

synopsis:

- Buyers are focusing more than ever on sustainability, buying directly from the source, and incentives like rewards, coupons, and brand loyalty.
- When publishers sell direct, you retain the customer data, you can earn more profit, and all decisions are up to you.
- Picking a platform is the first step to getting started. After that, it's about taking advantage of the tools available.



OWNING THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

How to think like Amazon and utilize direct-to-consumer trends to grow your audience.

by Sarah Gilbert

As someone who has been in publishing since the early 2000s, it's fascinating to observe how new writers make publishing decisions and their perceptions about what success means. What publishers define as success compared to what those in the publishing industry understand is actually success can be very different.

Overheard at Thanksgiving last year, "Your cousin Ann launched her romance novel. She's on Amazon."

I'm chewing my food slowly at this point so that I can think of a way to sound excited for my sweet cousin when I understand the writing of the book was a hundred times harder than getting it listed on Amazon. But there you have it, the gold standard of book

credibility—Amazon. It's the finish line for any author, like a stamp of authenticity. Naturally, those outside the publishing ecosystem don't see how books end up on Amazon, so they don't understand how many independent publishing roads easily and naturally lead there.

But as good as it sounds, your ability to manage direct connections to your readers is limited in a large marketplace. Like if a tree falls in the woods, does anyone hear it? If a book is up on Amazon, does anybody see it?

Many of us shop on Amazon, especially when we know what we're looking for. If a reader who likes romance starts searching for new romance novels, how would Cousin Ann's novel get discovered? Is it listed in the Editor's Picks, Top Rated, Best Sellers, or Most Wanted

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For? If not, it's somewhere in the over 60,000 titles listed in that specific category. There are so many more than 60,000; that's just what Amazon showed me as the result. Oh, it's Vampire Romance? That should narrow my results. *Clicks "Enter"* Oh, there's 50,000 to start.

Am I saying don't list your book on Amazon? Absolutely not. List it there. The benefits you might reap are collected reviews, connections to authors in your genre, book sales—and having your book where buyers buy stuff seems like a natural marriage. Optimizing your Amazon listing is also worth the time as it will increase your visibility and discoverability.

My question is: What are you learning about your audience and readership with your book listing on Amazon?

How a Publisher Can Think Like a Retailer

Buying and selling online and in-store has forever shifted in the last few years. Chalk it up to COVID-19, our mobile devices, or a crowded marketplace; buyer

behavior has evolved into what's convenient, trusted, and protective of their data. Buyers are focusing more than ever on sustainability, buying directly from the source, and incentives like rewards, coupons, and brand loyalty.

Publishers need to build long-term, ongoing relationships with their readers, and that can be a challenge when competing with big-box store sales whose value proposition is fast shipping and low prices. Engaging with potential readers through email and social media can result in brand loyalty and more purchases. But if the publisher-to-buyer relationship only exists in email and social media—and not in the marketplace—it seems like a missed opportunity.

Once you take control of a marketplace and begin selling directly to your readers through your own website, valuable connections can be established with your audience, providing insights to you as the publisher that can drive future marketing initiatives. In this case, the old adage "knowledge is power" works to your advantage as the publisher.

Here are some recent trends in e-commerce.

- In 2021, one of the leading ecommerce providers, Shopify, said their Black Friday volume increased 23%. ([shopify.com](https://www.shopify.com))
- Consumers are willing to spend more money and accept slower shipping times—for the right brand. ([shopify.com](https://www.shopify.com))
- Mobile sales account for over 62% of all e-commerce. ([techjury.net](https://www.techjury.net))
- Social commerce is still on the rise. By 2025, sales via social media channels are expected to triple. ([shopify.com](https://www.shopify.com))

And, most recently, there's a shift moving in the direction of consumer privacy. This will make it harder for social media ads to pinpoint their audience. TechCrunch outlines it: "This year will be when brands rapidly adapt to this change and future-proof themselves from an even bigger change, the eventual end of third-party cookie support in Google Chrome. The only way brands can adapt to these changes—specifically the loss of third-party data from Facebook and Apple—is to collect data directly from their customers (zero-party data) and leverage it for personalized marketing."

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Why Sell Direct?

What's in it for you as the publisher?

- **You retain the customer data.** You know your customers. This is the ingredient that will allow you to email your readers, develop a newsletter, know who is buying your books, ask for testimonials, and build a growing community of loyal fans. The more you know about your readership, the easier it will be to target future readers.
- **You can earn more profit since you're not sharing it with a third-party marketplace.** This does not mean you should not list your book elsewhere; selling directly to your readers is one of many channels where you can list books for sale.
- **All decisions about your brand are up to you.** You can even sell other stuff; this might be a complementary journal or book bag. Print-on-demand allows you to customize your merch.

What's in it for your buyer?

- **Build a connection with the author from a brand they trust.** Incentivize your buyers with a way to connect to the source. You can do this by sending swag (stickers/bookmarks) with the book, or a coupon code for another product.
- **Full transparency around sustainability practices of the seller.** More and more buyers are asking hard questions around packaging, sustainability, etc. With direct sales, you know specifically how to answer this with the knowledge of fulfillment methods and shipping practices.

What tactics can you use to successfully be your own sales channel?

- **Try paid advertising,** either through search engine marketing or social media directly. This will help with discoverability.
- **Start a newsletter or mailing list.** You're already retaining customer information, and this is a great way to stay in touch with your buyers for future marketing opportunities and engagement.
- **Get creative with out-of-the-box marketing strategies** like influencer marketing or local connections. This might be offering a coupon code for a book review website or local media outlet to give

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to their readers. Or partner with an influencer for a giveaway to increase referrals.

- **Post testimonials and reviews.** Since you have control over the content on your own website, showcase the best book reviews loud and proud.

Where to start:

1. **Pick a platform.** Some favorites are Shopify, WordPress, and Squarespace, but if you already have a website, there is no need to recreate one. You can find a checkout cart system that integrates with your website.
2. **Use the platform's built in tools.** Most e-commerce platforms have an app store featuring a wide variety of tools including customer management, tax calculation, shipping logistics, email campaigns, social media integration, and more.
3. **Connect books to print-on-demand.** POD book printing tools are available to integrate directly with your platforms. This might require an API integration, or there might be a built in solution already. This means you won't have to carry inventory.
4. **Take advantage of white-label options.** Brand loyalty is also part of the unboxing process. Take advantage of all of the white-label options to brand the entire process from checkout to delivery.
5. **Test-drive everything.** Kick the proverbial tires a few times, then ask your inner circle of trusted friends or colleagues to do the same. Perfecting the process might take a bit of trial and error, but it's worth it—the customer needs to trust the checkout process as much as they would with a major retail site.
6. **Stay in the know.** Subscribe to relevant newsletters and media that focus on e-commerce. You'll learn a ton of tricks around marketing, fulfillment, business management, and all things direct to consumer.

Using influencer marketing is one thing, but jumping in and creating an account as a company, or advising your authors to make a TikTok account, is a whole different undertaking.

These steps are a starting point for publishers to use the same tactics that big-box retailers use to drive sales and connect with their readership. Going to direct to consumer is an investment in time and resources, which should pay off big in the evolution of a brand. Adding in distributors when selling books can make it hard to keep branding consistent, as they have oversight and control on all policies, sustainability, and customer experience. Nobody is going to put as much effort into their brand as the publisher itself. Getting on board with direct-to-consumer sales is a long-term investment for

the publisher's future—setting it up for more profit, more control, and a stronger customer relationship. ●



Sarah Gilbert is the e-commerce marketing manager for Lulu.com, the publishing and print-on-demand company started in 2002 by Red Hat founder Bob Young. Her primary role is to educate and help those who would benefit from direct-to-consumer tools. In previous roles, she led public relations campaigns for over 75 authors and coached many more in preparation for their book launches.



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