

Publishing Nonfiction In Your Spare Time

Chapter 5

Creating the Covers

People say, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” They’re wrong! That is exactly how books are judged by everyone from the distributor to the bookstore buyer to the patron. It’s the wrapping by which the package is judged. You have about eight seconds to convince them to reach for your book and look at it. What will make that happen? Your cover!

When a distributor considers your book for a listing, what do they want to see? Chapters? No! They want to see the cover. The cover of your book is the biggest advertising tool you have. It can cause a bad book to sell or make a good book fail. If you want your book to sell, you’re going to need a great cover to make that happen.

Let’s begin with the type of book you want to produce. Your choices are many and varied. To begin with there is the classic hardcover book which printers refer to as case bound. Not all printers do case bound books. There are several approaches to this type of binding. Classically, the book covers had fabric stretched over heavy cardboard. The title was then printed or embossed onto the cover. Variations on this include paper instead of fabric, and printed paper on boards. With case bound books you also have a dust jacket that allows for special design elements, as well as the flaps that can hold more information about the book. The main problem with the case bound book is that it is a very labor intensive process and therefore expensive. However, as technology increases its role in how we produce these books, I suspect this price will drop and this option will become more accessible for the small independent publisher.

The greatest number of books published today, however,

Do It Yourself

are softcover or paperbacks. They can have a variety of spine treatments, but the one that is used most is the perfect binding. The advantage of the perfect binding is it allows the book to have a printed spine, so the title is visible even when the spine is facing out on the shelf. The other advantage is that it is easy to design and easy for printers to produce.

There are other spine choices. The spiral binding is often used in books that must lie flat, such as a workbook. It does not allow space for the title to be printed. Some printers are working with cover flaps that incorporate the look of a perfect binding and the utility of the spiral. Another binding is the plastic comb binding. This has the advantage of allowing the book to lie flat on the table, but if the printer wants, the title can be imprinted directly onto the comb before it is attached. This is a cheap way to do a small trial run of the book.

So, how do you get a dynamite cover? One way is to hire a fantastic cover designer who really knows how to create covers that sell. This can run you from five hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on the project. Why spend the money? Well, it doesn't matter how well your book is written or how timely the topic - without a great cover, no one will find it on the shelf to read.

Finding a great cover designer is not a matter of calling your cousin who took some art class in high school, or the lady who did the cute picture of your dog. Cover designers, especially the good ones, know how to take your concept and make it sell. They interpret your subject into a graphic that not only catches the eye, but expresses the essence of the book in such a stunning way that people will grab it off the shelf and open it. The rest is up to you.

Where do you find great designers? Literary Market Place has lists of them, and you can check online sites such as the Independent Book Publishers Association. You can Google the internet for book designers and check out their work. Always see their

Publishing Nonfiction In Your Spare Time

work first. Once you have narrowed it down to a few, talk to them about the project. Don't just go with the cheapest. This is a case where you often get what you pay for. Pick the one who has the talent you like and who you feel will listen to your input. Creating a great cover requires the combined inspiration from the author and the designer.

In a large publishing house, the author may not have an idea what the cover will look like till the book is on the shelf. As a self-publisher, it's your job. Either hire it out or do it yourself. This is not a case of paying a fee and saying, "Design me a cover." The designer must know what you want. What is the size of the book? Will it be hardbound or a trade paperback? What is the mood of the book? Who is the reader? What is the book about? It is your job to see that all these questions are answered in detail. The more the designer understands, the more likely you are to get what you want. Just throwing money at the project isn't going to guarantee success.

If you have good design sense and are on a tight budget, you can design it yourself. You know your subject best. Sometimes, a simple cover is what is needed. It can also be very dramatic. You've got the passion for your subject—just think visually.

Have you noticed how many books have covers that say nothing in their design? Some are just bands of color with the title lettered across. If it's a text book or a reference work that people will be compelled to read, this might do; however, if you're writing a trade book, you need more.

Does a picture form in your mind when you think of your subject? The saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words," comes into play here. If your subject is visual, the cover has become a lot easier.

When I decided to write a series of knitting books with portraits of certain breeds of dogs, I knew that my cover was obvious. I needed someone wearing a sweater with the dog design

Do It Yourself

knit on it, and a dog of that breed sitting next to them. So with more than forty years in showing dogs as experience, I went to my friends and found people to model the sweaters and the dogs to go with them.

I have many years experience doing dog portrait photography. So it wasn't hard for me to get a picture that worked. I shot between eighty or one hundred photos, which gave me choice. Even when you think that you've taken your best shot, keep shooting. You might find that in what you thought was your best shot, the person was frowning or they had blinked or that the dog's ears weren't alerting, and instead of looking majestic, he had a 'dumb dog' expression. Film is cheap, and doing the shoot with a good digital camera is even cheaper. Remember, you have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find the prince.

You need a 'TA DA' photo. For me it was obvious. Make a list of possibilities, then grab your camera and shoot. Print out your best and stand back to judge. Narrow it down to just a few and then go over them carefully, making sure there are no flaws. Ask people for their favorite, but remember the choice and responsibility is yours.

What if you are not a photographer, but you still want to do your own cover with a simple photograph? Well, there are options. Thanks to the internet, you have access to hundred and hundreds of photographers.

There are stock photo sites that have copyright free photos depicting almost any concept. It might well be worth taking an evening or two to wander through stock photo sites. If your topic is computers, simply type in computers or choose it from the list of topics. Up will pop page after page of thumbnail size photos of computers in every conceivable situation. If, in scrolling through, you find one that would make a perfect cover, look it over and see if there will be enough room to have your title on top of your photo or, as I did with my knitting books, simply put it in a frame on the page.

Publishing Nonfiction In Your Spare Time

When working with stock photos you will be using someone else's work and credit must be given. It may be copyright free, but it is not credit free. Also, this person went to the trouble of taking this beautiful photo that will sell your book, so he deserves to be paid whatever the photo costs. But a stock photo will cost much less than having a cover designer create the same quality photo for you.

Be aware that the stock photographer makes a living by selling and reselling the same photo many, many times. The shot on the cover of your book might appear in a magazine advertising Yahoo or Pepsi. It is yours to use once. You pay to use it, but you don't own it. The photographer can sell that same shot hundreds of times and everyone else is free to use it as well. If it is important to you that your cover be unique, you might want to go either with a designer, pay a photographer, or take the photo yourself.

Next comes the title. Give it a hook. If you will be doing a series, make sure it will work with all the books. The "*Chicken Soup*" series did it, as well as the "Idiot's" series. Try to make it catchy.

My series, *The Crafty Dog Knits*, had the breed's name being substituted for the word 'dog' in each book. The title shows the general idea, and the subtitle *Knitting Projects for Dog Lovers*, explains it. This approach works. Since it's a series, each cover is laid out exactly the same way. The font is the same. The wording only changes with the name of the breed. I designed each cover with a photo of a person wearing a sweater with a portrait of the breed on it with a dog of that breed sitting next to the model. This is surrounded by a band of white that contains the title and author wording. Finally, I placed around that a wide band of color. The style of each cover is exactly the same. The only changes being the subject of the photograph and the color of the outer band. The repetition works to identify the series.

There are over one hundred and fifty breeds so I could be

Do It Yourself

doing these books forever. Will I change the look? No way. When something works—don't mess with it. What I have is a series that's recognized in knit shops, at dog shows, or online. People recognize the cover from across the room, and they will know exactly what they're getting.

All you have to do is create a cover that reflects your subject, demonstrates your quality, and catches the eye. "Piece of cake," you say. However, if you don't think you can manage it, go to plan B and hire a designer. If you get a fantastic cover that attracts buyers, it's money well spent.

Once you have your photo and your cover design planned, you can begin to lay out a simple cover. You'll use your desktop publishing program. If the cover is going to be Perfect Bound, you'll do it all in one piece, with the back cover on the left, then the spine, and then the front cover on the right. With the spiral or comb bound book, the front and back covers are in separate files.

Let's assume you're laying out a Perfect Bound book. You will have checked with your printer's technical staff and found the exact measurement of the file. You've opened your desktop publishing program and you are ready to set it up.

To do this, go to 'File' and scroll down to 'Page Setup', click 'custom' and put the measurements you received from your printer into the appropriate boxes. Be sure that 'portrait mode' is checked.

When you go to the layout, it will be a horizontal rectangle. First you have to get rid of the automatic margins. To do this go to 'Arrange', and in the dropdown menu, click 'Layout Guides'. Now in the boxes, replace the 1" measurements with '0'. This removes the margins and lets you take your illustration right out to the edge of the cover. This background is the blank slate upon which you will create your cover. Let's start in the middle with the spine.

On the spine, the lettering should read from left to right,

Publishing Nonfiction In Your Spare Time

with the front cover facing up. To make this, create a text frame that is 1/2" high by 8.75" wide. Letter in your title, author and publisher in that order. Make sure it is well spaced. Now go to the dashboard and find the rotation icons and click 'Rotation Right'. This will turn your spine 90 degrees, and then all you do is center it on the layout.

It should be easy to read. Print out your spine, tape it to the wall, and then back up to the point where you can no longer read it. If it is less than ten feet, try to do something with your choice of typeface, or contrast between the background and the type so that the words jump out at you.

The front and back should have the same color theme. The front is where you work your layout magic that will catch and hold the interest of buyers. Use all your design expertise here. Test its readability the same as you did with the spine. Also, go to 'View' in the dashboard and choose the smallest sized reduction and look at it again. Remember, when it's selling on Amazon, the cover picture is about the size of a postage stamp so make it look good even when small.

Now for the back cover. This is where you sell the book. Where the front cover is the "eye candy" that gets the reader to take the book off the shelf, the back cover is the pitch, the ad, the motivator, the proposal, the offer, and the selling point that turns the person holding the book from a shopper to a buyer. How it is laid out, what it includes, and how it directs the buyer to open the book are all important elements. First, we'll deal with the "law of attraction" and how you are going to use it to grab your reader.

If you have used great photos inside your book to illustrate your work, you have probably done them in grayscale so that the printing price is reasonable. However, being smart, you saved all the pictures in full color as well in your graphics file. Now is the time to pull out one or two of the "Awwww!" pictures, the ones that grab the heart, and use them. More effective

Do It Yourself

than tons of copy, is to use bullet points from the table of contents. People scan covers, they don't read them.

If you've got testimonials, they go here. Having someone else, preferably famous, say you're great, is what sells books. Be sure to thank that person and send him a copy of the book when it is done. Don't make the cover crowded. "Less is More", so make every word work for you. The whole point is to leave potential customers wanting to learn more by buying your book.

The lower right corner of your back cover needs the barcode. When you're at Bowker getting the ISBN, go to Bowker Link and have them produce a bar code for you with the price coded as well. You then download this as a .JPG file and save it. As you lay out the back cover, just pull up that file and insert it.

Once you decide that the cover is perfect, you save it to your computer in the desktop program. Then, before you close it, you will convert it to a second file that will be a PDF.

When you load *Adobe Acrobat 8 Standard* software into your computer, it becomes a printer file. To create a PDF document, simply go to 'File' and 'Print'. One of your choices will be Adobe PDF. Click on this and it will take your cover and convert it to a PDF while retaining your original file. However, this file can be uploaded directly to your book printers FTP site and your cover will be printed directly from this file. Congratulations! The cover is complete and you were able to do it yourself.