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Q: Should authors try to sell their books in bulk? Who handles this at the publishing house?

Selling large quantities of books at a specially negotiated price is called Special Sales. Large publishing houses have Special Sales departments. Smaller houses may handle it through their marketing department.

Unless you or your agent have contracted to retain rights for you to sell to a specific market, you should start by talking with the person in charge of special sales at your publishing house.

If the idea you have is to sell to a cataloger, corporation, association, specialty store, or other outlet the publisher already deals with, the publisher may ask you to provide them with information you have that would help make a sale. If you want to pursue a lead in areas the publisher does not cover, you can discuss who should make the contact and how far you should take negotiations.

Bantam Doubleday Dell is very aggressive about Special Sales. BDD's Director of Sales for Special Markets Janet Cooke, who heads the 10-person department, recommends authors start by writing to the special sales manager at their publishing house and outlining marketing ideas. These can be the names and addresses of contacts you'd like the publisher to consider making, or ways that you would like to supplement the publisher's special sales activities.

If you don't get a response, wait a few weeks, then recontact the publisher to find out if they plan to act on your ideas. If not, ask what you can do.

The publisher may ask you to contact the vendor to see if there's interest, then turn over negotiations to the Special Sales Department, or you may be told other ways to proceed. Bantam Doubleday Dell has arranged for a number of children's book authors to be set up as distributors. They buy their books at a wholesaler's discount and then resell the books in bulk at a profit. "This has been an excellent arrangement for both Bantam Doubleday Dell and the authors," Ms. Cooke said. "We profit from having experts on the subject selling quantities of the books, and the authors get more money than they would have received through royalties."

Authors should know, however, that in this kind of an arrangement they are subject to the same rules as any distributor. They must pass a credit check, adhere to a payment schedule, and handle returns. BDD does outline the process for authors who do want to set up a distributorship. This is also an idea that is not widespread, so other publishers may not be able to work in this way.

This is not an area where books will sell themselves with a good storyline or attractive art. You must identify an aspect of the book that is uniquely targeted to a specific market. One author made inroads selling horse stories to stores at racetracks, another sold a book on AIDS to Planned Parenthood. Cookbooks can be sold to gourmet stores and food companies who might use them in special promotions. Gardening books can be sold to catalogue companies, nurseries, or could be of interest for packaging with children's garden tools.

With the right angle, you may find an opportunity to carve out a niche market. 8:9/93