

How to Distribute and Sell a CD

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“It has never been easier to create high-quality music and get it out to a larger audience than ever before.” If you’re an artist, you’ve probably read or heard something like this about a dozen times before. Yeah, OK, so... how do you do it? With the veritable explosion of musician-oriented services over the last 10 years, the number of options are dizzying and intimidating - not to mention many of them are [less than reputable](#).

This guide is intended to walk you through the process of turning finished music into a tangible (or virtual) product. Feel free to ask questions, post your own experiences, or add other comments at the bottom!

Step 1: The Music

Contrary to what you might have heard from various music industry “professionals”, the most important component of any music product is the music itself. Unless you have tens of thousands of dollars burning a hole in your pocket and access to the best promoters around, you can’t make up for bad music after the fact. Make absolutely sure that all the tracks you intend to put on your album are completely finished and polished before you even think about moving on.

From a technical perspective, here are the important things to consider:

- * **Consistency across all tracks in terms of volume** - both AVERAGE and PEAK. Average volume refers to how loud a song is perceived to be overall, rather than at any given point, whereas peak volume is the absolute maximum level the music hits. Whether you elect to master your own music or have someone else do it, make sure that the listener doesn’t need to touch their volume knob at any point. The peak volume should never exceed slightly under 0.0db. If you normalize everything to 0.0db, some playback systems may ‘clip’ the sound, so normalize to a hair less than that.
- * **Duration of silence within each track.** Ideally there should be virtually no silence at the beginning of any song, unless you’re doing some sort of very quiet, ambient, or meditative piece. Silence or an excessive fade-in means the listener may adjust their volume knob because they think the music is too quiet. You also don’t want more than a second or two of complete silence at the end of any song (eg. after a fadeout.)

* **Meta information or tags.** For any sort of MP3-only release, make absolutely sure all of your songs are tagged consistently and completely: track name, artist name, album title, copyright, genre, URL, etc. Even for a CD release, make sure your CD has “CD Text” (most burning applications can do this) indicating album and artist name. Individual tracks should have consistent naming with the album artwork.

***Gracenote CDDB information.** This is related to the above point. The [Gracenote CD Database](#) (CDDB) contains information on a vast number of musical albums, and anyone can submit to it using applications like iTunes or Winamp. CDDB is what tells your internet-enabled player what you’re listening to when you put a CD in your computer, so if you want people to import MP3s that don’t say “Untitled Track 1”, you want to be in the CDDB. Just check the help file of your preferred player - Winamp or iTunes - for how to submit.

Step 2: Manufacturing

Thanks to the Internet, this step is optional. Read on only if you want to have a physical release of your album; if not, skip to step three.

Chances are, manufacturing is the biggest expense you’ll incur in the CD creation and release process, unless you booked outside studio time or plan on hiring a promoter of some kind. The rule of thumb is that the more CDs you print up at once, the cheaper the cost will be on a per-CD basis. In other words, it’s a lot more cost efficient to get 500 copies than 100, and even more efficient to get 1000 than 500. Of course, the risk is that if you only get 100 sales after printing up 500 CDs, you may have lost money; if you had just printed 100, you might not have turned as much of a profit on a per-CD basis, but you would have made back your initial investment.

Thus, the first thing to consider in the manufacturing process is **how many CDs you think you will sell**. If this is your first album release and you have a small or non-existent fan base outside of friends and family, start with a “short run” of 100 copies. It really doesn’t make sense to print any less than that from a profit perspective. If you actively tour or play live shows, and/or you intend on really pushing the promotion and marketing of the album, it’s worth going for a run of 1,000. You’ll make back your initial investment within the first 180-200 sales, meaning the rest can be used for promotional purposes, prizes, and pure profit.

The next consideration is **how the albums will actually be manufactured**. There are essentially two options; doing it yourself, or paying for a printer to do it for you. The former option is very rarely worth it unless you plan on doing a lot of releases on your own, and are willing to shell out for specialized gear. It’s not a simple matter of buying CD-Rs and sticking some art on top; if you want your

product to look professional, you'll need a specialized, high-quality printer plus accompanying ink to not only print for the disc itself, but for the album art and liner notes. In my opinion, this is really not worth it, considering how cheap it is to print at a dedicated disc press.

My sole recommendation for a disc manufacturer is [Discmakers](#). These guys are the industry leaders for a very good reason - great prices, great service, and great promotional deals. If you're doing a few hundred copies or less, head to their [Short-Run Duplication](#) section, select the physical configuration you want (eg. black and white vs. color disc printing, slim case vs. full-size jewel case, shrink wrap or none) and get a quote right there.

Remember to change the production time to "Standard - 5 Days" to save money. If you're confused about some of the other options, here's a rundown:

- * **Disc Type:** For musical CDs, you want "CD". The "CD - No Content" option is if you are going to burn it yourself (why bother? this doesn't save any money, and just wastes your time.)
- * **Case Options:** The standard jewel case is "Clear Standard Case" here. A "Slim Case" has no room for art on the back, but is a lot cheaper - you might want this if your album is only being distributed to friends and family, or if it's an EP. A "Paper Sleeve" is the cheapest option yet, but if you're doing this, you might as well be burning the CDs yourself! Lastly, a "Jacket" is a very green type of packaging, made out of mostly cardboard/paper, and it doesn't look half-bad either.
- * **Insert Options:** 2-panel vs. 4-panel refers to the insert which you see on the front of the case. The front side is always the album art, while the back side is what you see on the left when you open up the case. Use the 4-panel option if you want a little booklet that opens up; great if you have lots of lyrics to print. A "Tray Card" is what you see on the back side of the case, which extends to the spine of the case.
- * **Disc Surface:** Pretty self-explanatory, but the "Full Color" option is usually preferable unless you're OK with a very minimal on-CD design.
- * **Add-Ons:** The "Bar Code" option is not necessary if you plan on using CD Baby to distribute your CD (which I highly recommend.) If you're not using CD Baby, then pick it up.
- * **Prepress Preview:** If you've never printed a CD before, or you're worried your art might be difficult to print, this is a good option to make sure that your art will come out properly.

* **Poly Wrap:** Standard shrink wrap. Why not? Having shrink wrap looks professional, and it prevents new copies from being scratched.

If you're NOT doing a short-run order, then you need to go to the [Replication](#) section. Whereas short-runs are produced by CD burning, replication is a lengthier and more costly process involving a glass master. This is the real, fully professional deal that is well-worth the money if you're serious about your release - not to mention you get more packaging options, such as Digipaks and larger panel inserts. Replication is considerably cheaper than short-run duplication on a per-CD basis. If this is what you want, Discmakers' customer service can walk you through the process - we won't go into it for the purposes of this guide.

Step 3: Digital Distribution

Depending on the genre you're working in, digital distribution (such as iTunes, Napster, Amazon MP3) could account for the majority of your sales. On the other hand, it could also be a tiny fraction. Luckily, obtaining digital distribution requires no upfront investment, so even if you only get one sale on iTunes a year, there's no downside whatsoever to having it!

Once again, I have a sole recommendation in this area: [CD Baby](#). These guys are the undisputed champions of independent music distribution, paying out tens of millions of dollars to artists per year. To set up an account, go to www.cdbaby.net. Once you have one, you can create an album item and fill out tons of details such as price and amount of digital distribution. Note that CD Baby also does physical distribution, which we'll get to a little later. For now, you'll want to make sure you have all of your song information on hand, as well as your bio and other personal information.

Once you have filled out all necessary information on your CD Baby edit album page, they'll need your music and art. If you **ONLY** want digital distribution, just burn a CD-R with your music **exactly as you want it to be heard** and mail it to them. Then, email them a 300-DPI, high resolution (1000×1000) TIFF file of your cover art. If you're doing physical distribution, they'll want five copies of your physical CD (not burned) - that's all. You'll need to pay a small album setup fee as well as a barcode fee, both of which add up to a mere \$55.

Within a few weeks, CD Baby will put your music on a vast range of digital retailers all over the world. They also put it on their own website, which is nice because you can set the price here. None of this costs you anything; CD Baby will take 9% per sale, but that's all.

Wait! What about this Tunecore thing?

[TuneCore](#) is a competitor to CD Baby that acts as a digital 'aggregator'. They don't set up an album page for you, or sell your music on their own site. Rather, they'll put you on digital retailers for an

up-front fee and a yearly maintenance fee. They don't take a cut of each sale, which some people think is very attractive. However, I think that for most independent artists, the small fees will actually nickel and dime you for more than CD Baby's 9% cut unless you're selling a LOT of music (relatively speaking.) Here's an example:

Let's say you're releasing your first CD, which has twelve songs on it. You want it to be distributed on iTunes in the U.S., Canada, U.K., Japan, and Australia, as well as Rhapsody. TuneCore will charge you \$11.88 in song setup fees and \$5.94 in store setup fees, for a total of \$17.82. They'll also provide your barcode for free. OK, not bad so far, compared to the \$55 setup fee at CD Baby. Let's say you sell 200 songs in the first year - CD Baby might receive an average of 70c per sale, of which they'll take 6.3 cents. Thus, they've taken an additional \$12.60. However, TuneCore charges \$19.98 in album storage fees per year, bringing the TuneCore total to \$37.80 and CD Baby to \$67.60.

But wait, wasn't I just saying how CD Baby is a better deal? Well, maybe not in year one. However, remember that you'll get charged that \$19.98 from TuneCore in each subsequent year, *per album*. For CD Baby to take \$19.98 per year, you'd need to sell 317 songs from that album per year. Start selling any less, and TuneCore's fees will catch up to you quickly. The thing is, these fees are cumulative! Imagine if you had five albums. You'd be paying \$99.90 in annual fees per year at TuneCore. For CD Baby to equal that from the 9% cut, you'd need to sell 1,585 tracks a year.

With TuneCore, you're also losing out on the digital distribution present on CD Baby's site, which (from my experience) is fairly lucrative. CD Baby is the #1 independent music retailer in the world, meaning people that want to hear fresh new music will often head there first. It's highly unlikely anyone will be searching for you on iTunes if you're an unknown, but CD Baby has a lot of fancy search and browse options that enable people to stumble on your music even if you're completely new.

4. Physical Distribution

As mentioned earlier, CD Baby can take care of physical distribution for you very efficiently. You send them packages of CDs (you pay shipping) and they will handle everything else - receiving payment, shipping CDs to customers, and paying you. They take a flat \$4 cut per sale, which at first seems somewhat steep, but is actually a great deal compared to other online distributors like Amazon. As you start selling a greater volume, you can send them larger and larger quantities of CDs, which will save you the hassle of going to the post office more frequently.

There are, of course, other options which you can utilize at the same time. Amazon has something called the [Advantage program](#) which allows you to create a merchant account and sell items on the Amazon.com storefront. This is worth it primarily because, well, it's Amazon. Lots of people buy their CDs there that won't shop anywhere else. Additionally, you can post an editorial review or two, and customers can leave their own reviews. There are definitely downsides to Advantage, though - there's an

annual fee (which luckily gets taken out of sales) of about \$15-20, and they take a huge cut of 55% per sale.

Additionally, you don't just send them lots of CDs for them to keep in inventory, unless you're really moving a lot of product. They generally request just one or two at a time, which cuts into your profit margin even further. I generally would not recommend joining Advantage unless you are actively promoting your music, or you're getting played on terrestrial, satellite, or internet radio (including [Pandora](#)).

You can also try distributing the CDs yourself. [Jillian Goldin](#) is an example of an artist who does this quite successfully. In terms of profit, this method is unquestionably the best, but you must be prepared to get all the necessary materials to make it work as well as commit to a regular investment of time. Here's how to do it:

1. Set up a [PayPal](#) storefront on your website. Setting up a PayPal account is easy - you just need a bank account and credit card. Once you're verified, you can access the Merchant Services section to create simple HTML/JavaScript "Buy Now" button images. Throw these on your site, and when people click on them they will be taken to PayPal to pay for your CD. The customer does NOT need an account to pay, only a credit card. When the sale is complete, you'll receive the customer's address and the money is deposited in your own account.

2. Get packaging materials. Mailing envelopes or CD mailers are quite cheap these days, especially if you buy them in bulk. Self-sealing, padded CD envelopes (available through [Uline](#)) can be obtained for \$40 per 250 - a spectacular deal.

3. Print mailing labels. Another nifty feature of PayPal is the ability to actually pay for postage online and print labels that can be affixed to your package. All you have to do after this point is to drop them in a USPS mailbox. The only catch is that this sometimes doesn't work for international orders due to variable shipping costs, and for either international or domestic orders, you'll still need to go to the post office at least once to get the exact weight of the package WITH the CD in it. To access these features, browse to the Products & Services page on PayPal and look at Shipping Labels or Multi-Order Shipping.

So, an example order might go like this. The customer visits your site's store page and clicks on a PayPal "Buy Now" button that you placed. You receive an email informing you of the payment, go to PayPal.com and print out a shipping label. You get out one of your mailers, put a CD in, slap the mailing label on, and drop it in a mail box. If you decide to charge an additional \$1-2 for shipping and handling, you've basically kept the entire sale price of the CD for yourself. Not bad, eh?