

Publicists' Worst Nightmare?

Invasion of the POD People!

By Steve O'Keefe

They arrive by e-mail mostly — sometimes two or three a day. Occasionally, they brave the telephone. Rarely, if ever, do they use the post. They are the POD People — authors with no infrastructure attached. They insinuate themselves between you and your work day, latching onto your time and leeching off your experience. They are immune to the brush off.

Book publicists are enduring a plague of the POD People. Book marketers, too. Literary agents are surrounded by them. Acquisitions editors have to beat them off with a stick. Reviewers are up to their knees in PODs. Bookstores fumigate to keep them out. A legion of parasites has descended upon the publishing profession. All of them hungry for knowledge, wanting to know what they can do to get attention for their books, wanting to know what *you* can do to generate sales.

Whether they wear the brand of Xlibris, iUniverse, 1stBooks, or some other e-vanity press, the POD people have all come to realize one unsettling truth: either they don't have the resources to find an audience for their books or, if they do, they shouldn't have become POD People in the first place. They are stuck in a Publishing Twilight Zone, condemned to wander the trade looking for someone who will comfort them, nurture them, show them the way out of this terrible dilemma. Often, they find me.



Last week, I spent nearly two hours on the phone with a POD person. He had sent me PDFs. He phoned for an ap-

pointment. He is a friend of a friend, so I knew I wouldn't be able to ignore his pleas for help. Like most POD People, he expected me to snap to — I am a vendor, after all, and he is a potential customer. I have an unwritten obligation to court his business and bear the cost of that courting. He wants to know why he should spend \$3,000 with me to promote his book. My answer, of course, is he shouldn't.

I start with the finish line: could someone buy your book if they wanted to? Let's see: Is it available through Amazon? "No." How about Barnes & Noble Online? "No." Any online bookseller? "You can buy it through my web site." Really? With a credit card or debit card? "No." How much are your shipping charges? "I haven't decided yet." Do you ship overseas? "I'd be willing to." What forms of payment do you accept from overseas customers? Silence.

Okay, let's take a step back in the retailing chain. Is the title available from Ingram? "No." Does Baker & Taylor list the title? "What's Baker & Taylor?" Have you tried to purchase your own book through a bookstore? "No." What do you think bookstore clerks will tell people who ask for your book? "I don't know." How about, "Sorry, that title is not available." "Really?" Yes. So let's say I generate a lot of attention for your book. I get journalists to review it, and I sprinkle excerpts all over the Internet, and people like what they see and want to buy the book. How are you going to capture those sales? "That's what I'm hoping you'll help me with."

The biggest problem with POD People is that they have entered the publishing profession in




the middle (production), and they can't reach the end (sales) without going back to the beginning (planning). They want to be authors, but they have *de facto* become publishers, and for the most part they don't know anything about publishing, nor do they want to learn. But once their book is published, they do want it to get reviewed and they do want it to sell, so they're willing to learn about publishing — they just aren't willing to pay for it. So it's up to me and bookstore clerks and book reviewers and literary agents and acquisitions editors to teach these novices the hard lessons of the publishing profession.

"I tell them to get my book," Judith Appelbaum confided in a recent interview. Appelbaum is the author of *How to Get Happily Published, Fifth Edition* (HarperPerennial) and the proprietor of Sensible Solutions, a book marketing firm. "POD is a danger to writers," she said, "because it reinforces the myth that *production* is the same as *publication*. Unless they understand the business and marketing activities, it's just another form of vanity press."

At Publishers Marketing Association's Publishers University, held prior to the Book Expo America in New York, I asked Dan Poynter what he thought of POD. "It doesn't make sense," he said, referring to the initial publication of a new book. "You have to give away 500 copies anyway, you should get them printed as inexpensively as possible." I had considered Poynter to be one of the champions of POD publishing, but that shows my own ignorance and confusion over terms. He's very positive about using

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