

WORKING WITH INDEPENDENT RETAILERS

By Kevin Potvin,
Owner of Magpie Magazine Gallery, 2006

From retailers' point of view, the shelves and the space on them is precious. Your approach to a retailer should be tailored to cause the staff and manager as little extra work as possible.

AS A SMALL PRESS PUBLISHER, before asking what retailers want, ask yourself what you want.

There are three reasons for trying to place your small press product in stores. First, there is a real, tangible pleasure in seeing your magazine, newspaper or chapbook out there in the real world where complete strangers might find it, like it and buy it.

Second, there is a large measure of credibility obtained by a publication produced on real paper and sold in real stores that is never available to even the most recognizable—but strictly online—publications, even if the print run is very small and the distribution very narrow.

Third, placing your small press product for sale in stores increases its visibility and may help achieve

sales of subscriptions and advertising contracts, or may open the door to other means of financial support that would not be available were the product never seen on any store shelves.

You'll notice I didn't mention "making money" as a motivation for placing your small-press product for sale with retailers. This just isn't going to happen.

From retailers' point of view, the shelves and the space on them is precious: they know the value that placement in their store gives to the products, and they also know what they pay in rent each month for each square foot of their floor space. Yet no single product makes a significant amount of money, just as removing a title results in almost no cost to the retailer.

With all this in mind, your approach to a retailer should be tailored to cause the staff and manager as little extra work as possible.

The first thing is to have your paperwork ready to go. A simple invoice book of the kind found at any stationery store will suffice—always use letter-size stock. Be realistic—no more than 10 copies will be required at any store. Find a cover price for your product that is high enough for the retailer to take an interest in (at least \$5) and offer a generous cut to the retailer, like 50%.

These numbers may lose you money, but consider it an expense, not a loss, to be covered by income generated in other ways: subscriptions, advertising, grant support, etc.

If you are operating through the mail, do not ask the retailer to strip off and return whole copies or covers. Trust them to fill in the number of unsold copies on an easy-to-read invoice form and to discard unsold products. If you're suspicious, run a secret spot-check.

For one small press product with just a few sales, it is often inconvenient for a retailer to make out a cheque; the option of just sending cash (in a self-addressed envelope you have provided!) may smooth out the process even more.

Lastly, a brief cover letter in your initial package introducing yourself, your product and the terms you offer, should be one page maximum, and hopefully shorter. Ditto for an email.

Visiting in person (with your product) can be difficult since many managers run at the first sound of anyone coming in asking for them. If you do go to the store in person, bring a product package similar to what you would have mailed, find out the person's name and leave it for them. Follow up with a phone call or two.

To sum up, a package should have no more than 10 copies of your product, an easy-to-read 8.5" x 11" invoice, a stamped, self-addressed return envelope for payment, and a cover letter explaining the cover price, the discount for the retailer, your expected frequency, how unsold copies should be indicated on the next invoice, how payment can be made and all relevant contact information, like an email address and phone number.

Avoid trying to convince the retailer your product is incredibly good or can make him a lot of money—this is a waste of time and will create the impression that you're an unrealistic neophyte. What the retailer really wants most is to do the least work possible, suffer absolutely no confusion and give the whole relationship the least amount of attention as possible. If you can accept that and tailor your approach with this in mind, you should have no problem achieving success and enjoy seeing your product on store shelves earning the credibility that comes with a real product. Good luck!

Author Kevin Potvin was the "Magazine Man" on CBC Radio. He is the Publisher of The Republic of East Vancouver newspaper.

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