

Print-on-Demand for Association Publishers

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Print-on-demand (POD) technology allows economical printing of small quantities of books—even just one book. Books are stored digitally and printed when needed on what are essentially industrial-strength laser printers (typically a black-and-white printer for interiors and a color printer for covers), which are connected to binding equipment. A book can be printed and bound in a matter of minutes.

Association book publishers can benefit from POD in these situations:

- **When they need to print fewer than 1,000–1,500 copies.** Standard offset printing will be less expensive in higher quantities.
- **When they are unsure of demand for a book.** With POD, there is no need to print large quantities that may never be sold.
- **When they don't have the resources for a large up-front printing expense.** POD requires only an initial setup fee of typically less than \$100. After that, pricing is per book printed.
- **When they don't have a climate-controlled warehouse needed for book storage or don't care to rent space.** With POD, books are printed when customers order them.
- **When they wish to continue the life of an out-of-print book.** Some POD printers will scan offset-printed books to digital format.

POD, however, does have limitations:

- **Print quality is not quite as good as offset.** POD presses offer resolutions of 600 dpi, making

text and line art largely indistinguishable from offset printing (although it's best to avoid fonts with thin lines)—but POD photographs will appear grainier. Some POD presses support halftone screens of only 85 lines—a bit better than newspaper printing—but the technology is improving, with newer presses supporting 106-line screens. In contrast, offset printing supports 133-line screens or higher.

- **Per-book costs will be higher than per-book costs of offset printing in larger quantities.** For example, the per-book cost of a 300-page 6"×9" POD book will be about \$5.50, but the per-book cost of a 300-page 6"×9" offset book in a printing of 3,000 copies will be about \$1.50.
- **POD offers limited choices of trim sizes and paper.** POD printers generally offer a selection of a half dozen or so trim sizes and several choices of paper. Recycled paper is usually not an option.
- **Color interior printing is prohibitively expensive.** While color POD printing will still be less expensive than offset color printing in small quantities, the per-book cost will be multiple times more than that of B&W POD printing, making it nearly impossible to mark up the book for profit.

POD printing should not be confused with POD publishing—author services companies (sometimes referred to as subsidy publishers or vanity presses) that use POD printing. These companies serve self-publishing authors and include AuthorHouse, Booklocker, BookSurge, CreateSpace, iUniverse, Lulu, and Xlibris. They probably aren't an attractive option because they offer publishing services that association publishers can better and more cheaply handle on their own.

Association publishers can, in fact, directly establish an account with the POD printer that

Dale Adams is president of Wordfirm Inc. (wordfirm.com), which offers publication production services, including copyediting and proofreading.

many author services companies use—Lightning Source Inc. (LSI) (lightningsource.com). As the nation's largest POD printer, LSI offers very competitive pricing, but its principal advantage over other POD printers is its distribution capabilities. For a small annual fee, LSI distributes books through the nation's two top book wholesalers—Ingram Book Group (LSI and Ingram are both owned by Ingram Industries) and Baker & Taylor—and the two top online book retailers—Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

These are the basic features of LSI's program:

- **LSI works with only publishers and author services companies.** They handle just printing and distribution; you'll need to handle all other aspects of publishing.
- **Publishers upload books through an online form or send them by mail as CDs/DVDs or books to scan.** Acceptable digital formats include PDF, Postscript, InDesign, and Quark—basically the same as required for offset printing.
- **LSI prints both paperback and hardcover books.** It offers 13 paperback trim sizes and four hardcover trim sizes. It offers two paper types. It can print both B&W and color interiors.
- **Once books are in the system, they can be printed and shipped in two business days.** This turnaround allows the distribution partners to show books as "in stock."
- **Through the online form, publishers can set the basic terms of the book, including list price, discount, and returns policy.** Of course, how these are set will affect booksellers' willingness to purchase books. The standard trade discount is 55 percent, and bookstores like to be able to return books they do not sell.
- **Choosing the distribution option lists books with Ingram and Baker & Taylor.** Booksellers and libraries purchase books through wholesalers, so this arrangement is essential to establish

the mechanism for purchases—but it doesn't mean bookstores will necessarily stock your books. You'll still need to market books so that customers want to purchase them and booksellers want to stock them.

- **For sales through LSI's distribution partners, LSI mails a check or makes a direct deposit for the difference between the discount price and LSI's printing cost.** There is no charge for shipping. Each month LSI sends an e-mail statement of the publisher's account.
- **Publishers can buy books directly from LSI for in-house sales.** In this case, LSI invoices the publisher for the printing and shipping costs. LSI offers discounts for volume printing.
- **LSI offers the option of book printing through its U.K. office.** This makes the book available through Gardners Books—the largest U.K. book wholesaler and a major supplier for Amazon in the U.K., France, Germany, and Japan—as well as a number of other European wholesalers and retailers.

Association publishers of all sizes can benefit from POD, but those with a small book program will find Lightning Source a relatively inexpensive means of manufacturing and distributing books. The only major initial expenses will be for writing and producing a book, and the only ongoing expense will be for marketing. POD lets small associations run a book program when they otherwise could not afford one.

*For more information on POD publishing, read *Aiming at Amazon* by Aaron Shepard (*Shepard Publications*, 2007).*



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