

The New York Times



Tom Story for The New York Times

SELF-HELP Laurie Notaro's self-published book led to a lucrative publishing deal.

You Oughta Be In Print

Web Services Can Make Any Author a Published One.
But Fame and Fortune? That's Another Story.

By ERIC A. TAUB

AFTER spending a year trying to sell her book to publishers and receiving 70 rejection letters as a reward, Laurie Notaro, a newspaper columnist in Phoenix, decided to do it herself. Working with iUniverse, one of many companies that offer "print on demand" services, Ms. Notaro paid \$99 to have her book designed, laid out, stored as a digital file and printed and bound only as copies were ordered. Several months later she sold the rights to her book, plus the concept for a new one, to a major publisher for a six-figure sum.

Joe Vitale, on the other hand, had already published several business books with traditional publishers. But for a new book, Mr. Vitale, a marketing consultant in Austin, Tex., decided to try a print-on-demand company, 1stBooks Library. For two days in June, Mr. Vitale's book was the best-selling title on Amazon.com.

In the same way that the home computer

gave users the ability to create documents that looked good, even if they didn't necessarily read well, print-on-demand services now enable people to publish a book with ease, regardless of whether anyone else would want to read it.

For \$99 to \$1,600, such companies offer a professionally laid-out book, a choice of stock or customized covers and an International Standard Book Number, or I.S.B.N., which is used to list the book in databases open to traditional and online bookstores.

For those fees, authors also get up to 10 copies of their book, and can buy additional copies, typically for 60 percent of the retail price. With the print-on-demand model, there is no minimum print run; books do not end up stored in a warehouse and possibly destroyed after a few months' run. Yet they never go out of print; the digital file is stored indefinitely, always available for creating another hardback or paperback book when needed.

Some first-time writers believe that if

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An Author, Sure, But No Celebrity

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they can get their books in print, they can succeed in the world of publishing. But experiences like Ms. Notaro's and Mr. Vitale's are the exceptions. With up to 100,000 new titles published each year, most books fail to achieve significant sales or produce income for their writers, no matter who the publisher is. And if they are created by a print-on-demand company that sells mainly through the Internet, the chances for success are even smaller.

"Think about how difficult it is to be successful when your book is distributed by a mainstream publisher, multiply that by 10, and that's what you're up against when you go the P.O.D. route," said John Feldcamp, chief executive officer of Xlibris Corp., one of the largest print-on-demand companies.

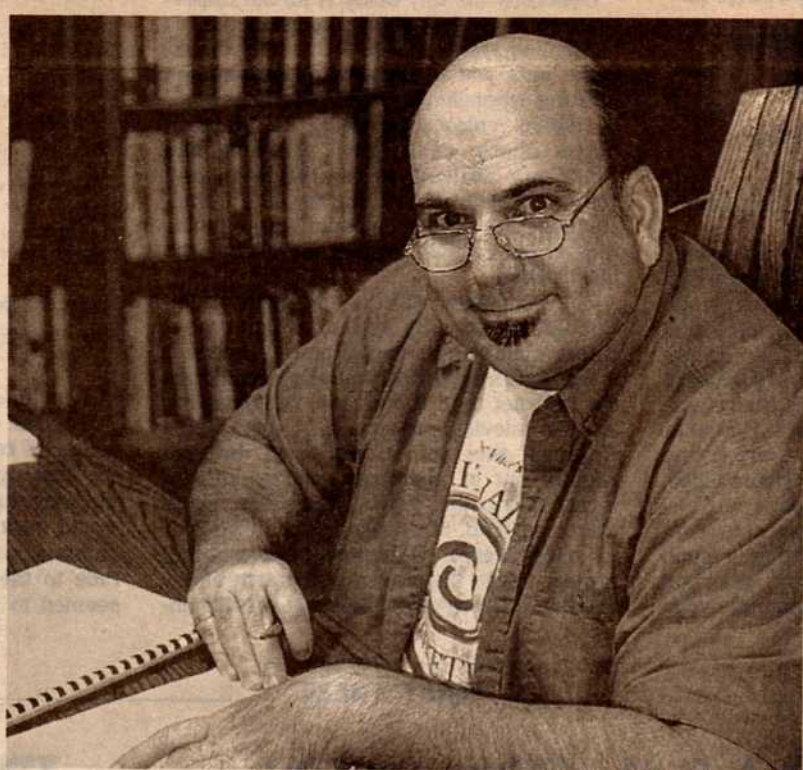
Yet each year thousands of new authors use the services of a print-on-demand publisher. Some cling to the dream of making it on a best-seller list, while others have more modest goals—printing, say, 50 copies of a family history at a reasonable price to give to relatives.

On-demand books are a new wrinkle in the concept of vanity publish-

ing, in which a vanity press typically prints many copies of the book at once (and generally the author has to pay for them). Since print-on-demand publishers only issue books as needed, costs are lower and the author can even make a little money in royalties.

The boom in on-demand publishing began, like so many other Internet-related businesses, in the mid-1990's, when the rapidly growing World Wide Web seemed as though it might subsume standard retailing. Traditional publishers wanted a piece of the action. Random House and others invested \$15 million in Xlibris, while Barnes & Noble bought a 49 percent stake in a competitor, iUniverse. (Barnes & Noble's stake has since been reduced to 20 percent.) "We're serving notice that the rules in publishing have changed," Richard Tam, the founder of iUniverse, was quoted as saying in 1999.

In fact, the rules did not change. Several major print-on-demand companies are now out of business, while others among the several dozen that remain have scaled back their expectations. "Our business model is not obvious yet," Mr. Feldcamp said. "We don't know if publishing on demand will become an effective outlet for alternative publishing, or just a



Mark Matson for The New York Times

BEST SELLER Joe Vitale's newest book reached No. 1 at Amazon.com.

new variety of a vanity press."

Nor have the companies' corporate links brought writers any closer to success. Random House has picked up just three to five titles for traditional publishing since it became associated with Xlibris, Mr. Feldcamp said. Of iUniverse's 10,000 titles, six are now available on Barnes & Noble shelves. "Those titles are meant to showcase iUniverse, not to provide their authors the hope that their work will be distributed in Barnes & Noble bookstores," said Steve Riggio, the company's chief executive officer.

Unless authors make extraordinary promotional efforts on their own, most print-on-demand titles typically sell just a few hundred copies. "A big seller for us is anywhere between 1,000 to 5,000 copies," said Kim Hawley, president of iUniverse.

When it comes to paying authors for books sold, most print-on-demand companies follow the model of traditional publishers: writers receive a percentage of sales as a royalty. However, with printing on demand, writers pay advance costs to have their books created. And print-on-demand companies never pay advances for books.

Once the book is created, the hard work of selling it begins. Given that the writing quality of print-on-demand titles can range from the sublime to the ridiculous, few newspapers review them, and not many more than a handful of bookstores stock any of them, although the I.S.B.N. allows a title to be ordered through a store's database.

The New York Times does not review print-on-demand titles, as the newspaper's policy is to review books that are widely available only in general interest bookstores, said Catherine Mathis, vice president for corporate communications. The Los Angeles Times does not have a policy against reviewing print-on-demand books but has not reviewed any.

"Without question the scales are tilted in favor of traditional publishers," said Steve Wasserman, book editor of The Los Angeles Times. "P.O.D. titles do not have the discriminating filter of editors and publishers. Until a publisher develops a reputation for literary excellence, one greets their books with healthy skepticism."

Getting reviews from the trade press is no easier. "We started to review P.O.D. books, but we don't want to get inundated with them," said Jim Milliot, news editor for Publishers' Weekly. "There's still a standard of quality that must be met."

Marketing the print-on-demand book is up to the author, which is one reason why most do not sell.

"The P.O.D. books that succeed are not the best books," said Mr. Feldcamp of Xlibris. "They're the ones that have been pushed most successfully by their authors."

As an experienced newspaper columnist, Ms. Notaro knew that traditional marketing techniques would get her nowhere. She did not bother to send her book, a collection of humorous essays called "The Idiot Girls' Action Adventure Club," to newspapers to be reviewed.