

Understanding the E-Book Marketplace: What Writers and Small Publishers Need To Know

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The exploding world of e-books, with its multiplicity of software, hardware devices and formats, can give publishers and authors a headache when trying to effectively deliver content to the digital marketplace.

In addition to the popular Kindle, the [Apple iPhone](#) and the [Sony Reader](#) there has been a glut of hardware, software, e-book file formats, and new e-book stores, to sift through in search of the right marketing combination.

What must an author or publisher do to get a book seen by the widest readership? It all depends on how many file formats you effectively use. Deciphering the ones that are best for your marketing goal is no easy task. The more complicated this world becomes, the more an author will need a professional organization to deal with the digital marketplace.

Perhaps the following quick analysis will get the reader started on a productive path.

Forget the confusing jargon for a moment. The first step to conquering the e-book world is to define the specific digital markets that you, as the author, or small publisher wish to reach.

The same basic strategies ad agency media buyers have used for decades can be applied to e-book marketing: seek the widest possible "audience reach" with the highest rate of "frequency" for the least "cost per thousand people reached."

The big difference lies in the new technology.

DEVICES: Think of the various reading devices as "containers" for your e-book. The book might be accessible on:

Personal Computers

Smart phones/PDAs (such as iPhone or Blackberry)

Readers (such as Kindle)

APPS: To be able to read a book on these devices, the consumer must have the appropriate software applications (or "app") installed on the device. These apps (the software programs that enable one to read books on that particular device) are based on any one of about eight platforms, sort of like the difference between running a Windows PC or a Mac platform/operating system. It's as if one platform speaks English and another, Spanish. The growing list of platforms currently includes Palm OS, Windows Mobile (three flavors), Symbian, iPhone, Android, Access Linux Platform (ALP), Blackberry, upcoming Palm Linux, and several other mobile Linux platforms.

The variety of "apps" now available enable online e-book stores to offer their reading catalogues in a number of formats that allow a user to download or access material from the e-book store regardless of what popular device they are using.

It is easy to see that having an e-book capable of being read on the Web in a single format is no longer sufficient for reaching a broad audience. Mobile reading devices now claim 30% or more of the reading audience, especially the younger readers. To reach your audience goals today, one must grapple with myriad technological challenges of delivering the goods.

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Today's e-book content is delivered through multiple software applications running on multiple devices, including e-book readers, PDA's and smart phones—all with their own requirements.

RETAILERS: The key to effective marketing lies in studying the online retailers. Whatever the end reading device may be, it takes some sort of Internet retailer to actually deliver the book (or for now, that's the ideal way). Each retailer is likely to deliver content in at least four different formats. If your e-book is offered in only one format, then you may be missing the other 75% of that retailer's particular audience.

Here's how an app works to enable a user to read your book. As an example, if you have downloaded Lexcycle's popular [Stanza ebook reader](#) application on your iPhone, you can use the built-in Stanza store to buy the latest bestsellers and download them straight to your iPhone or iPod.

Amazon.com, the dominant player in electronic books, still pushes its own format for the Kindle reader. But it now also owns two companies — Mobipocket and Lexcycle — that sell e-books and reader software for smartphones.

One can also access and read books from Barnes & Noble's catalogue on a smart phone with the right app through B&N's Fictionwise.com.

Fictionwise supports "Secure e-books" in four formats: Mobipocket, eReader, Microsoft Reader, & Adobe. A secure e-book is encrypted and can only be read in the format that you purchase. The user picks the format that matches their reading device.

In some ways, the line between desktop computers and smart phones will eventually blur as smart devices offer more of the same features as traditional computers.

FORMATS: For now, there are two formats that promise the greatest audience reach. The ePub format, an open standard for e-books created by the International Digital Publishing Forum (IDPF), can be read on Sony Reader, Adobe Digital Editions, Lexcycle Stanza, BookGlutton. Barnes & Noble's new nook will also support ePub, with or without Adobe Digital Rights Management (DRM).

The Mobipocket format (.prc; mobi) can be read on most Windows, Symbian, Blackberry and Palm Operating systems. AZW, an e-book format used exclusively on the [Amazon Kindle](#), is basically the [MOBI](#) format using the high compression option.

Creating all these various formats from your manuscript is not straight forward. While many inexpensive software programs tout simple solutions, there are none.

Even preparing a file in a simple PDF format has its challenges when one tries to convert the file for use on a smart phone in order to capture a larger audience. Each format requires tweaking to take full advantage of a platform's interactive capability, thus giving the reader an enjoyable experience.

When a PDF which was originally meant for the print market is converted to another file format for distribution on smart phones, errors can occur. The document may, at the very least, not offer the reader an easy way to navigate through the material. At worse, the content may lose or add line spacing, may not be displayed in the right typeface, may omit or lose linking to the table of contents, or cause several other bizarre problems. No single format will suffice for wide distribution.

KEY QUESTIONS: Complex or not, the more formats you offer, the more choice you allow your readers, thus the more readers you are likely to reach. Here are four key questions to consider in marketing your digital content:

1. Which e-book retailers are you targeting, i.e. Fictionwise.com (Barnes & Noble), Kindle, Mobipocket? What others?

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2. What reading devices are your readers most likely to be using—i.e. iPhone, Kindle, Blackberry, all devices? How big is the user base for each device? Might one overtake the other as the dominant device?
3. What software applications (which, in turn, dictate file formats) are the target retailers offering to the end user? For example, can the consumer who comes to that retailer's store read your book only on an iPhone, or will Blackberry owners also be able to read the book?
4. What level of DRM security do you require—how is the end user able to access and use your content? Some formats offer security that set limits on the user and file sharing; others do not.

GETTING HELP: To help answer these questions, the author or small publisher who doesn't want to spend hours deciphering eBook technology would do well to consult an e-book conversion and distribution expert before embarking on the journey. In the long run, it could save a lot of time and money, reap more effective marketing results, and leave the writer to do what he or she does best—write.

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