

What Acquisition Editors Really Want

By Barbara McNichol

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Speakers who want to place their books with major publishers may have difficulty connecting with decision-makers—specifically acquisition editors—in the big houses. After all, editors review between 300 and 1500 submissions a year and select only a small percentage to publish. They're often too busy for phone calls.

So here's an opportunity to learn how five acquisition editors answered key questions you might ask them face to face.

Do you ever work directly with authors or always through a literary agent?

Laura Shepherd (Avery Publishing—an imprint of Penguin Putnam specializing in health-related topics) says her company works directly with non-agented authors for about 50% of new titles. "But it's much easier to work with literary agents because the proposals and manuscripts usually come to us in better shape."

Mary B. Good (Dearborn Trade Publishing, specializing in business, finance, real estate, entrepreneurial titles) works both with agents and directly with authors, though she finds the process goes smoother when first-time authors have an agent. "The key is an author's comfort level in negotiating contracts," she says.

Jennifer Enderlin of St. Martin's Press (pop-psychology, self-help, relationship topics) adamantly prefers working with agents; so do Lauren Marino of Broadway Books (business and general interest nonfiction) and Jackie Johnson of Walker & Company (history, science, self-help, children's, fiction).

Notes Lauren, "There are many reasons for working with agents. They negotiate the deal and can step in to represent the author during difficult parts of the process. This allows the author and editor to have an unsullied collaborative and creative relationship. Agents and editors have long-term working relationships, and come to understand one another's tastes and styles. Also, I don't read proposals from agents I've never heard of because doing so makes my job more difficult and time-consuming."

What criteria do you apply when evaluating a book proposal?

Editors want the proposal to include the following:

Author's Credentials and Platform

Lauren puts "author's credentials and platform" at the top of her list of criteria. "If I'm looking for a spiritual or self-help guru, I want to know he/she is out there building an audience, conducting workshops, speaking in all the right places." That's definitely a strength for active speakers.

Mary believes professional speakers who have established a large following bring a benefit other authors don't have. "However, I make sure the book is written for the

same audience the author already speaks to . . . and not a new group. So the proposal needs to reflect how many people are already being reached."

Adds Laura, "We love it when authors are already 'on the circuit.' The ability to find contacts and expand to bigger audiences is important to the sale of the book." That means the book proposal must include a comprehensive marketing strategy that shows how the author will attract a high volume of sales. While publishers take care of distributing the books, they want authors to get their own titles out in the world—creating appeal and name recognition that leads to sales.

Track Record

Says Lauren, "If you've self-published books that have sold well, that's going to help. If your last book bombed, it's going to hurt. First-time authors have an advantage in that they have a clean record."

Does having a track record mean editors look for a lot of writing experience? Jennifer says not necessarily. "An author's experience can range from none to tons. That part doesn't matter. What matters is: Can I sell this book?"

Mary believes having a book already can be a blessing or a curse. "If a current book hasn't done well in the marketplace, it's important to document the reasons with data. Then we ask, 'Through our company, can this new book do better?'"

"Be sure to present the sales figures for previous books, include copies of the reviews, and list media appearances or print interviews. If you've published articles on the subject, send only one or two of them," advises Jackie.

Competitive Elements

Doing extensive research before writing a book proposal is critical to the persuasion process. "You need to know what's already out there," says Jennifer. How? Scour bookshelves. Check online booksellers for available titles. Suggests Laura, "Subscribe to *Publisher's Weekly*, a magazine that talks about what's happening in the publishing industry. Online, check out <http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/lunch/free/>."

Advises Mary, "Your information needs to support market demand for your idea and highlight why readers would pick up this book. If there are no direct competitors, list current books on this topic that come closest to yours. Do not simply write 'there are no competitors.'" Says Lauren, "Even if there's no such thing as a fresh idea, you must take a great idea and express it with a new angle or with new research so it reads like it's fresh."

Additional Elements

"Make your proposal as comprehensive and specific as possible," advises Mary. Indeed, some speakers/authors spend far more time fine-tuning their proposals than writing their manuscripts.

In addition to spelling out the above elements, your proposal should include a brief description (content of the book and its intended market) and a three-paragraph summary of its purpose, approach, organization, and content. Be sure to mention why you wrote the book. Include any special editorial features (e.g., forms, case

studies, charts, photos, research references, etc.), an outline of the book (chapter names, subheads, brief explanations, appendices, glossaries, etc.), project status (e.g., length of manuscript, date to be completed) and a sample chapter that represents the heart of your work.

NSA members Michael Larsen and Jeff Herman have written excellent references for writing proposals: *How to Write A Book Proposal*, Michael Larsen, AAR (Writer's Digest Books) and *Write the Perfect Book Proposal*, Jeff Herman and Deborah M. Adams (John Wiley & Sons.)

Good Writing

This is key. In Lauren's words, "You would think this goes without saying, but you wouldn't believe some of the things I've had to read. If you're writing nonfiction as an expert but aren't a natural writer, hire a ghostwriter or freelance editor." Jennifer emphasizes that the book must have a clear, distinct voice and an entertaining tone.

Says Mary, "Make sure the proposal itself is well written. A proposal rarely comes in fully polished, yet it's the only tool I have to sell the concept to my team of decision-makers at Dearborn." She wants to see documentation that verifies facts and figures, as well as print and media clips so the team can get a sense for how to position your book in the media. "And when I read a proposal from a speaker, I need to see that the author recognizes and appreciates the difference between what works in the written word versus the spoken word," she cautions.

Bringing these points together, Jackie looks for answers to these questions: What is unique about the proposed book in the defined marketplace? How have similar books fared? What is the author's experience that documents expertise in writing about this topic? Has the author persuaded me there's a good market for the book? What is the author willing and able to do to promote the book—apart from the publisher's efforts?

What are some pet peeves about working with authors?

- Bypassing the publisher's marketing department by contacting producers and potential reviewers on your own.
- Getting too wedded to a title or cover concept. "Best to defer control on these issues to the expertise of the publisher," says Jackie.
- Unrealistic expectations. "It's a problem when authors complain about the publicity effort. They're disappointed if their books don't land on Oprah. But publicity can be slow going. If an author makes a name locally first, then regionally, it goes smoother for everyone involved. Developing on-line promotions helps, too," comments Laura. What can authors do in partnership with the publisher to have a top-selling book?
- Choose a slant that hasn't been "done to death."
- Stay in tune with manuscript deadlines, production and marketing schedules.
- Make yourself available and willing to seize publicity opportunities as they come along.
- Work synergistically with the marketing and sales team so we don't duplicate our efforts. Allow the publisher's marketing professionals to take the lead.

- Provide information that convinces booksellers to order your book in strong numbers. For a book about stargazing, for example, provide statistics showing a steady increase in telescope sales.
- Take time to understand the editor's point of view. Notes Lauren, "It takes years of reading submissions and watching what's working in the market, reading bestsellers, doing research and working with mentors to develop this taste (in acquiring books). Choosing books to acquire isn't purely arbitrary—cream will rise to the top." Even after years in this role, editors enjoy its rewards. In Lauren's words, "When I find something I feel excited about, I know right away. I become very alert, my eyes open wider, my heart beat accelerates." Is that your proposal she's reading?

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