

## Three Short-Run/Print-on-Demand Suppliers: Compared and Contrasted

I've recently self-published my novel [City of Masks](#), and in the course of doing so I dealt with three different print-on-demand or short-run publishers: [CreateSpace](#), [Lulu](#) and [Zenith](#) (also trading as [PublishMe](#)). Here's a summary of my experiences.

### 1. *The History*

I initially was going to publish only with CreateSpace. I chose them because they offered a direct, free way to get into Amazon's catalogue (Amazon owns CreateSpace).

However, I then compared the quantity discounts available from CreateSpace versus Lulu. I needed a number of books for purposes such as legal deposit, review copies and giving to people who'd helped me with critique of the draft, plus hopefully a few to [sell locally](#). The discounts from Lulu start at a lower number (26 instead of 50) and are considerably more generous, so I decided to put the book on Lulu as well. The royalties from Lulu are also very slightly better for a book that is priced the same, but there isn't much in it and I wouldn't have gone to the extra trouble just for that reason (see The Pricing Compared, below).

At this point I discovered that I had (completely arbitrarily) picked a size for my book on CreateSpace that Lulu doesn't offer, so I had to change the page size and margins in [Lyx](#), the typesetting program I was using, and create a new file – fairly simple to do, fortunately. I also had to re-do the cover, but I would have had to do this anyway since Lulu and CreateSpace have different requirements for cover files – Lulu has a larger trim area.

Unfortunately, I didn't realize that shipping 50 books from the USA to New Zealand is incredibly expensive, about \$5 US a book for my fairly thin volume. I didn't realize this because there is no way to discover it on Lulu's site until you have completely set up your book and go to order 50 books to be shipped. (Except now there is a way to discover it – I'm telling you.) Not a problem in the US, UK or Europe, since Lulu prints in all three of those locations and ships locally, but if you live outside Europe and North America, an important consideration. If I'd known this upfront I wouldn't have bothered with Lulu at all.

I had an [unsatisfactory conversation with a Lulu representative](#) about the shipping – not her fault, really, she knew nothing but what was in her manual, but it was frustrating, and pointless. Once I had researched and found (with some difficulty, because of the lack of the information that she couldn't or wouldn't give me) that the vast sum they were asking was the real cost of shipping from USA to NZ, I realized that I needed to go local.

I had been in touch with Zenith previously – they wear a number of hats, including a conventional publishing house, and I had offered them another book of mine, which they had declined. I was reluctant to go with them for POD (short-run, really; I don't think they do true POD) basically because they don't have their prices on their website – something I've mentioned both to their managing director, at the time of my original contact, and to their sales person at the time that I contacted them for a quote. Since they also don't have their print specs or any templates on the website, it's hard to answer one of the questions which they ask when you request a quote – how many pages is your book?

Because I had, by this point, set the book for printing through CreateSpace, I now had an answer. This answer turned out to be wrong, because everything is bigger in the US, including paper, and I ended up having to re-page the book to fit inside the smaller A4-based size that Zenith quoted me for. They wore the cost of the extra pages, which was nice of them, but wouldn't have been necessary if they made more information available on their website. That's what a website is *for*.

## **2. The Websites Compared**

Which leads me to the websites. I'll compare them, and the other factors I'm comparing, in descending order of how happy I was.

### **1. CreateSpace**

[CreateSpace](#) stands first in the website comparison because it is just very easy and straightforward. You go through a simple wizard-style process of specifying your book, uploading your files, and approving your proof. The FAQ is easy to find and easy to follow, and there wasn't anything that I wanted to know that wasn't covered. They have a simple and straightforward pricing section. My only gripe: I didn't get an email to tell me that my book was up on Amazon. I had got emails to tell me every status change that I made myself, but nothing to tell me this actually quite important status change that was made by someone else.

### **2. Lulu**

One factor in the comparative simplicity of CreateSpace's website is, I think, that they offer fewer options than Lulu. Another is probably that they are more recently established; [Lulu's website](#) has the feel of something that has evolved into more and more complexity as they add functionality. It could do with a good boil-down and reorganization to make it easier to find information and go through the process. Again, it has a wizard-style interface which differs from CreateSpace's mainly in detail (Lulu has more of it). One nice feature, though: it automatically checks your cover dimensions and tells you straight away if you get it wrong (I did, having confused points and pixels). CreateSpace has a manual check, which obviously delays production.

### **4. Zenith**

[Zenith's website](#) stands fourth out of the three as far as I am concerned. It has very little information and is little more than a sales brochure. There is no pricing, there are no templates or size guides, there is no online functionality for processing your book or uploading files, and the FAQ is very general and high-level. It compares extremely poorly with the (obviously much larger) US companies.

## **3. The Process Compared**

The process is closely linked to the website for CreateSpace and Lulu, much less so for Zenith, obviously.

### **1. CreateSpace**

It was a tricky call between Lulu and CreateSpace for top spot on the process assessment. It really comes down to a matter of opinion: is it better to require a proof to be sent out and approved by the author/publisher, or not? If you think yes (and I tend to), then CreateSpace wins. It adds time to the process, but because they did, in

fact, mess up my job (not once but twice, and I'll talk about that more below), it was an important step.

## **2. Lulu**

Lulu suggests, but doesn't require, that you order a proof copy before making the book available for sale. This makes the process quicker but potentially more error-prone.

## **3. Zenith**

Again, Zenith is the nadir as far as process is concerned. Because of the lack of functionality on their website, the process consists largely of emailing their sales guy. He is very helpful (see Customer Service below), but there was at least one process problem which more website functionality would have avoided: I got delayed by two weeks because he never received my email with the PDF for the cover, and I didn't realize this until I hadn't heard from him for some time. I had to burn it to disk and mail it in the end, which is a bit 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

## **4. *The Shipping Speed Compared***

### **1. CreateSpace**

CreateSpace shipped my books quickly, in just a few days. Their production turnaround is obviously a lot faster. The problem was that the first proof they sent me was wrong, so from order to *correct* proof was longer than for Lulu. Their manual checking of files introduces at least a day's delay between submitting the file and ordering the proof, but they printed and shipped the same day I ordered.

### **2. Lulu**

Lulu were slower in printing the book than CreateSpace and so it took longer to reach me. From order to shipping took 5 days (including two weekend days).

### **3. Zenith**

Zenith's printing process is considerably slower than either of the US printers; it took a couple of weeks before my books arrived.

## **5. *The Features and Benefits Compared***

### **1. CreateSpace**

CreateSpace stands first for features and benefits for three reasons.

1. You can easily and straightforwardly use your own ISBN number.
2. By ticking one box, you automatically and at no extra cost go into Amazon's catalog. Lulu charges (quite a lot) for this service and there are restrictions around it; as a publisher with my own ISBN I can't get distribution outside Lulu, at the time of writing.
3. The website and process are just simpler overall, as mentioned above.

Another feature important to me, at least, is that CreateSpace also enables you to publish multi-disk audiobooks.

## **2. Lulu**

Lulu has good features and benefits, but CreateSpace is just a little better for my purposes.

## **3. Zenith**

Zenith has, obviously, fewer features than the larger US publishers. The primary benefit from my viewpoint is that they are local, and so I'm not paying a fortune for shipping. They're friendly and helpful to deal with, too.

## **6. The Customer Service Compared**

When using any service, it's important to look at what happens when things go wrong – because they will. How easy is it to get in touch with someone who will actually help you?

### **1. Zenith**

Zenith stands a clear first in customer service – not only because they're in the same timezone as me, either. With Zenith you are in direct, frequent contact with a real, named person, the same one all the time, who is friendly and helpful within the limits of what is possible for a small company.

### **2. Lulu**

Lulu and CreateSpace both gave me customer services issues, but because I got more direct access to Lulu I rate them higher. Their chat-based help with a named person is more responsive than CreateSpace's system (described below). Even though I didn't get the help I asked for from them, their actual help system is superior, in my experience.

### **3. CreateSpace**

To get help from CreateSpace, you log a call from a form on their website. The emails you get are not from a named person and you can't respond to them directly; you have to log another call from the same form, referencing the number you've been given. This is the least direct customer support of the three companies. The other reason I rate them lowest for customer support is that I had the same problem twice, and saw no evidence that they had kept or consulted any records of the first solution, either when printing the second proof or when resolving the same issue for the second time. I got the same sequence of emails each time, at about the same spacing, even though when logging the second issue I mentioned the first and said "please do whatever you did then to fix it". (They also never told me why the problem had occurred or what they did to fix it.)

The problem, incidentally, was that the ligatures – *ff*, *fl* etc – and the apostrophes had all dropped out of my book during printing, even though I was using a very common font and the widely-used Lyx typesetting program. This was the only print fault I had from any of the three suppliers.

Because of the requirement to get a new proof each time, I actually went through four proofs because of one minor change made to my book – two incorrect and two correct. This obviously took time, though they didn't charge me for the replacement proofs (as they shouldn't when it was their error).

## 7. The Pricing Compared

### 1. Lulu

Lulu offers, by a little, the best pricing of the three suppliers. Their discounts are larger, start at the 26<sup>th</sup> book and grow rapidly. However, this doesn't do me much good because the price of shipping books in bulk to where I am is so large. Not a problem for North American and European publishers, but a problem for the rest of the world.

The Lulu pricing (at the time of publishing my book) was calculated on a base cost of \$4.53, a per-page cost of \$0.02 and a royalty of 20% of the *profit* (the difference between your base cost + page cost and what you sell the book at).

### 2. CreateSpace

CreateSpace's pricing, for single books, is pretty much comparable to Lulu's; only a few cents in it, for my book at least (see the table below). They calculate the pricing differently: a lower base cost (\$3.15 versus \$4.53), the same per-page cost, but a royalty of 20% of the *total* sale price. Amazon takes an additional 10%.

Since I had my book printed, CreateSpace has introduced a premium pricing model which has greater upfront charges but, if you are confident of selling a number of books, is to your advantage because they charge a lower royalty, both in their own online store and on Amazon.

The following table shows the pricing for my book, which has 128 pages. I'm selling it at \$10. Figures obviously will vary for longer books or if you charge more. The difference in profit becomes a lot more marked at higher volumes, because of the greater discounts Lulu offers.

| For                    | Base cost | Page cost | Unit cost | Left from \$10 | Profit per unit |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|-----------------|
| CreateSpace            | 3.15      | 2.56      | 5.71      | 4.29           | 2.29            |
| Lulu                   | 4.53      | 2.56      | 7.09      | 2.91           | 2.33            |
| Lulu, 50 copies        |           |           | 6.03      | 3.97           | 3.18            |
| CreateSpace, 50 copies |           |           | 5.14      | 4.86           | 2.86            |

### 3. Zenith

Zenith's per-book cost, leaving aside postage but converting the currency, is greater than either of the large American companies. The reasons, I assume, include economies of scale, the need to import equipment and the New Zealand government's 12.5% sales tax on everything. It's still not bad, though, and compares favourably with the other New Zealand short-run printers I looked at – who show their prices on their website, a practice Zenith needs to adopt. I'm sure it would increase their business.

I can't tell you about their quantity breaks and discounts because that information isn't available to me.

## 8. What I'll Do Differently Next Time

Next time I will start by setting my book at the size that Zenith handles (A5, basically). I will then set it up on CreateSpace, without putting it in their store, and get some proof copies to distribute to friends for critique. I'll revise the book in line with the critiques, and finally publish it more or less simultaneously through CreateSpace

(for Amazon access and US sales) and Zenith (for local sales). I won't bother with Lulu; any price advantage they possess is wiped out by shipping, something which won't be true for people in countries where Lulu is local.

If that's you, I'd suggest you go with Lulu as well for bulk production (and in order to have another outlet). Pick a book size that both CreateSpace and Lulu print, like 6" x 9", to save having to re-set the interior as well as the covers.

Another possibility to consider is [LightningSource](#). They do a lot less hand-holding than Lulu or CreateSpace (you need to know what you're doing), and they charge setup fees, but their pricing for bulk is better and their catalogue access fees – not just to get into online outlets but for other major distributors – are cheaper than Lulu's. I would use them if I was reasonably confident of selling 100 or more books and commercial distribution was important to me.

## **9. Summary: *The Good and the Bad***

### **1. CreateSpace**

Overall, the best.

**Good:** Simple website. Free access to Amazon. Easy to use my own ISBN.

**Bad:** Printing fault. Customer service at arm's length, and showing no evidence of learning from earlier errors and preventing their recurrence.

### **2. Zenith**

Second for me, as a New Zealand publisher; outside New Zealand the picture will be different.

**Good:** Highly responsive, helpful and friendly customer service. Local printer means minimal freight charges.

**Bad:** Almost useless website making the process very manual. More expensive per unit.

### **3. Lulu**

Depending on your requirements, may be the best option.

**Good:** Excellent quantity discounts. Fast to set up a book for production.

**Bad:** High shipping costs outside Europe and North America. Website more complicated than CreateSpace. More difficult to use your own ISBN. More expensive to get access to Amazon.