

# How My Book Became A (Self-Published) Best Seller

*Updated Dec. 3, 2013 to include the latest statistics on the number of self-published books.*



Digital technology has made it possible for anyone to publish a book, and the number of self-published titles is exploding. In 2012 there were more than 391,000 self-published books, [according to Bowker](#), which provides the numeric book identifiers known as ISBN numbers—up from 133,036 in 2010. eBooks now make up 40% of the books that are self-published.

Still, turning a book into a successful commercial venture is far more challenging. For more than one year after self-publishing my book, [Estate Planning Smarts](#), promoting it was practically my full-time job.

I didn't take the decision to self-publish lightly. In fact, I turned down offers from two big publishers because I wasn't happy with the money they offered. McGraw-Hill's offer was missing a zero—and I told them so.

One from Bloomberg Press (which published my last book) was more than three times as much, but still pathetically low. We spent three months trying to negotiate a compromise that would give them print rights and allow me to retain electronic rights before the deal fell apart over contract wording. On Halloween of 2008, an auspicious day, I made the decision to self-publish.

The reason for publishers' low offers was that statistics show estate planning books don't sell well. I had a vision for a book that would prove them wrong, but the big companies would never have allocated the resources to produce it.

My business model involved going against the grain by spending money where big publishers are cutting corners: high-quality paper, two-color graphics, printing on a Web press, rather than print-on-demand. And while big publishers were cutting experienced staff, I retained top talent for editing and graphics, on a freelance basis. The goal was to produce a high-quality product that advisers would give to their clients and friends and family would share with each other.

To edit the book, I turned to [Joshua Mills](#), chairman of the journalism department at Baruch College who had edited many of my freelance articles for The New York Times. For design, I enlisted [Laura Zavetz](#), who had done layouts for more than 80 articles I had written for various Bloomberg publications. Her husband [Craig](#) deftly implemented Laura's highly creative vision and also designed [the book's Web site](#). He is the [Web master](#) who helps keep the book's site up-to-date.



*The author on press at Berryville Graphics. Photo: Wayne Kirn*

Wayne Kirn, the crackerjack production guy on my team, came highly recommended by Workman Publishing, where he had spent 25 years before recently retiring.

It was Wayne who accompanied me on the trip from New York to the printer in Berryville, Va., on Dec. 10, 2010, to oversee the printing of the book on a two-story Web press. He showed up with his camera, and when I asked why, he said, "You'll see." Now I do. The photo on the right is me climbing up the three-story press to watch my book being printed. (This self-publishing thing tends to attract micromanagers.)

About seven months later, I got an e-mail from Florrie Binford-Kichler, president of the Independent Book Publishers Association asking if she could interview me for an upcoming webcast on self-publishing success stories.

Huh?

It seemed that the program co-sponsor, Baker & Taylor, which wholesales my book, supplies all the big chains and 95% of the libraries in the country, had identified *Estate Planning Smarts* as a small press title in their database that had done phenomenally well. Florrie wanted to interview me about how I had done it.

The previous seven months, spent promoting my book, were a blur. I went back over e-mails sent to Laura and Josh to piece together what had happened. Josh had started calling these e-mails "The Jacobs Chronicles." One week after returning from the printer, I had sent him this note about what it was like to be an entrepreneur:

*At a time when our industry is going down in flames, this has been the best year of my work life. I have not only had a lot of fun, but have felt enormously challenged. I didn't plan it this way, or even hope or imagine that it would be like this. The euphoria that I have felt at times during the past 12 months defies all logic and intuition.*

*During the past week I've descended to a lower altitude. There have been a lot of practical, business-oriented details to attend to. For example, I monitored shipments of books to various places and worked with Laura's husband Craig on the e-commerce part of the book Web site.*

*Before that happened, I got my first telephone order and didn't know how to process the credit card. I have had to learn to use a handful of new web sites: Amazon's section for book sellers, the book wholesaler's, the bank credit card processor, and the shopping cart (which of course is not the same as the bank). Then I suddenly realized that my business accounting software doesn't include an inventory function, so how will I keep track of the 10,000 books that I printed and where they have gone? This weekend I must install an upgrade and learn how to use it.*

*More about getting the ducks in a row: 10,000 brochures were sent by bulk mail Wednesday to subscribers of *Trusts & Estates* magazine. Ken [my husband, who is a marketing consultant], who helped arrange the list rental, reminds me that this is just the kind of mail that generally goes directly into our recycling pile, and does not even get carried upstairs. Tomorrow an e-blast will be sent to 90,000 subscribers of *Financial Advisor* magazine (bartered a story for them in exchange for that and a full-page ad in the January issue). Jack [our son] is computer literate enough to point out that "people might just delete it without even reading it—just like you do." Next week 500 books not shipped elsewhere directly from the printer will arrive at our house (for the first two months the printer offered free storage of the others). At that point my Brooklyn brownstone will turn into Santa's workshop as I package courtesy copies for all the*

*sources who helped and people whose photos appear in the book. I will also send out review copies to those who have expressed an interest in seeing it.*

*Since 1998 when my last book was published, the world has changed dramatically. I'm much less dependent on the persnickety, sluggish mainstream press this time. In fact, the proliferation of online information may work in my favor in promoting the book. Those who wield the greatest influence and have been receptive to my pitch are various tax pros who run blogs and Steve Leimberg, whose estate planning e-mail newsletter goes to 35,000 subscribers.*

*So (block that metaphor) I am on an emotional roller coaster. Where it will take me is a great big question mark. But it is an exciting journey into the vast unknown.*

As background for my interview with Florrie, I recounted these steps and others, elaborated upon here to reflect subsequent events:

**Display at trade shows.** Shortly after I began writing the book but one year before it was published, I was thinking about the possibility of displaying it at the Heckerling Institute on Estate Planning, the annual Super Bowl on the subject. So as part of my due diligence I walked through the exhibitor's hall to see how other books had been showcased. At the Brentmark Software booth the company's vice president Jane Schuck intercepted me, and after hearing what I was up to, gave me some great career advice. "If your book succeeds, there will be people who try to cut you off at the knees," she said. "Get ready for it."

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and business relationship with Jane and her daughter Nicole Maholtz, who works with her. They have featured *Estate Planning Smarts* in their booth at numerous professional conferences and tirelessly promoted it to the community of lawyers and financial advisers.

Our first conference together was the month after *Estate Planning Smarts* was published. I was proudly standing in the Brentmark booth when a lawyer who I didn't know came up to me and said "What are you trying to do—put us out of business?" Then another lawyer, who was speaking at the conference came by and said: "Who's going to buy this thing, anyway?" What a low moment!

I thought I had kept a poker face, but maybe not. It was a struggle to get myself out of bed and back to the conference the next morning. When I arrived at the booth that day, Jane took my hand and said: "Remember what I told you."

By the following year, *Estate Planning Smarts* had been embraced by a wide audience of consumers, lawyers, accountants, fundraisers and financial advisers. We knew they were using it to:

1. Provide clients background before a meeting
2. Reinforce their own recommendations afterwards
3. Reduce the time they must spend with clients who are sensitive about fees

4. Provide an independent perspective about controversial subjects, such as the pitfalls of do-it-yourself documents
5. Facilitate family meetings
6. Suggest next steps, referring to the action-oriented To-Do lists at the end of each chapter
7. Serve as continuing education course materials
8. Educate colleagues who are less familiar with the subject
9. Prepare for the Certified Financial Planner exam
10. Enrich law school courses they teach. Both full-time and adjunct faculty have adopted *Estate Planning Smarts* as an “uncasebook,” leaving more class time for experiential learning

**Write articles.** In my e-mail, I told Florrie: “Have written a gazillion (or so it seems) free articles for various publications and Web sites. This has been very hard to swallow since I am a writer and rely on getting paid for my work, but an online presence has been crucial to my efforts.”

Update: What I didn’t know at the time was that it would lead to a full-time job as an editor at FORBES, where I have been happily employed for the past two years. So it turned out to be a better investment than I could ever imagine.

**Garner media reviews.** I sent many review copies to members of the press. Most went into the slush pile. But I hit pay dirt with one sent to Glenn Ruffenach, who edits a retirement supplement to The Wall Street Journal. I had taken his copy editing course at Columbia Journalism School in 1987. (Since it was Saturdays at 9:00 a.m. I am probably most memorable to him, if at all, as the student who always showed up on time and stayed awake.) In an e-mail titled “Hello from a former student” I reminded him of this fact and told him about *Estate Planning Smarts*.

Four months later, The Journal reviewed my book, calling it “a terrific guide for people who are just beginning to grapple with estate planning, as well as those who have (or think they have) their affairs in order.” The next day, *Estate Planning Smarts* became an Amazon bestseller, ranking #62 in the top 100 books. Although its rank has fluctuated since then, it is now in the third edition and has consistently remained a bestseller in its category.

After I explained my strategy to Florrie during a telephone interview, she said I was a “poster child” for the upcoming Webcast. When I listened to the program, I found myself in some unexpected company. One slide showed that my book was #4 of the top 10 small press bestsellers wholesaled by Baker & Taylor in the period of the study. That put *Estate Planning Smarts* ahead of a book with a far sexier title. No. 10 on the list was *Oral Sex Is the New Goodnight Kiss*.

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