Confessions of an Xlibris Author

By Pat Hartman

Once I realized there was such a thing as print on demand, I contacted three companies that offered paper information packets, because I didn't have my own Internet connection. One sent a coloring book, crayons, and a kitchen sink full of bells and whistles of which I was instinctively suspicious. Another sounded way too complicated — and I got phone calls, always a turnoff. Xlibris sent an actual book, just like what my manuscript would eventually become. This was more like it.

Signing up wasn't difficult. The amount of paperwork was bearable, and they let me send the manuscript on disk, a big plus because I still didn't have a modem. There were a few snags in the process, resolved by my author representative. The proof copy was on paper, absolutely necessary in my situation. At publication time, I got one free hardcover and one free trade paperback.

Xlibris provides a private web page to see when sales are made and where the orders originate. Only problem: it was a very long time before I could access mine. I was given several different passwords, there were phone consultations with my rep, etc. I was using a borrowed computer at the time, and finally an Xlibris tech fingered the problem: the unwillingness of my computer-owning friend to accept cookies.

In this and other ways, Xlibris took for granted a degree of computer sophistication in the customer. Many of us who want to publish are, in our own fields, brilliant, productive, and above all busy — too busy to acquire or desire computer literacy beyond abc.

I like to do business with indies, and wasn't thrilled when Xlibris became a "strategic partner" of Random House, whatever that means. What it meant in this case was, everything changed: service packages, book prices, web site design. I'm of two minds on this. The snobby notion that self-publishing via print on demand is proof of inferiority. Well, that's a bunch of crap. It's propaganda put out by the gatekeepers. They want me to think if I go the POD route it's tantamount to hanging a leper bell around my own neck. On the other hand, if offered a contract by a traditional publisher I'll certainly give it very positive consideration.

In a magazine article about Xlibris, a gatekeeper type claimed that 80 percent of print on demand books are bought by their own authors. Well, so what? There are only so many relatives you can give your book to for Christmas. Anything over 20 copies, I'd start to suspect that writers are finding their own ways to retail their books, and more power to them. I bought some copies of mine and started planning an event.

What I could do without was all the peripheral stuff Xlibris offered. I already had experts lined up for advice on publicity. I know where to get postcards and bookmarks if I want them. And I wasn't interested in chatting with other writers who probably knew less than I did about how to create a character or make the subject and predicate agree. All I want my print-on-demand house to do is precisely that: put their energy into filling orders in the timeliest possible manner. (After, of course, helping me produce my book exactly the way I want it.)

Then came The Horror. Xlibris summarily switched its payment system to an electronic debit card company. Endless passwords and serial numbers followed. I hated every aspect — the security quiz, the minutiae of pecking long strings of verification numbers on the keyboard, the necessity to learn a whole new vocabulary dealing with fiduciary nuances I'd never had to think about before.

Whether or not electronic funds transfer is a good thing, the bottom line is, it wasn't what I signed up for. These people were making me jump through hoops to get paid a lousy pittance. I emailed a grouchy protest to Xlibris. Maybe other authors did too.

After a whole barnload of aggravation, the decree was reversed and Xlibris went back to issuing checks.

"Never go out of print!" is a major selling point in the POD game, yet it appears that POD outfits can let that disaster happen as readily as mainline publishers. What you need is a fall-back position, something to pass along to a different POD company if your first one poops out. Xlibris, showing perhaps not as much confidence in its own continued existence as I would prefer, came up with an offer. They would sell me a CD-ROM with my book on it, formatted in that special way, and including the cover, for another $75. What a racket.

The worst thing was the unsearchability of my book. The listing made it into Amazon, Borders and Barnes&Noble, as promised, but there was a problem. You could only find it by asking for it directly. If you searched for words such as "Venice Beach," it wouldn't take you to *Call Someplace Paradise*. I asked my Xlibris rep if something could be done and mounted sporadic attacks on the online bookstores. Eventually one of them answered, saying that keywords for the search process were only taken from titles. But I knew that was nonsense, because if you punched in Venice Beach you'd come up with a slew of novels starring an ex-junkie female auto mechanic/detective, none of which contained the words Venice or Beach in their titles. I'm willing to share the blame for this fiasco. Obviously, at some point in the pre-publication task list, I wasn't paying enough attention. Still, I feel that Xlibris might have been more helpful and explicit in the initial stages.

You can have the most wonderful product in existence, but enabling people to find it is about 36 times as important as its actual content.

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