

# Towards A Self Sustaining Publishing Model

## A ten minute lesson / rant / manifesto

Some things I have learned in over 30 years of publishing since my teenage days as a zine maker, administrating my project Public Collectors, and from working in the group Temporary Services and our publishing imprint Half Letter Press:

If only one or two things that I share here are useful, that's plenty! It took me decades to understand some of this stuff.

Use every exhibition invitation with a budget to print something. Use the whole budget to print something. Make something in a large enough print run so that you have something to give away and surplus that you can sell. Your publication can be a folded sheet of paper, a booklet, a newspaper, a poster, a book, or anything in between.

Be able to print at least something at home. Buy a cheap laser printer or inkjet printer, find a used copy machine, buy a RISO or some other duplicator, carve something into a potato or a piece of foam and print it. Being able to do at least some of the printing and production at home—even if it's on a tiny scale—will compel you to print things that you might have convinced yourself not to send out or bring to a professional printer. Hopefully the ability to print impulsively and compulsively will result in good work. Figure out how to keep making things on every scale. Look for cheap used printing equipment on Craigslist. Team up with friends and buy equipment together that you can share. Start a printing collective in your basement.

Ideally your publication should cost 1/5th or 1/6th of the retail price to make. If you sell a \$10.00 publication through a store, you are probably only going to make \$6.00 or less after the store takes its cut. So ideally your \$10.00 book costs \$2.00 or less to make. Don't aim to just break even. Aim to make a profit so you can keep making more publications and pay for your life. Publishing will probably never be your sole income but don't lose money on purpose. Make things that are priced fairly and look like they justify what they cost to buy. The fact that you didn't find a more affordable way to print something is not an excuse to sell something that feels cheap and shitty for a ridiculous sum of money. Good cheap printing is easier to find than ever before. Do your homework.

Figure out the cheapest and least wasteful ways to do everything. Ask other publishers where they get their work printed. Look for local printers so you can avoid shipping fees. Ask local printers if you can pay in cash for a discount. Ask printers if there is a cheaper way to do what you want to do by adjusting the size of your paper or the paper stock or some other small shift in form. If you print things yourself, buy the paper that is on sale. Design a publication around the paper that you found for cheap. Discount warehouses sometimes have good paper. Even dollar stores sometimes have good paper. I've bought paper at flea markets. Costco sells an 800-sheet ream of 24 lb paper for \$6.99. I use it all the time. It rules. I also recommend getting your jugs of organic olive oil there, but you can't print with that.

Free printing is good printing. If you have access to free printing, use it. Free printing is like free food at art openings and conference receptions. It is one of those pleasures in life that never gets old. Come up with an idea that is based around the aesthetics of whatever free printing you have access to and make the publication that way. Eat the cheese and bread. Drink the wine. Make the copies at work.

Buy bulk shipping mailers on eBay. Find bubble wrap and other packing materials in the trash. Look out for neighbors who just bought new furniture—it's usually wrapped in miles of packing material you can use for shipping books. Boycott terrible right wing fuckers like ULINE. Seriously, they give money to everyone horrible. Trump? Check. Ted Cruz? Check. Scott Walker? Check. ROY FUCKING MOORE? CHECK FUCKING CHECK! Tear up their catalogs and use them as packing material to protect your books. Make publications that have a consistent size so you can purchase cardboard mailers in bulk and get a discount on them. Buy packing tape in bulk. Buy everything in bulk. You can store your extra reams of paper under your bed or on top of your kitchen cabinets if necessary. Be like a wacko survivalist prepper, but for office supplies. Go to estate sales and look for the home office in the house. Buy the dead person's extra tape and staples and rulers and scissors. I've been using some random dead person's staples for years because I bought their staple hoard. Staples aren't like meat and milk. They don't expire.

I'm against competition. Try to avoid competing with other artists for resources. If you don't truly need the money, don't ask for it. Artists should have a section on their CV where they list grants they could have easily gotten but didn't apply for because they are privileged enough that they don't need

the money as much as someone else. I almost never apply for anything but the one thing I do apply for and get every year is a part-time faculty development grant from Columbia College Chicago where I teach. It pays adjuncts up to \$2,500 a year to fund their projects and seems to be completely non-competitive. My union negotiated to get us more money. I have used that grant to make over a dozen publications. The value of the publications I make and sell with each grant is about three or four times the value of the grant itself. Some years I make more from the grant than I do from the limited number of classes I teach. But I don't depend on this grant to be a publisher and I'd still be able to make things without it.

Make things in different price ranges so everyone can afford your work, but also so that you can sustain your practice. Make a publication that costs \$2.00, that costs \$6.00, that costs \$20.00, and make something special for the fancy ass institutional libraries that have a lot of money to spare and can buy something that costs \$300.00. Likewise, make things in all different size print runs. Is there something you can print 1,000 of that you can keep selling and giving away for years, to enjoy that quantity discount that comes with offset printing a large number of publications?

Collaborate with people and pay them with publications (if they are cool with that) that they can sell on their own. Sometimes this ends up being better pay and more useful than an honorarium, and it helps justify a larger print run. But see what they need—don't assume. Barter with other publishers and sell each other's work and let each other keep the money. This helps with distribution. Sometimes it's easier to sell their work than it is to sell your own. Help others expand the audience for their publications.

Fund your publishing practice by asking your friends who teach to invite you to talk to their college classes about your work. Use those guest speaker fees to print something. I sometimes tell people on social media: If three or four people will invite me to speak to their class, it could fund the entire next issue of X booklet series that you like so much. This has often worked. Also, sometimes their students end up ordering publications. Sometimes lectures about publications generate more income than the publications themselves.

Have an emailing list and write newsletters to announce new publications. Stay in touch with people who like what you do. Expect to spend a ton of time corresponding with people.

Have some cheap things and cool ephemera on hand that you can send people for free when they mail order your publications. Reward people who support you directly with something nice that they didn't expect. People like handwritten notes. It's okay if they are very short but sign the packing slip and at least write "Thank you!"

Above all, know that publishing is a life journey and not a get rich quick scheme, or even a make very much money scheme. Enjoy the experience of meeting and working with others, trade your publications with other publishers and build up an amazing library of small press, hard to find artist books. Get vaccinated and travel and sleep on each other's couches. Be generous with your time, knowledge, resources, and work. Tell Jeff Bezos to fuck off by never selling anything you make through Amazon. Find the bookstores that you love and work with them forever. It's nicer to have deeper relationships with fewer bookstores than surface level interactions with dozens of shops run by people you don't know.

Think about your publishing family. Bookstore people are your family. People that organize book fairs and zine fests are your publishing family. Other publishers are your family. People who follow your work for years on end are your family. Printers and binderies are your family. The postal workers that know you by name and that you know by name are your family. The person who doesn't care if you make the free copies at work is your family. Over thirty years later, I'm still in contact with people I exchanged zines with through the mail when I was a teenager. In some cases I still haven't met them in person. It's fine! They are my family. Your students are your family—particularly once they graduate or drop out, as long as they continue making books and zines. Your family is your family, particularly if they value and support your publishing practice. And for this reason, this text is dedicated to my late father Bruce Fischer, who let me use the company copier and postage meter when I was in high school, and to my mom who sat on the floor with me and helped me hand collate and staple my zines.

— Marc Fischer [Originally delivered at a panel discussion organized by GenderFail Press for Printed Matter on April 2, 2021]

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