INTERPRETING YOUR BOOK SALES

May 1, 2023

Were your book sales good or disappointing for last year? Here is a rule of thumb based on stats collected over the last decade or so: self-published books can expect to sell 100 copies in a lifetime; books by small presses (like ours) can expect to sell 100 copies a year; books by the big 5 publishers (Simon & Schuster, etc.) sell anywhere from nearly nothing to gaspingly high NYT best-seller volumes, the latter more likely by big-name authors. So, from these stats, you can draw conclusions about your own book:

**$200/$150**

If your royalties were $200 for a 19.95 book or $150 for a 14.95, you are right target for where you should be. If the majority of your sales came from e-books, then consider that the average e-book sells for $5, from which authors and publishers receive $1.75 each so that the total royalties would be lower and still be equivalent to the average small publisher annual sales, or alternatively, if the majority of sales were from paperbacks, then the total should be a tad higher. For general purposes, you can use the $200/$150 figure.

You can also check the number of books sold on your royalties statement; that works for print books, but e-book sales records lump together books sold with pages read. The volume should be at least 100 copies for those authors whose sales are meeting the expected annual sales volume.

**Less than $200/$150**

If your royalties were less than this amount, your book is not selling adequately. That could be for several reasons, some of which can be repaired, some of which cannot.

*Adequate Publicity*

The word is just not getting out; either you are being too humble about blowing your own horn all over town and the Internet, or you and we are reaching out to the wrong target audiences. We will continue to analyze SEO to give us some feedback on our own efforts. You can check your own efforts; if you expect to sell 100-1000 books a year, you need to ensure that you (or someone) is shouting out your book in some guise at least weekly.

There are lots of platforms to choose from to make this happen. Even your website (highly recommended that every author have one) should add something or change in some interesting way at least weekly.

All these efforts will not work well, however, unless you have properly identified and targeted your audience. Those MSI Press authors who sell 500 or more books annually know who their readers are and where to find them; they don’t waste efforts through scatter shots but narrow their focus to those most likely to read and purchase the book.

*Recognition of Book Quality*

The book’s quality has not been recognized. Recognition of quality is generally critical to sales success.

Do you have at least 75-100 strong reviews? If not, go after more.

Do you have awards? If not, submit your book. Some competitions are even free. Look at the list on the author hub. A widely overlooked, inexpensive, and author-friendly source for reviews and awards is Literary Titan (details in the book awards document on the author hub).

*Book’s Topic*

It could be that the topic has run its course or that the original target audience no longer exists. The WWII audience is essentially gone. The boomer audience right now is productive, but it will continue to shrink. The pandemic audience is definitely on the wane.

Do some google searches on your topic. How many pages come up? How recent are they? What communities—and how many—are engaging with this topic?

*Influencer Attention*

Your book could be lacking a maven (think *Tipping Point*). A maven is someone a great many people listen to and trust. What the maven reads, others want to read.

This is also known as an Influencer. Sometimes, Influencers fall into your lap, but usually you have to track them down and cultivate their interest.

*Unknown Reasons*

There are idiosyncratic reasons that just puzzle us, When good books don’t sell, we look at all the above reasons. If none is explanatory, we are left scratching our heads just like you.

Sometimes, we can find a unique explanation, but often we cannot. In those cases, we all need to explore alternative forms of promotion and alternative target audiences.

Sometimes, publicists can help, All too frequently, however, the cost of the publicist is more than the income from the books even though the publicist can help grow the reach, If you want to discuss the ins and outs of publicists for your flailing book, give us a call. We have a pretty pragmatic take on the topic, and for sure, we are on your side. We won’t let you get “taken” if we can help it.

*Sleeper Books*

Sleeper books are more plentiful than one may think. There are some known reasons for sleeper books and some are just puzzles.

Some books may be ahead of their time. When their time finally catches up, they begin to flourish—years after they were originally published.

Maybe it just took years for the word to get out or the right audience to be determined. Finding one’s niche can be daunting, time-consuming and, often, a matter of trial and error.

In the case of sleeper books, typically where newly alive books are selling in excess of 500 copies a year, we are quite willing to put out a second edition, A second edition can amplify interest and sales since it allows the author to update the topic to keep up with the times.

**More than $250/$150**

If your royalties were higher than $200/$150, your book is outperforming the statistical average. A number of our better-selling books earned 4-figure royalties this year, or came close. If yours was among them, well done! Keep doing what you are doing, and we will, too!