REVEALED
THE METHODS OF SUCCESSFUL INDEPENDENT AUTHORS
Self-publishing’s largest survey ever uncovers how top-earning authors market and promote their book.
2017
Methodology

The 2017 Self-Publishing Survey conducted by BookBaby was focused specifically on revealing the most successful book marketing and promotional strategies for self-publishers. The 56-questions survey targeted two subgroups: authors who have published at least one book (either self-published, traditionally published, or both), and aspiring authors who have not yet published a book. The online survey was conducted between October 24, 2016 – November 28, 2016, and was completed by 7,677 aspiring and published authors.

About BookBaby

BookBaby makes self-publishing easy: From book printing, eBooks, editing, distribution, cover design, and more. Since 2011, we’ve helped thousands realize their publishing goals, backed by a 100% satisfaction guarantee.

BookBaby creates and distributes your printed and eBooks to the largest distribution network, including Amazon, iBooks, Barnes & Noble, and many other popular retailers worldwide. You’ll keep 100% of your book’s net sales, and retain all rights and creative control.

Best of all - you can call us at 1-877-961-6878 and talk through the process with a real human being – a fellow writer who’s invested in the success of your book.

www.bookbaby.com
Nearly a decade after the introduction of the Amazon Kindle e-reader and Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) platform, there’s simply no denying the fact that the practice of self-publishing has entered something of a Golden Age. A quick overview of the career successes of authors such as Amanda Hocking, Hugh Howey, and E.L. James, to name only a few, should be enough to convince nearly any industry observer that the era of self-publishing being viewed as a vanity hobby has come to an end.

Indeed, according to data compiled for the May 2016 Author Earnings Report, “verified self-published indie authors were taking home nearly 50% of all US Kindle author earnings.” And although that share has since fallen—as of October 2016, it was just below 40%—it’s still a substantially large chunk of the platform’s overall sales, and certainly speaks to the quickly growing mainstream acceptance of self-published books as a whole.

And yet the rise in popularity of self-publishing has created a different sort of challenge for the independent author: namely, a serious glut in the marketplace. According to Bowker, 727,125 ISBNs were assigned to self-published titles in 2015, representing 625,327 individual indie books.

So how best to ensure that your book rises above the proverbial fray? A properly executed marketing campaign is almost certainly the best way for a self-published author to ensure that his or her hard work is given the fair shake it deserves. However, little research has been conducted to definitely determine what specific marketing tactics will yield the best results for self-publishers. As a result, self-publishers often end up grappling with the question of how best to market their books, or experimenting half-blind.

As BookBaby President Steven Spatz suggests, marketing and promotion is the one step of the self-publishing process that seems to trip up even the most experienced of indie authors. “Marketing and promotion is so outside their comfort zone,” he says, “and so outside their knowledge base.”

As an end-to-end book publishing and distribution services provider, BookBaby has first-hand knowledge of the pain points authors encounter when producing and marketing titles. Since 2011 BookBaby has worked with tens of thousands of authors to self-publish their books into the digital marketplace. In an effort to understand how both self-published and traditionally-published authors have built their careers and marketed their work, BookBaby conducted a 56-question survey that was completed by 7,677 aspiring and published authors. The 2017 Self-Publishing Survey was targeted toward two subgroups: authors that have published at least one book (either self-published, traditionally published, or both) and authors that have not published a book yet. Nearly 60% of the respondents were published authors. The resulting 2017 Self-Publishing Survey, the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind, serves as the basis for this report.

“We were thrilled to get highly detailed information on book promotion and sale experiences from over 4,300 published authors,” said Spatz. “We have a mountain of data from some of the most successful self-published writers and we’re looking forward to sharing it with the world.”

This report focuses primarily on revealing what marketing and promotional activities will enable self-publishers to increase exposure and sales of their titles. It will examine the most popular marketing practices of the average author and the specific promotional activities employed by the most successful authors.
Today’s authors have a bounty of promotional and marketing tactics from which to choose, and it’s clear that very few are limiting themselves to just one or two options. Instead, to get the word out about their work, traditionally- and self-published authors alike are involved in everything from pre-sales and giveaways, to launch parties and bookstore appearances.

Findings from the survey show that on average published authors engage in about 3.5 marketing tactics to promote their books. The research also shows that the most successful authors (those that have earned over $5000 in sales in the past 12 months), are more active marketers than lower earners, engaging in 5.3 marketing activities per author compared to 2.2 activities respectively.

According to BookBaby President Steven Spatz, the great variety of tactics authors employ may have something to do with his impression that self-publishers today seem to have more hope than ever that their efforts might blossom into a full-time career. “More self-publishers are taking their careers more seriously these days,” he says. “Because just as there are many different paths to fame and fortune in self-publishing, there are also many different paths to finding yourself in a traditional book deal.”

That said, a few specific tactics are especially popular with both self- and traditionally-published authors. Soliciting book reviews stood out as the most common promotional effort among published authors. Published authors also expressed a strong predilection for social media as a marketing platform.

Requests for Book Reviews

Given the importance of discoverability for authors who sell the majority of their print or eBooks through e-commerce platforms such as Amazon.com and its Amazon Kindle Store, it’s perhaps not surprising that 51% of published authors responded that they have actively solicited reviews for their books. A good deal of those resulting reviews appear to be having the intended effect: 53% of those same published authors found their efforts to solicit reviews either “moderately effective” or “very effective.”

When soliciting book reviews, authors split their time fairly evenly among approaching book bloggers, Amazon reviewers, and beta readers. A good bit of weight is afforded to the opinions of book bloggers, who have been contacted by 42% of published authors in search of reviews. Yet there’s one group that receives book review requests with even more frequency than bloggers: friends and family. Over 61% of published authors have asked friends or family members to review their books.

To a large degree, authors who have been both traditionally-published and self-published have few qualms about earning negative book reviews, as long as the reviews continue to come in. When presented with the statement, “I would rather receive zero reviews on my book than any negative ones,” 63% disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement.

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Book Promotion Activities

One of the key findings in the 2017 BookBaby Self Publishing Survey concerned authors’ book marketing and promotion activities. The question posed to previously published authors read: Have you done any of the following marketing activities for any of your books? The authors were presented with a long list of possible promotional tasks and encouraged to check all that they had attempted with their previous books.

Our results show that the more successful authors—at least in terms of royalties earned—had invested time, effort and possible money to promote their titles. Most in this group had executed pre-sale promotional activities and solicited book reviews. Nearly a half of these authors also hosted a book launch party, wrote and sent out press releases and participated in book giveaways through both Kindle and Goodreads.

The data revealed clear patterns between two groups of authors:

- Authors who had earned less than $100 in royalties on their last book.
- Authors who had earned more than $5000 in royalties on their last book.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>Authors who earned MORE THAN $5,000 in sales</th>
<th>Authors who earned LESS THAN $100 in sales</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE-SALE</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOOK LAUNCH</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
<td>USED A PUBLICIST</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>GOODREADS GIVEAWAY</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>KINDLE GIVEAWAY</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOOKBUB PROMO</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>10%</td>
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<td>SIGNING/BOOK TOUR</td>
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<td>SOLICIT REVIEWS</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<td>PRESS RELEASE</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOOK TRAILER</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>18%</td>
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The Strength of Social Media

Among published authors, the use of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook is an enormously popular way to promote a book and develop an author brand. Indeed, 81% of the published authors surveyed answered in the affirmative when asked whether they thought a social media presence was important for any author.

Furthermore, it appears that the more an author grows in terms of financial success, the stronger his or her belief becomes in the importance of a well-maintained Facebook author or book page. 56% of authors with book sales of less than $100 in the past 12 months supported a devoted Facebook page. As for authors with sales of $5000 or more in the preceding 12 months, 68% agreed or strongly agreed with the theory that a well-maintained Facebook page is a great way to interact with readers, and to promote their author brand.

The Strength of Self-Publishing

Social Media Presence is Important for any Self-Published Author.

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<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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Clear trends regarding financial success emerge when looking closely at the marketing habits of authors with differing levels of annual sales. Lower-earning self-published authors should be able to improve their own net proceeds by emulating some of the tactics that the more successful among them are employing.

For the purposes of this report, “successful authors” are defined as those who earned $5000 or more on the sales of all their books within the preceding 12 months. This accounted for a little less than 5% of published authors surveyed. This high-achieving group was compared to lower earning authors that have sales of less than $100 in the last year.

While authors are in fact engaging in a variety of marketing tactics, we identified some of the tactics that the most financially successful authors are doing. According to the data, for instance, the high-earning authors request more book reviews than their less successful counterparts. They contract with more service providers. They also tend to have more titles under their belt and are finding success with the audiobook format. Read on to get an idea of what the successful author’s marketing playbook includes.

Soliciting Reviews from the Right Sources

As was indicated by all the survey’s respondents, soliciting book reviews is a popular marketing tactic for authors. However, what’s revealing is that successful authors (those earning more than $5000 in sales) are even more likely to employ this tactic, with 59% claiming it as a weapon in their marketing arsenal. Compare that to the 43% of authors who made less than $100 in book sales over the last 12 months.

“Our most successful authors know the best sources to ask for reviews,” said Spatz. “Prolific book bloggers are a gold mine for self-published authors.”

A closer look shows that “who” authors are soliciting for reviews might make a big difference in gaining exposure for their books. The data clearly shows that the most successful authors target potential reviewers who have the power to influence public opinion of their work. Just over 61% have contacted book bloggers, for instance, and 47% have contacted beta readers. The less financially successful authors, meanwhile, are more likely to harangue friends and family to review their books.

A side-by-side comparison of these groups also shows that overall the highest-earning authors are more likely to ask for more reviews from more potential sources than less-successful authors.

Our most successful authors know the best sources to ask for reviews,” said Spatz. “Prolific book bloggers are a gold mine for self-published authors.”
**COMPARISON**

We asked our survey group of authors a question about published book inventory: *“How many books have you published?”*

### How Many Books Each Author Released

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors who earned MORE THAN $5,000 in sales</th>
<th>Authors who earned LESS THAN $100 in sales</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1 Book</strong> ~10%</td>
<td><strong>1 Book</strong> 42%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5-10 Books</strong> 25%</td>
<td><strong>5-10 Books</strong> ~11%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2-5 Books</strong> 43%</td>
<td><strong>10+ Books</strong> 3%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>10+ Books</strong> 43%</td>
<td><strong>10+ Books</strong></td>
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### What Kind of Books Each Author Released

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<th>Printed Books</th>
<th>eBooks</th>
<th>Audiobooks</th>
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<td><strong>95%</strong></td>
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<th></th>
<th>Printed Books</th>
<th>eBooks</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>80%</strong></td>
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<td><strong>80%</strong></td>
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<td><strong>3%</strong></td>
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COMPARISON

Do authors invest in their book? We asked our survey group of authors: “What professional services did you purchase to help produce your book?”

Authors who earned MORE THAN $5,000 in sales

Authors who earned LESS THAN $100 in sales
We surveyed author opinions about their book marketing efforts: “DOES MARKETING START BEFORE YOUR BOOK IS EVEN PUBLISHED?”

77% of Authors under $100 agree

92% of Authors over 5K agree

Contracting with Professional Service Providers

While it’s true that neither design nor editing are traditionally viewed as a marketing or promotional plays, it’s also the case that self-published books littered with typos and featuring unsophisticated cover designs have become a widely recognized cliche.

So it’s noteworthy that the highest earning authors are more likely to hire professional service providers to handle front and back cover design and editing than their less successful counterparts. A whopping 79% have hired a graphic designer, while 74% have hired an editor. Compare those statistics to the decidedly lower numbers from the survey’s lowest-earning authors: 58% have hired a graphic designer and 48% have contracted an editor.

The respondents were also asked to share their opinions about the importance of a professional editing job and the potential drawback of a book with a poor cover design. And while the majority of both the highest and lowest earners were clearly in agreement that professional editing is crucial and poor cover designs impact on sales, a close look at the numbers nevertheless tells a story: The number of highest earners who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “having a book professionally edited is important” was almost 10% greater than the group of lowest earners who answered in the same manner.

“The majority of high-earning authors seem to be of a mind that without a quality visual package and a professional editing job, marketing dollars spent elsewhere will be dollars largely wasted.”
COMPARISON
Where do our authors go for book reviews? We surveyed writers asking: “Who have you contacted to write reviews for your books?”

Authors who earned **MORE THAN $5,000** in sales

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<th>Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Book Bloggers</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amazon Reviewers</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Review Co. (Kirkus, Blue Ink)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friends/Family</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beta Readers</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>NetGalley</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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Authors who earned **LESS THAN $100** in sales

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<th>Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Book Bloggers</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazon Reviewers</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Review Co. (Kirkus, Blue Ink)</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/Family</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beta Readers</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<td>NetGalley</td>
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<td>Other</td>
<td>28%</td>
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“When you’re trying to sell a house, it’s ‘location, location, location,’ right? Well, I think the new catchphrase for self-published authors is ‘inventory, inventory, inventory.’ Those who are finding more success are publishing a lot.”

As Sandra Smith says, “Thankfully, people are [finally understanding] that you can’t hire your next-door neighbor who took an art class to do your book cover.”

Clearly, the majority of high-earning authors seem to be of a mind that without a quality visual package and a professional editing job, marketing dollars spent elsewhere will be dollars largely wasted. Steven Spatz, for his part, tends to agree. “I would say probably half of the books that come through here are [clearly] not edited,” he says. “And every book needs editing. Frankly, I would rather authors spend the money on editing than buy 100 books from us.”

Spatz may very well be right. Consider the fact that of the most financially successful authors who completed the survey, 90% have published more than one book. Drilling down, roughly 22% have published somewhere between 2 and 4 books, 25% have published between 5 and 10 books, and 43% have published more than 10 books.

When those statistics are compared with the number of published titles by the least financially successful authors, the opposite trend-line emerges and only 16% of these authors have published more than one book.

The concept that self-publishers who put out more books are the ones making the most money “is something we’ve known intellectually,” Spatz says. “But now we’re really seeing it demonstrated and played out in this survey.”

Spatz warns, however, that writers certainly shouldn’t be fooled into assuming they can crank out work quickly just for the sake of increasing their inventory. “Don’t just toss schlock out,” he says. “Write the best book that you can. But don’t spend the next six months saying, ‘You know what, maybe it needs that forth copy editing—that’s gonna do the trick!’ No, it’s not. Get it out there, let the critics go at it, get some reviews coming in, and find out what readers like and what they don’t.”

Another statistic that’s certainly worth bearing in mind is the especially high number of hybrid authors—those who are both self-published and traditionally published—in the most financially successful group. Hybrid authors make up 44% of that population, for instance, while only 16% of the least successful authors have released both self-published and traditionally published books.

**Audiobooks Popular with Highest Earners**

According to the data collected in the survey, there isn’t an enormous amount of difference between the rates at which the most and least financially successful authors are publishing their work in print and digital form. While it is interesting to note that the work of both the highest- and lowest-selling authors is being released in print at a slightly higher rate than digital, the difference is so negligible that one could fairly easily argue for its statistical insignificance.
In fact, as far as publishing formats are concerned, only one clear and obvious trend stands out, and it stands out in a big way: High-earning authors are experimenting with audiobooks in much higher numbers than their lower-earning counterparts.

The data bears this trend out in no small manner: Among $5000-plus earners, 39% have audiobook versions of their work available. But what of those authors with earnings in the $1000 or less range? Fewer than 6% have released audiobook versions of their work. And perhaps understandably given the various costs involved in audiobook publishing, less than 3.5% of authors who earned $100 or less in the past 12 months have audiobooks in their portfolio.

As most industry insiders are well aware, audiobooks have steadily grown in popularity along with the rise of smartphone ownership. According to estimates from the Audio Publishers Association, “audiobook sales in 2015 totaled more than $1.77 billion, up 20.7% over 2014.” Clearly, this is a segment of the industry that self-publishers will want to observe closely for some time to come.

Role of Genre

It’s no secret among those in the industry that significant numbers of self-published romance novel authors have lately been enjoying unprecedented levels of success. To begin with, among the most financially successful authors, 81% write fiction or both fiction and non-fiction. And among fiction authors, the standout genre was romance: 22% of the high-earning respondents indicated they primary write in this genre. The second most popular genre among the most successful authors was historical, at 13%.

Planning a Book’s Promotional Campaign

Another key area where all authors might need to brush up is on the planning of their promotional campaigns. Many low-earning authors indicated that they don’t begin book promotions until late in the publishing process.

When asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “The marketing of a book should begin even before the book is finished,” 71% of low-earning authors agreed or strongly agreed. When asked to agree or disagree with the same statement 81% of high-earning authors agreed or strongly agreed.

“[Authors] need to start marketing themselves and their author brand long before their book comes out for the best chances of success,” says Sandra Smith, president of the book marketing agency Smith Publicity, which frequently partners with BookBaby clients. “And seeing the survey’s results, you can see that’s an area where people aren’t quite thinking in those terms. I think this is a big area for education.”

Heavily Discounting eBooks

Although it’s difficult to predict the marketing value of offering eBooks to consumers at heavily discounted rates, it’s nevertheless clear that the practice is a popular one among authors with the highest levels of financial success. Indeed, 50% of that group agreed or strongly agreed that the habit of heavily discounting their eBooks has resulted in more downloads. Interestingly, 19% of the least successful authors felt the same way.
If there’s one conclusion that can be drawn with near certain from BookBaby’s appraisal of the current state of book marketing, it’s probably that even among the highest-selling self-publishers, a very mixed bag of marketing and promotional tactics are required in order to stand out among the proverbial crowd. “There’s no one magic bullet,” as Spatz says.

It’s also clear that self-publishers enjoying the greatest levels of financial success are experimenting with the widest degree of marketing and promotional tactics. They’re doing the most publishing, they’re engaging service providers at the highest levels, and they’re requesting reviews with more frequency than lower-earning authors.

Authors with the most success, in other words, seem to be doing—or have done—a little bit of everything where book marketing is concerned.

And that, as Spatz explains, is one of the primary reasons BookBaby decided to conduct the Self-Publishing Survey. “We’re trying to shed some light on what you should do, how much you should spend, and what’s working,” he said. The BookBaby staff, he added, came to the conclusion that marketing and promotion in particular is perhaps the top area in which authors need more information than they currently have.

“It think the survey reinforced just how important marketing and promotion education is to authors,” Spatz suggested, “because there are a lot of people doing a lot of different things.”

Some of them are succeeding quite nicely,” he added, and the survey showed us what they’re doing. Some of them are not doing well, and the survey showed us what they’re doing. We thought this survey would be helpful and useful for the industry.”

It’s also true that the conveniences of modern technology have clearly not made the book marketers’ job any easier. In fact, with a promotional to-do list that might begin more than a year before a writer’s book ever sees the light of day, it’s little wonder that when responding to the question, “Marketing my book was easier than I thought it would be,” roughly 73% of the most successful authors disagreed, indicating that they found the job of marketing their work to be filled with heavy lifting.

We’re trying to shed some light on what you should do, how much you should spend, and what’s working.
1. **A variety of tactics**
   A large variety of marketing tactics are being used by authors of all stripes.

2. **The service provider effect**
   Top-earning authors put a lot of stock in using professional service providers for cover design and editing, which appears to be an indicator of success.

3. **Soliciting reviews**
   Book reviews are a leading marketing tactic for all authors, but the most successful authors turn to book bloggers and beta readers rather than friends and family.

4. **Inventory matters**
   Authors with more published books demonstrated greater sales, likely the result of building an engaged fan base.

5. **Role of genre**
   Fiction is significantly more common among the most successful authors, with romance clearly leading the pack.
About BookBaby

BookBaby is dedicated to making your journey from writer to published author as easy as possible. From first-timers to veterans, novelists to photographers, BookBaby has helped many thousands prove that it doesn’t take a traditional publishing deal to bring a dream to life. You can do it yourself—and BookBaby has the friendly customer service, knowledgeable publishing specialists, and quality book products and services you need to get the job done.

Printed book services

• Expert cover design
• Interior design & formatting

eBook services

• Professional conversion
• Expert Cover design
• Fixed layout

Additional services

• Premium book editing
• Print On Demand
• Worldwide distribution
• Metadata optimization
• Personal marketing consultation