Leaf Introduction: Product Vision, Business Plan & MVP

The Direct-to-Reader Publishing Platform

Own your audience. Fairly monetize your work.

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The Problem

Authors today are expected to build their own audiences. Whether self-published or traditionally published, the reality is the same: if you want your book to succeed, you need to market it yourself, grow your own following, and drive your own sales.

And yet, the channels authors are forced to sell through actively work against them. Amazon, the dominant marketplace, captures the customer relationship, withholds buyer data, takes 30–65% of revenue, and can terminate accounts without warning or recourse.

IngramSpark provides bookstore distribution but offers zero customer insight. Even the most flexible platforms treat books as commodities—standardized products in standardized boxes at standardized prices.

The result is a broken equation: authors do the hard work of building audiences, but the platforms capture the value.

Authors are told to "build your platform." But every sales channel strips away the very thing a platform is built on—a direct relationship with your readers.

This is a growing problem in a growing market. The number of self-published books has more than doubled in the past decade, reaching over 2.6 million in 2023. Annual self-published book sales now exceed $3 billion and growing over 7% year-over-year. Traditional publishing, meanwhile, is contracting.

The bigger problem: The entire book publishing industry is facing crisis. Publishers large and small barely survive on razor thin margins—not earning enough to pay their employees living wages—while corporate retailers and distributors thrive. The average author earns well below the poverty line for their work, forcing many to seek more lucrative creative channels like YouTube and newsletters.

In short, the publishing business model is broken, and if we don't do something, books as a creative medium are at risk.

The Opportunity

The best creator tools today share a common philosophy: give creators ownership, flexibility, and the freedom to monetize on their own terms. Shopify arms small merchants against Amazon. Beehiiv helps writers build and own their subscriber base. Patreon lets creators earn sustainable livings from their audiences. These platforms don't dictate what you build—they empower you to build it.

Authors don't have their version of this yet. The publishing toolchain is fragmented across 5–8 different platforms: e-commerce, print fulfillment, email marketing, digital delivery, distribution, and landing pages. Motivated authors cobble together Shopify + Lulu + BookFunnel + MailerLite + Squarespace, spending more time on integrations than on writing and marketing.

Leaf is the direct-to-reader publishing platform. One place to sell your books, own your audience, and grow your readership—without giving up your margins or your customer relationships.

What Leaf Does: The MVP

Leaf is built around a simple workflow: upload your book, set up your storefront, and start selling directly to readers—while building an audience you actually own.

Sell Direct, Own the Relationship

- **Beautiful landing pages.** Each title gets a polished sales page with cover art, description, pricing, and purchase options. Great design is a must, but design *skills* not required.

- **All formats, one place.** Sell physical books (hardcover, paperback), ebooks, audiobooks, and the Leaf Reader (more on this below)—all from a single listing.

- **Bundles and premium editions.** Create product bundles at any price point: book + workbook, book + course access, signed editions, or subscription

packages. Amazon doesn't allow this. Leaf does.

- **Print-on-demand fulfillment.** Physical books are produced and shipped via Lulu's global POD network. No inventory, no upfront costs, no minimum orders.

- **Wide distribution.** Opt into distribution to Amazon, Barnes&Noble, bookstores, and libraries through the same integration—while keeping direct sales as your primary channel.

- **Customer data is yours.** Every purchase gives you the buyer's name, email, and purchase history. Build a real relationship with your readers.

The Leaf Reader: Your Marketing Secret Weapon

The Leaf Reader is a web-based reading experience that every direct-sale customer receives automatically. Customers can start reading your book online instantly and easily share snippets with friends or colleagues.

The Leaf Reader is also your secret weapon for marketing your book online:

- **Shareable sections.** Every chapter and section has its own URL. Readers can highlight passages and share links to specific parts of your book on social media—driving organic discovery without giving away the full text.

- **SEO-indexed content.** Each section is crawled and indexed for search engines and AI answer engines. Your book becomes discoverable through the ideas inside it, not just the title and metadata.

- **Gift links.** Readers can send free copies to friends directly through the Leaf Reader, turning your best readers into your best promoters.

- **Talk to your book.** Readers can ask questions and get answers drawn directly from the text—a new way to engage with nonfiction content.

- **Multimedia and bonus content.** Embed videos, podcast clips, downloadable resources, and author notes directly into the reading experience.

- **Beautiful by default.** Designed to feel timeless and effortless to read. Mobile-ready. Nearly as easy to read as a printed book.

Build and Monetize Your Audience

- **Email capture and list ownership.** Collect reader emails at purchase, through lead magnets, and via lead-capture pages inserted into physical books. Export your list anytime—you own it completely.

- **Follow-up email flows.** Pre-built email "plays" to onboard new readers, promote backlist titles, drive reviews, and convert free subscribers to buyers.

- **Sales and traffic analytics.** See where your buyers come from, what they purchase, and how they engage with your Leaf Reader.

Growth Tools

- **Web reader analytics.** Track read-through rates, top highlights, and reader engagement to understand what resonates.

- **Shareable and gift links with tracking.** Measure which shares drive the most new readers and purchases.

- **Author cross-promotion.** Team up with other Leaf authors to recommend each other's books—a built-in, community-powered discovery network.

Where Leaf Goes Next

The MVP is a focused product for self-published authors with an *existing* audience who want to sell direct. From there, Leaf expands in three directions:

More Growth Tools

- Full email marketing suite with segmentation, automation, and campaign analytics

- Author profiles and landing pages—an author's home base for all their books and work

- Agentic commerce optimization—structured data and feeds so AI shopping agents can find and recommend your books

- Paid ad generation—create beautiful, relevant ads with a few clicks

- Marketplace for books—help readers discover new books and connect directly with authors, powered by full-text search across the Leaf catalog

Editorial and Production Tools

- Manuscript formatting and interior design

- Cover design templates and tools

- Collaborative editing workflows

- Audiobook production and direct fulfillment

Platform Expansion

- Blogging and newsletter features—publish content alongside your books

- Fulfillment and logistics integrations—warehousing, bulk orders, event sales

- Embeddable storefronts—sell Leaf books from your own website

- Support for traditional publishers, hybrid publishers, and media brands launching imprints

Target Customer

Primary Persona: Self-Published Nonfiction Authors with Existing Audiences

Leaf's first customers are self-published nonfiction authors who are writing books to build their businesses or careers. They have much more to sell than just a book, and they intrinsically understand the value of owning their audience.

They are:

- Building newsletters, courses, and consulting practices alongside their books

- Active on LinkedIn, podcasts, and social media—they already have distribution channels

- DIYers at heart who get excited when they find a tool that empowers them

- Frustrated by the lack of control, flexibility, and customer data from current platforms

- Capable of building technical solutions but lost on marketing strategy—they need playbooks, not just tools

Pain Points

No customer data. Amazon and IngramSpark retain all buyer information. Authors can't follow up, upsell, or build relationships with the people reading their books. Even authors with 10,000+ sales through cobbled-together direct systems report this as their biggest frustration.

Poor margins. Authors typically earn ~$3 on a $16.99 Amazon sale. Direct sales yield $7–8 or more. The margin gap is 2–5x, and it compounds with every book sold.

Platform dependency. Amazon controls 70%+ of the ebook market. Authors report arbitrary account terminations, book removals, and nonexistent customer support. One author lost a book with 20,000+ sales and 630 reviews to automated moderation. Leaving Amazon means losing ~75% of sales overnight.

Fragmented tooling. Direct sales today require stitching together 5–8 platforms. Shopify's $39/month is prohibitive for lower-volume authors, and even then you need separate tools for email, digital delivery, and fulfillment.

The "Now What?" problem. Authors who do capture emails often don't know what to do with them. They need strategy and structure, not just a list. One author built 500+ emails and sent exactly one thank-you message.

Discovery remains unsolved. Discoverability on personal websites is essentially zero without active marketing. Cold traffic from paid ads is largely ineffective for books. Authors need organic growth paths they don't have today.

Superpowers Leaf Unlocks

Customer data and relationships. Know who buys your books. Follow up. Upsell. Build a real reader community.

Bundles and premium pricing. Sell book + course + consulting at any price point. Premium bundles drive ~50% of revenue for successful direct sellers. One author rejected a $70K traditional deal while earning $10K/month through direct sales with a $95 premium hardcover.

Organic growth through content. SEO-indexed book sections, shareable highlights, gift links, and cross-promotion create compounding discovery—your readers become your marketing team.

Email as the growth engine. Author-branded emails achieve 60% open rates versus 20% industry average. A 15K email list guarantees bestseller status in

niche categories. Email is the most effective book marketing channel, and Leaf makes it native.

Flexible production. Any format, any trim size, any price. Physical, digital, audio, web, multimedia. No more fitting your creative vision into someone else's templates.

One platform instead of eight. Sales, fulfillment, email, analytics, landing pages, reader experience—all in one place. Spend time on writing and marketing, not on integrations.
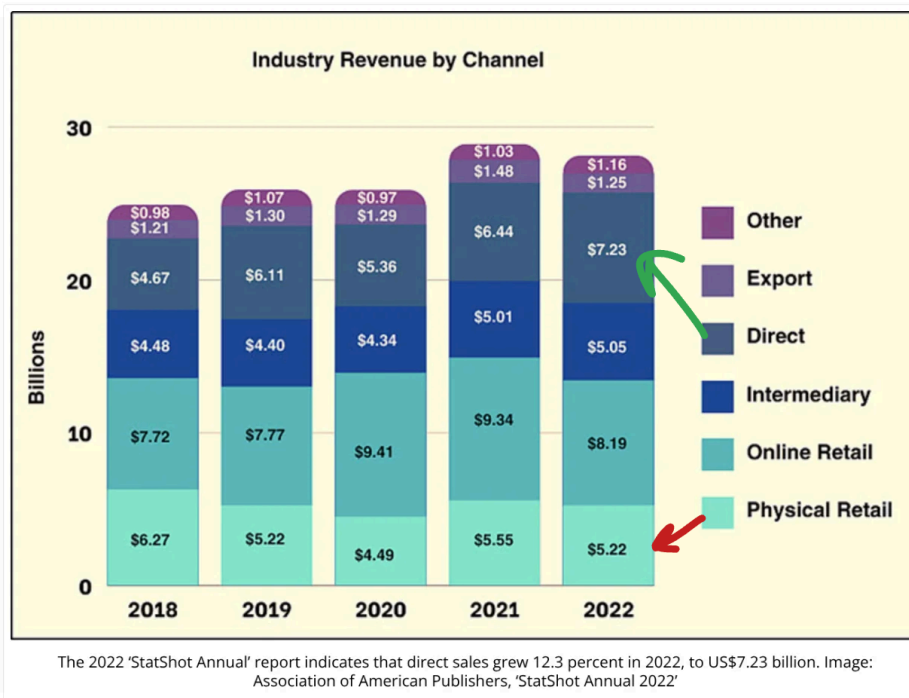
Market Context

Self-Publishing Is the Growth Story

Self-published titles reached 2.6 million in 2023 while traditional publishing output declined. The market has more than doubled in a decade. This isn't a niche—it's the center of gravity in publishing, and it's growing.

The Direct-to-Reader Movement Is Real

Major publishers including Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, and Macmillan have launched topic-focused sites to capture reader data. Stripe Press, Author's Equity, and successful self-published authors are proving that direct sales work—and that readers will buy from authors they trust. The infrastructure to support this at scale doesn't exist yet.

In addition, the American Publishing Assocation found that as of 2022, the Direct Sales channel is larger than Physical Retail — and growing.

Industry Revenue by Channel

The 2022 'StatShot Annual' report indicates that direct sales grew 12.3 percent in 2022, to US$7.23 billion. Image: Association of American Publishers, 'StatShot Annual 2022'

AI Is Reshaping Discovery

Google search traffic to publishers has declined 33% globally. Answer engines and AI shopping agents are changing how readers find books. Full-text indexed content—like the Leaf Reader—creates a structural advantage in this new landscape. Books can be discovered through the ideas inside them, not just metadata.

Creator Economy Economics Work

The Gumroad model (free tier + percentage of sales) has proven effective for creator tools. Beehiiv, Patreon, and Shopify demonstrate that platforms can build large businesses by aligning their revenue with creator success. Authors are ready for this model—they've just been waiting for a platform built for them.

Market Size

TAM: Global Publishing — ~$130B

The global book publishing industry generates roughly $130 billion in annual revenue. The U.S. alone accounts for $32.5 billion, with North America representing about a third of the global market. The industry's infrastructure is dominated by wholesale-first players—Ingram Content Group ($2B) underpins traditional distribution, and Amazon controls 70%+ of ebook sales and 40%+ of all new book sales.

Leaf's long-term opportunity is to build the direct-first alternative: the same scope (production, distribution, discovery) but optimized for author ownership and higher margins. Just as Shopify armed rebels against Amazon in retail, Leaf will arm authors and publishers against the legacy wholesale model.

SAM: Self-Publishing — $3B+ (U.S.)

Self-publishing is a global phenomenon, but U.S. data is the most reliable. In the U.S. alone, self-published titles reached 2.6 million in 2023, growing 7.2% year-over-year. Output has more than doubled in the past decade, while traditional publishing titles declined 3.6% over the same period. Amazon Kindle Unlimited alone paid $650 million in author royalties in the past twelve months, equating to roughly $1.2 billion in total sales—and that excludes standard KDP sales. U.S. self-publishing exceeds $3 billion annually; the global figure is significantly larger but harder to pin down.

Leaf launches in the U.S. market first, where current platforms are built for wholesale distribution, not direct reader relationships.

SOM: Nonfiction Self-Publishing — ~$750M–$1B (U.S.)

Fiction dominates self-publishing bestseller lists, but nonfiction categories like business and economics rank in the top five for ISBN registrations. Leaf's ICP—nonfiction authors building businesses around their expertise—is a smaller but significantly higher-value segment: higher willingness to pay for tools, larger lifetime value (courses, consulting, speaking, premium editions), a natural fit for direct sales and audience ownership, and underserved by fiction-focused platforms. This is the U.S. beachhead; the same author archetype exists globally, particularly in the UK, Australia, and India.

Proof of Concept: Direct Sales Work

Two publishers are already proving the direct-first model:

Metric	Damn Gravity	Holloway
Gross revenue	$147,000 (2025)	$577,155 (2020-2025)
Key metric	$99 AOV	$35 avg revenue/book
Model	Premium editions, bulk/B2B	Web-native reader, direct sales

Compare to Amazon: a typical ebook earns the author $2–3.50, and a typical paperback earns $4–6. Direct sales generate 6–30x more revenue per book than retail platforms.

Growth Path

Stage	Market	Size	Focus
Now	U.S. nonfiction self-publishing	~$750M–$1B	Business authors, thought leaders
Next	All U.S. self-publishing	$3B+	Expand to all genres
Long-term	Global publishing	~$130B	Displace wholesale-first infrastructure

Business Model

Leaf aligns its revenue with author success:

Free Tier	15% royalty on sales, on top of print and transaction costs. No upfront fees. Authors pay nothing until they sell.
Subscription Tiers	Monthly fee with reduced or zero royalty. Authors keep more as they scale. Just print costs and transaction fees. Tiers based on total sales volume and premium features

This follows the proven Gumroad/Beehiiv model: remove barriers to entry, then grow revenue as authors succeed. The free tier gets authors in the door; the subscription tier rewards and retains high-volume sellers.

Go-to-Market

Now: Author Marketing Education

Marketing content, free tools, events, courses, and community for self-published authors. This topic is one of the most painful and oft-talked about subjects in online author communities.

Goal: Establish Leaf as the trusted resource for authors who want to build direct-to-reader businesses. This is how we find and earn our first customers.

Next: Paid Growth

Build on our organic marketing success with paid ads, SEM, and influencer partnerships to scale acquisition once the product and retention are proven.

Later: Channel Partners

Expand through hybrid publishers, self-publishing services companies, publishing consultants, and book marketing professionals. These partners bring authors to Leaf as part of their existing workflows.

How We Win and Keep Authors

Exceptional customer service. Self-published authors are used to being ignored by platforms. We will be radically responsive and helpful. This is a wedge we can sustain against larger competitors.

Beautiful design. The Leaf experience—for authors and readers—should feel premium. Every landing page, every Leaf Reader, every email should look like it was designed by a professional. Design is a moat when your competitors are Amazon's generic product pages.

Creative freedom. As we build products, our goal is to give creative freedom to authors, publishers, and readers. We believe with the right tools and incentives, authors and publishers will create exceptional books. We want to enable a new renaissance in publishing.

Competitive Landscape

No single platform today combines direct sales, print-on-demand fulfillment, email marketing, and a web-based reading experience with organic growth tools. Authors currently choose between:

Amazon KDP / IngramSpark: Reach and distribution, but no customer data, poor margins, and platform dependency.

Shopify + Lulu: The current best-in-class DIY solution, but $39/month, no author-specific features, and requires separate tools for email, digital delivery, and analytics.

Payhip / Gumroad: Simple digital sales with good margins, but limited print integration and no growth tools.

BookFunnel: Ebook and audiobook delivery with newsletter swaps, but not a sales platform.

Curios / Beventi: Emerging direct sales platforms, but early-stage with limited features and unproven at scale.

Leaf's position: The only platform purpose-built for authors that combines direct sales, print-on-demand fulfillment, audience ownership, and organic growth tools —in one product, with pricing that scales with author success.

The future of publishing is direct. Leaf is how authors get there.