

SELF-PUBLISHING SERVICES FOR AUTHORS WITH A WEB-PRESENCE

This proposal includes a comparative analysis of three popular self-publishing services and recommends the best choice for Canadian fiction-writers who have already ruled out traditional publishing, and who have an established web-presence.

A Proposal

Table of Contents

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2**
- BACKGROUND 2**
 - TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING VS. SELF-PUBLISHING.....2
 - ROLE OF SELF-PUBLISHING SERVICES.....3
 - CATEGORIES OF SELF-PUBLISHING SERVICES3
- DETAILED REQUIREMENTS 4**
 - SCOPE AND ASSUMPTIONS4
 - SERVICE PRIORITIES.....4
 - RETURN ON INVESTMENT.....5
- OVERVIEW OF SERVICE PROVIDERS..... 5**
 - LULU.....5
 - Sample service budget*.....6
 - Return on investment*.....6
 - User reviews*.....6
 - XLIBRIS.....7
 - Sample service budget*.....7
 - Return on investment*.....8
 - User reviews*.....8
 - SMASHWORDS.....8
 - Sample service budget*.....9
 - Return on investment*.....9
 - User reviews*.....9
- COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS10**
 - LULU.....11
 - XLIBRIS.....11
 - SMASHWORDS.....12
- RECOMMENDATION12**
- BIBLIOGRAPHY.....13**

Executive Summary

This proposal is in response to a request by Canadian members of the online fiction-writing community for an analysis and recommendation of self-publishing options appropriate to their community. It provides a comparative analysis of the following three online self-publishing companies:

- Lulu (<http://www.lulu.com/>)
- Xlibris (<http://www2.xlibris.com/>)
- Smashwords (<http://www.smashwords.com/>)

Per instructions from the requestors, this analysis assumes a sample author who is a Canadian member of the online fiction-writing community, with a finished or nearly finished black-and-white novel manuscript of approximately 100,000 words, and an established web-presence¹ and fanbase². It assumes this author has a goal of selling as many copies of their book as possible, and has already rejected the traditional publishing option. It further assumes this author is familiar with social networks and their use as marketing tools and does not have a high need for assistance in this area. Finally, it assumes a budget of \$5,000 or less.

Based on the comparative analysis outlined in later sections, the ideal self-publishing company for the requestors is Lulu. Lulu offers the highest return on investment of the three companies, as well as the most relevant service offerings within the \$5,000 budget. Additionally, online user reviews for the company are largely positive, especially when compared to the other two companies.

Background

This section provides an overview of the self-publishing industry, and the types of services available.

Traditional publishing vs. self-publishing

In essence, the difference between traditional publishing and self-publishing is who owns the financial risk. With traditional publishing, the publishing house covers all the costs, and therefore bears all the financial risk of publishing a book. Additionally, the publishing house handles all of the work required to take the book from manuscript to published novel. Finally, the publishing house controls all aspects of the publication of the book – everything from which stores will carry the final product, to what type of paper is used. They may even control some of the content of the book.

When self-publishing, you, as the author, take on responsibility for the financial costs and risks, and are responsible for handling the work involved in the publishing process. This work includes purchasing an International Standard Book Number (ISBN), editing and formatting the book for print or digital sale,

¹ This proposal defines "web-presence" as an active and persistent online identity networked across multiple websites and social media platforms. The level of activity and size of the network can vary from author to author, based on their needs.

² This proposal defines "fanbase" as a community of individuals who have a positive relationship with the author and/or her online identity and current body of work (if any). Typically, this will include individuals who "follow" the author on her social networks, but may also include members of the author's physical community who have become aware of the author through other means. In essence, it is a community of people with a higher-than-average likelihood of purchasing the self-published book as soon as it becomes available, and that the author can leverage for word-of-mouth marketing.

arranging for distribution, marketing, and printing, and many other related tasks. Additionally, the process can be very expensive, and for new authors, it offers no guarantee of a return on your investment. The tradeoff for taking on this risk, however, is that you maintain full control of your book and its publication.

Role of self-publishing services

Self-publishing companies typically offer you services that are similar to those a traditional publishing house would offer; however, you are the one who covers the cost. These services can ease the publishing process and provide access to expertise you may not have (e.g., sales experience or graphic design help). They can help ensure your book looks professional, and assist you in increasing your sales.

It is important, however, to remember two things:

- A traditional publishing house makes money by selling as many copies of your book as possible. A self-publishing company makes money by selling their services to as many authors as possible.
- Because *you* are carrying the financial risk, *you* are the one who is in control. You may find it beneficial to handle some aspects of the process on your own, and purchase the services of a company to handle others. You do not have to outsource the entire process to a self-publishing company.

Categories of self-publishing services

While the details vary from company to company, self-publishing services generally fall into three main categories:

1. Production
2. Distribution
3. Marketing

Production services relate to the conversion of your writing into a format that is sellable (whether in hard copy or digital format). This includes editing services, cover design, page formatting, printing copies, and so on. Most companies offer the basic production services for free (e.g., converting your book to the required electronic format for digital sale), and offer upgrades for a price (e.g., cover design services).

Distribution services relate to getting the final, sellable copy of your book onto shelves (physical or electronic) where customers can purchase it. This includes national or international distribution, and electronic and brick and mortar bookstores. Most companies will distribute your book via their website for free; however, expanding your distribution to other online stores (e.g., iBookStore, or Amazon.com) and/or to physical bookstores will cost more.

Marketing services relate to the promotion of your book. This includes official websites, publicists, book trailers, press releases, promotional materials, social media campaigns, advertisements, and so on. Marketing services are typically very expensive, and almost never free.

Detailed Requirements

This section outlines the requirements put forward by the requestors, as well as the assumptions and thought-process that form the basis of the analysis.

Scope and assumptions

This proposal recommends a self-publishing service appropriate for Canadian members of the online writing community. Per instructions from the requestors, this analysis assumes a sample author with a finished or nearly finished black-and-white novel manuscript of approximately 100,000 words, and an established web-presence and fanbase. It assumes the author has a goal of selling as many copies as possible (digital and/or paperback), and has already considered and rejected the option of pursuing a traditional publishing deal, regardless of reasons. It further assumes this author is familiar with social networks and their use as marketing tools and does not have a high need for assistance in this area. Finally, it assumes a budget of \$5,000 or less.

This recommendation is based on a comparative analysis of the services offered by the following three self-publishing companies:

- Lulu (<http://www.lulu.com/>)
- Xlibris (<http://www2.xlibris.com/>)
- Smashwords (<http://www.smashwords.com/>)

These companies were chosen for consideration based on the focused scope of their service offerings (book publishing for completed manuscripts only) and experience (at least 5 years in the self-publishing market).

The key services identified from each company are those that would be most useful to the sample author, taking into account budget, needs, and potential return on investment. The proposal's final recommendation is based on a comparison of these options.

Service priorities

In order to perform the comparative analysis required to make a recommendation, the services offered by the self-publishing companies were prioritized in the following order:

1. Distribution
2. Production
3. Marketing

Distribution is the number one priority because it is the hardest thing to accomplish on your own. You could format and print your own books, and you could handle your own marketing, but if you cannot get the book into the stores where your customers are, you will not be able to sell them. Bookstores (online and brick and mortar) prefer to deal with known agents. The odds of a bookstore including your book in their catalogue are better if you use a self-publishing company.

Production is the second priority, because ensuring that your book looks professional is one of the most important elements in terms of making a sale, and convincing a bookstore to carry your novel.

Additionally, production services are the bread and butter of publishing; without them, you do not have a book to sell. Within the suite of production services available, a high priority has been placed on editing services.

Marketing is the lowest priority for two reasons:

- The research done for this proposal shows the costs to be prohibitively expensive and typically well outside the \$5000 budget established for this recommendation. Additionally, the return on investment is not always clear. Common sales pitches, such as “guaranteed placement on YouTube” for book trailers, are questionable at best (anyone who knows how to upload a video has guaranteed placement on YouTube).
- You already have an established web-presence and fanbase, and an understanding of how to use social networks for marketing. Many of the services offered for a fee – for example, creating a website or blog – are either redundant (in that you have already established these for yourself) or something you could easily create on your own for minimal cost. Additionally, the primary aim of these services is to build an audience for your work; however, you already have one.

While all packages listed on the companies’ websites that fall within these criteria have been considered, the proposal focuses only on those deemed most relevant. Services deemed to be outside the budget, redundant because of your current skillset, or not applicable to your needs (e.g., hardcover copies) are not included in the comparative analysis.

Return on investment

In addition to consideration of the services provided, this proposal considers your return on investment when choosing a service provider. This includes factors such as whether or not you are able to set your own price for your book, and what percentage of the profits (royalties) are allotted to you as the author. It does not consider payment schedules (e.g., monthly or quarterly).

Overview of Service Providers

This section outlines the relevant services offered by each company, as well as the expected return on investment, and an overview of online user reviews.

Lulu

Lulu began operating in 2002, in Raleigh, North Carolina. They are a Print-on-Demand company, and offer their basic publishing services for free. These include ISBN registration, a cover design-wizard, conversion to ePub format for eBooks, and a variety of binding and paper options for print books. Additionally, for no additional cost, Lulu will distribute print books that meet certain formatting criteria on the Lulu Marketplace, Amazon.com, and BarnesandNoble.com; and eBooks on the Lulu Marketplace, the Apple iBookstore, and Barnes & Noble’s NOOK Bookstore.

Lulu also offers a variety of paid services (individually, or as part of package deals). The most relevant to your needs are cover design services, editing services, digital publishing help, extended distribution, and book fairs.

Sample service budget

Table 1 (Lulu service budget) outlines the recommended services for your book and budget.

Table 1 - Lulu service budget

Basic services	\$0
ISBN registration, cover design-wizard, conversion to ePub, binding and paper options, distribution on Lulu Marketplace, Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com, and Apple iBookstore	
Cover design	\$599
Have a marketing professional design your cover	
Copyediting	\$2,300
Grammar, spelling, punctuation	
Word to ePub publishing	\$325
Professional assistance in formatting your eBook	
GlobalReach distribution	\$75
Includes your book in the Ingram catalogue (used by major retailers)	
Regional book fair	\$1,399
Press release, book displayed face-out and listed in exhibit catalog, full-page black and white ad, and inclusion in the publisher directory	
TOTAL	\$4,698
Budget variance	\$302

You can use the budget surplus to copyright your book in Canada and/or the U.S. and other countries (less than \$100 on average per country), or to print promotional materials.

Return on investment

Lulu gives authors full control over the price of their book. Manufacturing costs vary by book, but they are clearly outlined on the Lulu website. Lulu's commission is 20% of the profit³ from the sale of print copies, and 10% of the profit from the sale of digital copies. The author's royalty is the remaining 80% (print) or 90% (digital) of the profit. See Table 5 (Return on investment comparison chart) for a sample breakdown.

User reviews

Reviews for Lulu's services and support are largely positive:

- Information on services and processes is readily available and well designed;
- Customer support is good in terms of response times and quality of assistance;
- Final paper-copy product is of good quality.

The majority of negative reviews were concerned with Lulu charging a commission (a percent of profits) as opposed to a fee (a flat rate); however, commissions are common in this industry, and all of the options covered in this proposal work on a commission system.

³ Profit equals the retail price minus the manufacturing cost.

Xlibris

Xlibris has been part of the publishing industry for over a decade, and is now a part of Author Solutions Inc.. They are a Print-on-Demand company that groups their basic services into several different packages with varying prices (none free).

In addition, Xlibris offers “add-on” services for a fee to supplement the basic package required to publish through their company. The add-ons most relevant to your needs are cover design services, editing services, distribution related services, book fairs, and promotional materials.

Many of the add-ons have tiered levels of service (e.g., basic cover design or advanced cover design); however, the website does not offer a clear delineation of the differences between them. For budget reasons, this proposal assumes the least expensive tier.

Sample service budget

Table 2 (Xlibris service budget) outlines the recommended services for your book and budget.

Table 2 - Xlibris service budget

Advantage package	\$499
Three cover and two interior templates; paperback and eBook; one free copy; ISBN; worldwide distribution; book and author pages on Xlibris bookstore; 10 bookstubs ⁴	
Copyediting	\$1,100
Grammar, spelling, punctuation	
Basic cover design service	\$349
Custom cover designed by a professional	
Bookstore returnability	\$699
Twelve-month term; bookstores can return books through Ingram, increasing attractiveness to brick and mortar bookstores	
Channel availability and distribution	\$499
Your book will be listed in the Books in Print® database, making it available for purchase through Ingram and Baker & Taylor (book wholesalers in the U.S.)	
Online book search	\$99
A link to buy your book will be provided on BarnesandNoble.com, Amazon.com, and Google.com	
Regional book fair	\$1,199
Press release, book displayed face-out and listed in exhibit catalog, full-page black and white ad and inclusion in the publisher directory	
Marketing professional kit	\$399
Five posters, five bound galley of your book for reviewers, press release, 100 each of postcards, bookmarks and business cards	
TOTAL	\$4,843
Budget variance	\$157

⁴ Bookstubs are an Xlibris-specific promotional material – a small card with the book cover on the front, and a QR code on that back that leads to a webpage from which the user can purchase your book.

You can use the budget surplus to copyright your book in Canada (less than \$100).

Return on investment

Xlibris identifies the author royalty at 25% of the retail price for copies sold through the Xlibris store; however, they do not provide a breakdown of the manufacturing cost, or their commission.

You can purchase an add-on service (for \$1,599) to receive 100% of the profit from the book as royalties; however, you would have to sell an additional 127 copies of the book (at \$15.99) before you recouped the cost of this add-on.

Additionally, Xlibris will not allow you to determine the best price for your book unless you purchase an add-on service for \$249 (referred to as the “Set Your Own Price (SYOP) Program”). Based on the calculator provided on the Xlibris website, any retail price set below \$20.99 will return a significantly lower royalty than the 25% advertised by Xlibris. The number of additional copies you have to sell in order to recoup the cost of this add-on will vary according to the price you set, and the associated royalty.

You can combine both of those services (for a \$50 discount - \$1,799 in total); however, because your royalty goes down with the SYOP Program, the number of copies you would need to sell to recoup this cost is approximately the same as it would be without the SYOP Program.

While raising the price of your book would increase your royalty earnings on a per-sale basis, note that books with *lower* prices are more likely to sell more copies. Increasing the price could have a detrimental effect on your bottom line, and make it more difficult to recoup the cost of these add-ons.

See Table 5 (Return on investment comparison chart) for a sample breakdown.

User reviews

The analysis of user reviews for Xlibris services raised some significant concerns. Common themes include:

- Services are expensive, but Xlibris does not actually provide the help and quality assurance required;
- Customer service is poor, especially after the book has gone to publication;
- Royalties are often inaccessible to authors or unpaid by Xlibris;
- Xlibris salespeople are aggressive (frequent calls, “pushy” sales pitches);
- Prices for books sold through Xlibris are set too high, and royalties too low;
- Xlibris' claims to respect copyrights do not always hold true when an author moves to another publishing company.

The few reviewers with positive opinions had based their review on the services as listed on the Xlibris website, not on actual experience with the company.

Smashwords

Smashwords, founded in 2008, is a self-publishing company focused exclusively on eBooks. Smashwords offers all of its services for free, and there are no add-on services available. Their services include conversion of your book to sellable digital formats, and distributing copies to electronic stores. The only marketing services available are your author and book pages on the Smashwords website and discount coupons for your book that you can give to potential reviewers.

Sample service budget

Table 3 (Smashwords service budget) outlines the recommended services for your book and budget.

Table 3 - Smashwords service budget

eBook conversion	\$0
Convert from Microsoft Word format to nine different eBook formats	
Distribution	\$0
Apple iBookstore, Barnes & Noble, Sony, Kobo, Baker & Taylor, Diesel, Page Foundry, and libraries	
Data updates	\$0
Unlimited updates to book data and metadata at any time	
Consolidated sales reporting	\$0
Data on sales from all stores in one location for easy reference and tax-reporting	
Author space on Smashwords website	\$0
Author webpage and bio, listings of published works, webpages for individual books, support for embedded YouTube videos, member-contributed reviews, author favouriting, integration with social bookmarking and social networking, and Smashwords coupons	
TOTAL	\$0
Budget variance	\$5,000

Although publishing on Smashwords is free, you will have to spend your budget procuring services they do not provide (e.g., editing). If you choose to use Smashwords as your publishing company, you will need to research and negotiate with freelance providers for these services. Furthermore, in order to procure promotional materials, you will have to deal with a separate printing company.

Smashwords does not provide any publishing services for print books. If you wish to sell print copies of your book, you will need to use a separate service to design, print and/or distribute them.

Return on investment

Smashwords allows you to set your own price for your eBook, and there are no manufacturing costs. The author royalty is 85% of the profit, and Smashwords' commission is 15%. See Table 5 (Return on investment comparison chart) for a sample breakdown.

User reviews

User reviews for Smashwords are largely positive. Users are generally satisfied, but most provide no specific information on what aspects of the service they liked. Common themes include:

- Good breadth of digital distribution;
- Improper or problematic formatting when converting to some digital formats;
- Slow customer support replies;
- Delays in the publishing process;
- Lack of statistical reports when the retail price of a book is set to \$0.00;
- Some claims that sales are higher when dealing directly with vendors.

Comparative Analysis

Table 4 (Service comparison chart) assigns a score to each company’s relevant service offerings based on the analysis in the previous section. The score goes from one (bad) to three (good). A dash (-) indicates the category does not apply to the indicated company.

Table 4 - Service comparison chart

Category		Lulu	Xlibris	Smashwords
Free services	Breadth ¹	3	-	2.5
	Relevance ²	3	-	2.5
	Value ³	3	-	3
Paid services	Breadth	2.5	2	-
	Relevance	3	2	-
	Value	2	2	-
Distribution	Print	3	2	-
	Digital	2	1.5	3
Return on Investment	Royalties	3	1	2
	Control	3	1	3
User Reviews	Positive	3	1	2

¹ Breadth refers to the scope of services offered – the number of services and the number of types of services available.

² Relevance refers to the relevance of the service offerings to you specifically, based on the detailed requirements outlined in Section 2.

³ Value refers to the cost of the services compared to the other companies.

Table 5 (Return on investment comparison chart) compares the breakdown of costs and profit on each sale of a sample book published through each company. The sample book is a black and white, digest-sized paperback with perfect binding; it is 100 pages long and printed on publisher grade paper. Lulu cites the manufacturing cost of this sample book at \$4.30. Because Xlibris does not provide a manufacturing cost, this analysis assumes roughly the same process and cost for both companies. Smashwords does not publish print copies.

Commissions and royalties are presented as a percentage of profit, regardless of how the company advertises them. Because Xlibris’ default (non-negotiable) retail price for this sample book is \$15.99, the same price has been used for Lulu and Smashwords to ensure consistency. Additionally, because Xlibris’ royalties vary under the SYOP Program, it has been presented as a separate option. As \$15.99 was not an available option for retail price under the SYOP Program, the closest available price for was used for these calculations.

Table 5 - Return on investment comparison chart

Breakdown	Lulu		Xlibris (default book price)		Xlibris (SYOP Program)		Smashwords
	Print	Digital	Print	Digital	Print	Digital	Digital
Retail Price	\$15.99	\$15.99	\$15.99	\$15.99	\$16.99	\$16.99	\$15.99
Manufacturing Cost	-\$4.30	\$0.00	-\$4.30	\$0.00	-\$4.30	\$0.00	\$0.00
Profit	\$11.69	\$15.99	\$11.69	\$15.99	\$12.69	\$16.99	\$15.99
Comission % of profit	-\$2.34 20%	-\$1.60 10%	-\$7.69 66%	-\$11.99 75%	-\$9.69 76%	-\$13.99 82%	-\$2.40 15%
Royalty % of profit	\$9.35 80%	\$14.39 90%	\$4.00 34%	\$4.00 25%	\$3.00 24%	\$3.00 18%	\$13.59 85%

Lulu

Lulu rates very well compared to the other two companies.

Pros:

- It is possible to publish with Lulu for free if desired (paid services are non-essential), and still get distribution to most major outlets. The only distribution channel not available for free is the Ingram catalogue, which Lulu offers for \$75 (compare at \$499 with Xlibris).
- The paid services offered are customizable and relevant to your needs, and Lulu has presented them in a transparent and accessible way. It is possible to put together a complete package of relevant services within your \$5000 budget with Lulu.
- Lulu offers a high return on investment compared to the other two companies. Compared to Xlibris, Lulu offers a much greater degree of control at no cost. Furthermore, they offer higher royalties than both competitors, in print and digital formats.

Cons:

- Lulu's digital conversion service is extremely limited (ePub only). While ePub is one of the most common formats, PDF and other proprietary formats would increase distribution potential, device accessibility, and appeal to a broader audience.
- While the most relevant paid services are priced comparatively with Xlibris, they are slightly more expensive, and do not leave any room in the budget for promotional materials.

Xlibris

Xlibris rates very poorly compared to the other two companies.

Pros:

- Xlibris has a very broad collection of paid services to offer, and a number of package deals that you could leverage for discounts.
- The most relevant production and marketing services offered by Xlibris cost slightly less than the same services offered by Lulu.

Cons:

- Xlibris offers no free service. The minimum package required to publish with them costs \$499 and offers less customizability than the free services offered by either Lulu or Smashwords.
- Xlibris offers certain relevant services for less than Lulu; however, the requirement to purchase a package of basic services offsets any potential savings.
- The price of accessing distribution channels outside the Xlibris website is exorbitant compared to the other two companies, and their description of these channels is less clear in terms of precisely what you are getting in exchange for the cost.
- The return on investment with Xlibris is very poor, and they have demonstrated a concerning lack of transparency in the omission of details about their manufacturing costs and commission. They make two to four times more than you do on every sale, despite the financial risk being yours. Additionally, they do not allow you to control the retail price of your book unless you purchase an add-on service for an unreasonable price and significantly lower royalties.
- Research into online user reviews raises significant concerns regarding the legitimacy, honesty, and integrity of the company, particularly around the payment of royalties, and their level of service.

Smashwords

Smashwords rates well compared to the other two companies; however, its lack of paid services or print-copy services is a concern.

Pros:

- All of Smashwords' services are free, including services for which the other two companies charge a fee (e.g., expanded distribution).
- Smashwords has the highest number of electronic distribution channels, and they give you the option of opting out of any of them if you wish to deal directly with the vendor regarding your book (allowing you greater control over your book, and potentially earning yourself a higher royalty).

Cons:

- Smashwords does not offer print services, meaning either you cannot sell print copies of your book, or you have to arrange for printing and distribution through another company.
- The lack of paid services means a greater amount of work for you in terms of having to research and negotiate contracts for freelance services on your own.

Recommendation

The recommended option for the procurement of self-publishing services for your novel is through Lulu.

This recommendation is based on a comparative analysis of the three self-publishing companies identified in the proposal. Lulu:

- is a well-respected company, with a high number of positive user experiences reported online,
- has a well-designed and accessible knowledge base;
- offers a good range of free and paid services that will allow you to have your book professionally edited and designed, published in both print and digital formats, and distributed through several channels to major retailers; and
- offers you the highest degree of control, and the highest return on your investment, while staying within your \$5,000 budget.

Smashwords is the second-most favourable option because it:

- offers lower royalties than Lulu on digital books, and despite the fact that its services are free, it is not necessarily the cheapest option;
- does not provide a number of relevant services offered by the other two companies (meaning you would have to manage a number of freelance service contracts separately, increasing the amount of work you are required to carry in terms of polishing your book prior to publication); and
- lacks print-copy services, limiting your potential audience to individuals with access to eReaders.

Xlibris is a high-risk investment, considering it:

- offers a low return on investment;
- lacks transparency regarding commission and manufacturing costs;
- lacks clarity concerning their service descriptions and packages; and
- has a high number of negative online reviews, including serious concerns raised by Xlibris' clients.

Bibliography

The majority of the data in this proposal was taken from the primary websites of the companies under discussion:

- Lulu (<http://www.lulu.com/>)
- Xlibris (<http://www2.xlibris.com/>)
- Smashwords (<http://www.smashwords.com/>)

The analysis of the data was performed based on the author's understanding of the requestors' needs, and on information about the self-publishing industry provided by the websites listed under "Reference" below.

Reference

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