

I've been asked to jumpstart this discussion by considering the questions, why and how a publisher might outsource fulfillment services.

First why. When day-to-day order fulfillment gets in the way of editing, publishing and marketing your books, it's time to outsource. When you feel overwhelmed by the details, it's time to outsource. If the skill set of you and your staff doesn't include aptitude for the nitty-gritty details of fulfillment and warehousing, it's time to outsource. When you're tired of the seemingly endless demands of major jobbers, chains and online retailers, it's time to outsource. Or when you look around and wonder if you really need the warehouse space you're paying for, it's time to outsource.

So ask yourselves these questions:

Is my time, and that of my staff, better spent pursuing new publishing projects or processing and packing orders?

Is our time better spent creating and implementing marketing plans and creating product ads?

Is our time better spent selling?

How much does warehouse space cost us? Are we using it efficiently? Is our fulfillment staff busy all day, every day?

Do we really understand what drives the demands of the major jobbers and retailers?

Do I simply want more free time to enjoy the fruits of my labors?

From the answers to these questions, you can decide if it's time to consider outsourcing.

How to go about outsourcing? There are so many things to consider: cost; what services you want; location of the fulfillment center; flexibility of fulfillment center; personal compatibility; software; fulfillment and publishing expertise; mail order expertise; technical support; ease of communication.

To jumpstart the discussion, here is a general list of services you should ask about:

- order entry
- web interface
- banking
- credit/collection
- physical plant
- speed of order processing/shipping
- back end sales/inventory/cash/service reporting
- phones
- relationship with carriers

As special note about phone service. It can be costly because of the unpredictable nature of phone calls. Remember too that generally you can tell your customers about your product better than a fulfillment center can.

Simple questionnaire Intrepid Group uses:

Interested in:

- Pick/pack warehousing and fulfillment
- Complete order processing

Number of active titles currently inventoried

Number of title published past 12 months

Estimated number of items to store

Estimated value of inventory stored

Estimated number units shipped per year

Estimated number orders shipped per year

Average retail dollar value per order

Average physical size of your titles

Additional comment: