

Marketeer, entrepreneur, influencer...author?

Arthur Ehlinger, Stefan Luca and Amy Thomas, researchers at CREATE, investigate the dominance of professionalised marketing in indie publishing



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Ever since the advent of the Kindle in 2007, direct-to-reader or ‘self’ or ‘indie’ publishing has promised authors an escape from the old boy network of traditional publishing houses, and the opportunity to tap into niche, under-served markets. Yet with Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing service now releasing over 1.4 million indie titles a year, the indie market is saturated. As a result, the quality of an author’s marketability, rather than the quality of their work, is increasingly what matters when carving out a successful indie career. Niche genres, diverse characters and distinctive (or even controversial) content can only take you so far in a space with millions of competitors, ever-more powerful influencers and, increasingly, AI-generated content.

Our research, derived from a survey of 2,261 authors, confirms that authors are spending more time and money on marketing than ever. The indie sector has long been characterised by a grassroots, do-it-yourself ethos, but as authors increasingly engage professional services, has indie publishing now started to emulate the system it has tried to circumvent? Have indie authors escaped the rat race of traditional publishing only to find themselves in a marketing rat race instead?

‘If I stop running ads, I don’t sell any books.’

We found that marketing is the most significant factor influencing indie book sales. It’s also the most significant cost in what can be described for many as a quasi-industrial business operation.

Like any entrepreneurs, indies develop personalised and constantly evolving advertising strategies, building upon insights and tips from a variety of sources, including data

provided by platforms, podcasts, and online forums.

This equates to two main strategies of indie ‘spending to earn’: paid advertising and organic content creation.

Paid advertising offers a straightforward marketing path with minimal time investment. By crafting an ad and deploying it across platforms like Facebook and Amazon, which have been identified as the most impactful platforms, authors can pinpoint and reach specific reader demographics. A key advantage lies in the ability to track sales and gather data. This allows authors to gain a deeper understanding of their audience, offering insights into reader preferences and behaviours, and enabling them to tailor future promotional – and creative – content so as to resonate with their target demographics more effectively, and maximise a book’s visibility and sales potential.

A growing number of indie authors are exploring the potential of social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok (famous among authors for its popular subcommunity ‘BookTok’) for ‘organic’ marketing. This method involves creating engaging content related to their books, which ultimately cultivates a community of readers. Despite being more time-consuming, this form of online promotion capitalises on the platforms’ viral mechanisms to boost visibility without the costs of paid campaigns. The long-term earning potential from this method remains to be seen.

Regardless of which route an author chooses, it’s clear that data continues to be the new oil where marketing is concerned. Indie authors are increasingly leveraging data analytics to refine their advertising strategies, encompassing strategic, and often very granular, considerations: optimal posting times, specific emojis to convey thematic elements (like using a British flag for stories set in the UK), and ‘tone’. Learning about an audience’s demographic and geographical

distribution, here, is key.

These advanced marketing techniques, once the domain of commercial publishing houses, have now become indispensable for indie authors aiming to stand out. They are also an additional time-labour-cost burden, however, especially for authors without training in this area.

It is not enough to be a good writer, either. You have to be a good artist too – or the kind of good writer that has the spending power to hire a good artist. As the dominant mode of browsing content takes a visual turn, incorporating eye-catching images and graphics has become essential for storytelling and brand identity. Many turn to generative AI tools to help with this. Commissioning paid-for ad artwork or promotional copywriting might have been outsourced in the past, but as generative AI tools have become more sophisticated, many indie authors have discovered an easy-to-access, low-cost solution that surpasses what they might achieve independently – without the expense of engaging professional designers or marketing firms.

“ data continues to be the new oil where marketing is concerned

There is an important caveat. Increasing reliance on AI causes labour displacement for those creators that are usually involved in other aspects of book creation. Not only does this threaten the sustainability of the ecosystem, but it may also inadvertently lead authors to distance themselves from other creative communities involved within the self-publishing industry. The collaborative spirit of indie publishing that was fundamental at its grassroots inception is in jeopardy. Authors risk becoming islands.

When creativity and marketing merge

One of the attractions of the indie publishing model is the scope to write for under-served and niche audiences. In theory, this might lead to more creative and innovative content. Yet while the indie route affords authors unprecedented creative control over their work, this autonomy brings the challenge of balancing commercial viability with artistic integrity. As one respondent put it, ‘If there was no commercial aspect to writing, I would probably write some things that are very different.’

Although usually driven by a deep-rooted passion for storytelling, indie authors must navigate the realities of the marketplace. Marketing is no longer viewed as a separate activity to be undertaken post-writing, it has become an integral part of the writing journey – considered and implemented from the early stages of book development.

A trend among indie authors is the creation of book series over standalone titles. The rationale is that each title in a series serves as a natural promoter for the next, capturing readers’ attachment to characters or unfolding narratives. Once a series gains traction, typically after three or four titles, the first book often becomes a loss leader, offered at a discounted price to attract new readers. The subsequent books, priced normally, then drive the bulk of sales revenue. Similarly, advertising may end up costing more than the revenue from one book and only becomes viable if readers stay for an entire series. This series-based approach contrasts with the traditional publishing model, which tends to focus on individual hit titles without

actively promoting an author’s back catalogue. In the context of spending to earn, entering the market with an automatic loss leader can be a daunting prospect.

We also found that the blending of marketing strategies with the creative process has led to a notable increase in the diversity of titles available, as authors strategically fill gaps in the market. We found that, in principle, indie publishing supports a wide range of ethnic, religious, and cultural perspectives, and that these are often well rewarded. For example, LGBTQIA+ authors earn almost 20% more than heterosexual authors. This diversification is a direct result of the indie model’s absence of traditional gatekeepers, which tend to be more risk-averse where non-mainstream genres are concerned.

However, one of our most important findings is that the trend towards diversity in content does not automatically translate into increased diversity among authors themselves. For example, white authors often incorporate characters of colour into their stories as a strategic move to cater to under-served niches identified through analysis of reader preferences. While such representation enriches the content of the literary landscape, it does not directly contribute to supporting a more diverse pool of authors within the industry. We found that Black authors face a significant visibility gap in the market: they were represented by only 59 respondents (the survey was circulated via email lists and social media, and was available globally to potential respondents) compared to 1,587 white authors in our study, and earn almost seven times less than white counterparts. This substantial income gap seriously undermines the average Black author’s ability to ‘spend to succeed’ in the market where upfront financial support is not available. While we certainly wouldn’t discourage efforts to diversify content, our research suggests we should be sceptical of superficial diversity without looking deeper to the demographic make-up of the beneficiaries. ‘Spend to earn’ is not an equal opportunity.

New gates, different keepers

You do not need to be a master of marketing to enter the indie publishing market. Our research suggests that the barriers to entry are lower than ever. If you want to be successful, however, then there are two substantial barriers: time and money. And these barriers disproportionately exclude certain groups without the upfront capital to invest in their work, be it financial capital or simply time. Our research strongly suggests that the costs of doing business as an indie author are not only financial, but rather include the labour of networking, outsourcing and upskilling that are increasingly required in order to have a successful indie career. As these professionalised expectations intensify, we query whether this sounds suspiciously like a replication – rather than subversion – of the commercial publishing route that indie publishing initially sought to replace. ●

Arthur Ehlinger, Stefan Luca and Amy Thomas are researchers at CREATE, the Centre for Regulation of the Creative Economy, based at the University of Glasgow. The insights presented here are derived from a survey of 2,261 authors undertaken between February and March 2023 in collaboration with the Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi) and Learn Self Publishing, and further enriched by eight in-depth interviews conducted in November 2023 with independent authors across the world.