

## What Good Is a Book Publisher?

by Steve Piersanti, President of Berrett-Koehler Publishers  
January 2010

*"In this new marketplace in which all book sales depend on the author's efforts and general retail book sales are flat, doesn't it just make more sense to self-publish?"*

Berrett-Koehler President and Publisher Steve Piersanti responds:

One of [The 10 Awful Truths About Book Publishing](#) that I have written about highlights how most book marketing today is done by authors, not by publishers. That statement has led some observers to question what value publishers offer and whether authors would be better off self-publishing their books, given that the authors, more than their publishers, will drive sales. The case for self-publishing is further strengthened by today's ability of authors to reach the marketplace through Amazon.com, the new social media, and the authors' own websites.

In fact, I concur that self-publishing is the best avenue for many books, and I often encourage authors to go this route -- particularly when they are able to sell many copies of their books through their own channels.

However, a good commercial publisher still brings tremendous value to the book publishing equation in multiple ways:

**1. Gatekeeper and Curator:** In today's insanely crowded marketplace with an overwhelming number of publications competing for our attention, publishers select and focus attention on books of particular value and quality, thereby helping those books stand out. The validation, visibility, and brand provided by publishers add great value to those books.

**2. Editorial Development:** Berrett-Koehler raises the editorial quality of each book in several ways, including extensive up-front coaching of authors to improve the focus, organization, and content; detailed reviews of the manuscript by potential customers to make the book more useful to its intended audience; and professional line-by-line copyediting. Such editorial development is often pivotal to a book's success.

**3. Design:** Self-published books often stand out in a negative way because their covers and interiors appear underdesigned (or

overdesigned). Some self-published books lack the professional and appropriate appearance that good publishers bring to books.

**4. Production:** Although authors can now produce books on their own computers, publishers can save authors a lot of work while bringing higher quality to layout, proofreading, indexing, packaging, and other aspects of production.

**5. Distribution:** Publishers can usually make books available through many more channels (trade and college bookstores, multiple online booksellers, wholesalers, and other venues not open to self-publishing companies) than authors can on their own.

**6. International Sales:** Berrett-Koehler's books are sold around the world through distributors in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and Canada.

**7. Networks of Customers:** Berrett-Koehler brings books to the attention of our networks of individual customers, institutional customers, bulk sales customers, association book services, catalog sellers, other special sales accounts, and countless other groups. We have been building up these networks for eighteen years, and they add lots of value in helping books to succeed.

**8. Publicity and Promotion:** Although the publicity and promotion efforts of authors may actually exceed those of their publishers, publishers still reach many prospective buyers that authors cannot reach on their own. This is particularly true for a publisher like Berrett-Koehler that has a multichannel marketing system that combines online, direct mail, bookstore, publicity, social media, e-newsletter, website, special sales, conference sales, and other channels of marketing for each new book.

**9. Foreign Translation Rights, Audio Rights, Digital Rights, and Other Subsidiary Rights Sales:** This is an area of great focus and success for Berrett-Koehler (with over two thousand subsidiary rights agreements signed thus far) and helps books to reach many more audiences than the publication of just the English-language print edition. Authors also receive extra revenue, a higher profile, and greater satisfaction when their books are published in a variety of languages.

**10. Coaching:** Perhaps the greatest value provided by publishers is less tangible than the previous items on this list. Just as coaching regarding a book's content and organization can be pivotal to its success, so too can a publisher's coaching on the title, price, design, format, timing, market

focus, marketing campaign, and even tie-in to the author's business strategies make a big difference in whether a book succeeds.

In the end, working with good publishers is a partnership. For books to succeed, authors and publishers must collaborate in many ways. For example, the publishers set the table through their marketing channels, but whether the books actually move in those channels often depends on the marketing that the authors carry out.

Berrett-Koehler has been extraordinarily fortunate in that so many of our authors have worked with us -- and continue to work with us -- in this partnering way. We have tried to spell out some aspects of this partnership in the Bill of Rights and Responsibilities for BK Authors.

We also appreciate the many BK customers who partner with BK and with our authors in spreading the word about our publications, serving as manuscript reviewers, and contributing in countless other ways.