

Is Distribution Right for You?

A master distributor acts as your sales force and fulfillment center. Many people confuse distributors and wholesalers and the two terms are often used interchangeably. Because of this, the term “master distributor” was coined to describe companies like Biblio, NBN, BookWorld, Consortium, IPG, and PGW.

Here are the primary differences between a wholesale distributor (or wholesaler) and a master distributor:

- Wholesalers: retail customers’ warehouse and replenishment center; non-exclusive; no sales force
- Master Distributors: publishers’ warehouse and fulfillment center; exclusive to the trade; active sales force

A small press would most likely start out by getting its book into as many wholesalers as possible, the Amazon Advantage program, and local bookstores. Once you’ve done that and established your program somewhat, you might start considering a master distributor.

Here are the primary reasons a publisher would choose to work with a master distributor:

- To work with Ingram, B&N, Borders, etc. on a national level
- You can’t afford a sales force of your own.
- You’re tired of packing books in your garage.
- You’d like to give your program more national credibility in the industry.
- To access the experience of professionals with an investment in your success
- You want to spend your time on acquisitions, editorial, production, and publicity, not sales, fulfillment and credit & collections.

Once you decide that master distribution is for you, be sure to shop around and speak with several different companies. If you’re fortunate, you’ll have several distributors interested in your program and you’ll be able to compare contracts and services. This gives you the chance to choose the best fit for you, and possibly negotiate your terms.

However, if you’re still quite small and just starting out, getting a distributor to offer you a contract can be challenging. Make sure your submission to them follows their guidelines, is professional, and shows that you have an understanding of the business. It’s a lot like a job interview. Here are the questions I ask when reviewing a submission to Biblio from a prospective publisher:

- Did the publisher fill out the application completely and send in a complete submission as requested?
- Is the cover letter respectful, informative and concise?
- Does the book have an EAN barcode on it and a printed U.S. price?
- Is the price reasonable and competitive? (My #1 reason for rejecting a submission is when the answer to this question is NO.)
- Is the cover design competitive for the category?
- Do they have a clear marketing and publicity plan?
- Do they understand that promotion is the publisher’s responsibility?
- Is it POD? (We don’t accept POD books—the chains won’t buy them.)
- Is it perfect bound? (We don’t accept spiral bindings or books without a spine.)
- Is this a book I would be comfortable selling to my buyers (Ingram, B&T, B&N, Borders)?
- Is this a book I can ask my reps to sell to their buyers? (Credibility is all-important in our business.)

Make sure you do your research before signing a distribution contract. Get references. Ask questions. Understand the distributor’s schedule and requirements. Don’t sign a contract just because it’s the only offer you received. There are lots of places to get more information about particular distributors—regional publishing and writing associations, consultants like Brian Jud, Dan Poynter, John Kremer, industry publications, your existing accounts, printers, and other independent publishers. Signing a contract with a

master distributor is one of the most important decisions you'll make when it comes to your publishing business, so take it very, very seriously.

--Jen Linck
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www.bibliodistribution.com