficient information to work. Information like where do I print? Who is the most trustworthy publisher? How do I launch? Which marketing strategies do I use? Etc.
- (iv) Marketing -This is so scary, even to me as I write this. Someone described Kenya as a country of 3,000 readers(because a best seller book for general reading in Kenya only sells about 3,000 copies yearly). So imagine scrambling for 3,000 people with 120 other publishers. That's not all, you know that people are greatly distracted with the numerous avenues to entertain themselves. Just how will you reach that reader in Luada K'otieno in Homabay, or in El wak and you are employed and expected to work on a daily basis? How can this be done? Well, perhaps you understand why that friend of mine stocked all his books in his house.

What are some common mistakes made by Authors who wish to self-Publish?



(i) **They know EVERYTHING!**

It is funny how some Self-Published authors are a genius lot. They could be Engineers, Lawyers or street vendors, but they know everything regarding publishing. They come fully packaged, with instructions to be followed to the letter. You even wonder why they need a publisher in the first place. This is not a good attitude. It limits one from benefiting from the experience which the publisher has had, and exposing them to working with rumours they have heard around. Just like you would wish to be trusted at your work and given space to do your work, once you identify a good publisher, give them their space and let them do the work. Encourage a consultative environment where you share and make collective decisions. Approaching a publisher with fixed ideas is more like going to a hotel demanding food with specific cooking procedure, specific cooking fat etc. Well, it would have been easier to just prepare it at your place.

(ii) **They Compromise on Quality**

Well, this is worse than the previous mistake. Every time you compromise, even in other things not related to publishing, you end up getting a raw deal. The temptation of always having a person willing to offer the services at a cheaper cost and promises the same or better quality is the greatest illusion ever. If you are publishing a book, and you are torn between choosing an expensive publisher with a track record and a cheaper one, go for the more expensive one. And if you can't afford, don't publish. Publishing a poor quality book is more costly (in the long run). Your readers will trust you, just once, and once you hurt them, they won't trust you again.

(iii) **They are too ambitious**

It is possible to publish a book today, but it is not possible to make Ksh. 1,000,000 three days later. Perhaps this only happens in a lottery. Most writers are so ambitious, they

approach a publisher and demand that their book should be ready in a week's time, and be of a scintillating quality. They want their book on Amazon, and all the other platforms for online selling, printed copies delivered and the launch organized while they haven't even paid the deposit. Let's be realistic. There is normally a rush which accompanies book publishing which can be so disastrous. Good things take time.

(iv) Making decisions in a hurry

I met a friend of mine whom I advised to consider printing her books on demand. However, she was illusionary and thought that the 308 likes she got on Facebook upon announcing the launch of her book would directly translate to sales. When she defied the piece of advice and went ahead to print 1,000 copies with a loan, that is when she realized that 'likes' are not purchases. It is high time we handled this industry with the professionalism it deserves.

(v) Expecting Publishers and Booksellers to do the donkey work

The donkey work in this case is selling of books. Nobody can sell the book better than the writer. And this is for a simple reason; the reason can connect directly to the writer. A Publisher or a bookseller can only bring the book closer or make it available. It is also the duty of an author to ensure the process of publishing is managed properly and that the quality is great. That way, it will be easier to sell or people will look for it. If the book is poorly done, and you expect the bookshops to sell a million copies, deposit the money in your bank account and give you a call to use the money, then you will probably have to wait a bit longer for that to happen in Kenya.

"Anyone who says it's easy to self-publish a book is either lying or doing a pathetic job" **Nan McCarthy**

Pieces of advice you should take note of in Self-Publishing in Kenya

- (i) If you decide to Self- Publish, by-pass the publisher but never bypass the publishing process. Ensure your book is well edited by a professional and relevant editor, proofread, designed well and well presented to the readers. By a relevant editor, I mean someone who is actively in that field. Take note that a fiction editor might not necessarily make a great editor when it comes to non-fiction work or vice-verse.
- (ii) You are better off publishing just one good book in a period of perhaps 10 years than publishing 10 poorly done books in one year. Let your first book be great, in all aspects. Let it help you create a tribe around your ideology once and for all. If that is done, you will have covered a good ground for your subsequent books.
- (iii) Take note that every new day, about 100 new books are published in Kenya and all these books are screaming for attention from the distracted and poor readers Kenyans are (I am assuming your book only targets Kenyan market).
- (iv) Anyone who begs people to buy their book or one who feels their friends have betrayed them by not buying their book has failed big time. This is the surest way to determine that

your book is of low quality and is not appealing to readers. Nearly everyone likes a good thing, and just like when you come across an interesting WhatsApp message, you want to forward it to your friends without any pressure. This is the type of interest which your book should draw. If you take time in the publishing process and also genuine about the content, you may well not have to push your book down the throats of others.

- (v) Write your book around a certain ideology and let it be one which people can relate to. Do not publish a book because your workmate also published a book or because your co-wife did. Only publish when you have something to communicate. When you look around, you will realize that there is so much to write about (with a view to solving a problem or answering to a concern). As Kerry Wilkinson puts it, write for the right reasons i.e yourself.
- (vi) Reduce costs as much as possible on non-essential areas such as printing. I wonder why you would opt to print 1,000 copies and have them as dead stock in your house or pay for their warehousing somewhere while you can take advantage of things like print-on-demand which is now being offered in Kenya by Writers Guild Kenya. This is where you work on the printing cost per unit of your book and you only print the number you need and the cost doesn't change, even if it is just one book or 50, or whichever number you desire.
- (vii) If your book doesn't have a specific target group; If you can't mention, with precision, who you are writing for, then you are better off not writing. If you meet an author who tells you that their book targets everyone, then just take note that that is how jokers present themselves. A teenager whose interests are the changes in their bodies can't have the same interest with a jobless graduate and at the same time have common interest with a retired civil servant. Well, if you manage to get someone who can marry the interests of these people, please introduce us to them.
- (viii) Hire a professional Consultant or a Publisher to help you through your publishing. There is a reason why in building a house, different segments are handled by different people. Plumbing, Electricals, surveying etc are managed but not handled by the same person. You could have a lot of information regarding publishing, but take your time and let those in the field do their work.
- (ix) Explore creative ways to market your books. Using the bookshop model is good but it only targets a restricted populace. There are very many new avenues which you can use to sell your books and again, if you have a consultant, you don't have to resign from your job to get this done. Avenues like using popular brands on social media to push your book, using Inama Bookshops (street vending), events and activities. All these are new avenues to get your book to the desired target.
- (x) Amazon and Online Platforms are overrated. I know you have been told so many times that now you don't have to worry about publishing, as it is so easy since you can get your book right to online platforms and just like that, you will have over 3 Billion people online reading you. Easy said than done. If you get to statistics, you will realize that many Kenyans are online but they are not online for purposes of reading. While it is projected that the situation might change soon, we aren't there yet. You have to make your own brand and create a tribe around what you stand for. Online platforms will not correct the mistakes you make in your book. They will only amplify them.

"It is with publishers as with wives; one always wants somebody else's"
Norman Douglas

CONCLUSION

(YOUR TURN)

I have written this short guidelines on Self-Publishing as a result of my interaction and our engagements with many people who have a genuine desire to publish and get their ideas to the world. We recognize the genuinity of this intention and therefore feel very sad when one ends up frustrated instead. I know that many people plan to publish in the year 2018, and I know that many half-baked publishers are ready with well-developed contracts ready to prey. And this is particularly not very good news. That is why the overall responsibility, again, rests with you to ensure that all the books you have had in your minds finally published and translated into actual books.

The world needs to hear your story and your readers are waiting for you. Use this guide to enable you find them through your book. And that moment when you feel like you have further questions or even wish for a professional platform to get your reading and writing ideas actualized, I invite you to be part of the family - Writers Guild, Kenya.

All the best,

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