YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO THE PUBLISHING PROCESS

HERE’S HOW IT WORKS, WHY YOU NEED TO KNOW AND HOW YOU CAN PLAY AN INFLUENTIAL ROLE IN YOUR BOOK’S SUCCESS.

By Jerry D. Simmons

It might sound like an unfair stereotype, but it’s true: Those of us who have worked in publishing can attest to the obvious fact that few first-time writers have the slightest idea of what goes on behind the scenes at their publishers. And it’s not because it’s top-secret information that agents and editors don’t want you to know. In fact, the opposite is true: Developing a basic understanding of the process with a realization of how you can impact the sale of your book is crucial to your success. If you dream of a career as a writer, the more knowledge you have about the marketplace and the publishing process, the better your chance of making your dreams come true.

There are two crucial parts to every writing career: The first is the writing and completion of your manuscript and preparing it for acquisition and publication, and the second is everything that goes along with the production, marketing, sale and distribution of your book. Knowing how all this comes together doesn’t just increase your odds of crafting a submission that will get you a deal—it also gives you a better chance of impacting the decisions that can make or break your book’s success.

Here’s how it works, why you need to know and how you can enter into a publishing agreement as an author with influence.

First Things First

Before getting into the specifics of how publishing works, you need
to start with the basics. And that means that even while you’re in the stages of completing or revising your manuscript, you need to make a habit of visiting your local bookstore regularly. Your goal: marketplace research. Browse the aisles, make observations and read similar books in the same broad genre as your own.

Pay special attention to the books in your section written by authors you don’t recognize. Notice how they’re packaged and priced. Take note of the cover design, jacket copy and sources of the endorsement blurbs—anything that went into the process of publishing what you see in front of you.

Bookstores are laboratories for marketing and selling books. Writing is a craft, but publishing is a business. To become a successful author you must develop a knowledge of that laboratory. Being able to intelligently discuss books and authors with professionals who make their living in publishing builds your credibility as a market-savvy author—especially if you can demonstrate an understanding of where your own book will fit in. Once you know exactly where your work belongs on the shelf, be sure that knowledge is reflected in the query or cover letter accompanying your submissions to agents or editors. It will increase your chances of getting one.

Acquisitions
Publishing is an extremely competitive business. Houses compete to sign the best manuscripts possible. The major houses, as a rule, do not accept unsolicited submissions. They rely on agents to supply them with a steady stream of publishable possibilities. Once an editor agrees to read a manuscript, it has passed a critical test. If the editor likes what she reads and thinks it’s a good fit for her list, she will then move forward with a proposal to acquire the book. But this doesn’t mean it’s a done deal.

Every publisher has an acquisition committee of editors, publishers and sales and marketing representatives dedicated to finding manuscripts that can, to put it bluntly, make the company money. There are three broad criteria publishers use to make these selections. The first is whether or not they feel the manuscript is well written and informative or entertaining. The second is whether or not they think it can secure a wide enough distribution to booksellers—and then attract enough consumers to generate sufficient revenue. The third is whether or not the author has a platform and is promotable. Each manuscript must meet all three criteria, almost without exception, to be seriously considered. Timing (and, let’s be honest, luck) also plays an important role: If your book is salable but the company recently acquired two similar titles, yours may get the
bump. Publishers go to great lengths to produce a well-rounded list of titles. Each imprint has a certain editorial expertise by genre, and the company is focused on producing a group of quality books that fill every category.

If your submission meets the committee’s approval after all of this has been considered, you’ll be offered a contract.

The Meeting
Consider for a moment that even once you’ve made it past the gatekeepers, your book is just one of hundreds—or even thousands—your publisher releases each year. The more you can separate yourself from all the other authors up front, the better chance you have of making an impact on the publication of your book. So once you sign the contract (after negotiations and the expert consult of your agent or another legal professional, of course), plan a trip to your publisher, set up a meeting with your editor and ask him to invite the appropriate parties of all the departments involved with the book. Whether or not this request is honored—and if so, who exactly attends—will speak volumes about where you are in the pecking order of other authors. For example, if it turns out to be just your editor, or a group of bright young “assistants,” you’re probably near the bottom of the list (along with almost all the other first-time authors). If that happens, don’t take it as a bad sign. Just understand where you rank in the grand scheme of things so you can set realistic expectations.

The moment that contract was signed, you lost rights and control over how your manuscript will be published. But if you develop solid relationships up front with the key people involved in making your manuscript a marketable book, you have a better chance of at least having your ideas heard. This meeting is your first and, arguably, most important chance to do that. (It may even be the only one you get.) So don’t skip this step. The secret to being effective: Base your comments on the realities of the marketplace, and acknowledge the time constraints these players have in balancing their work on your book among all the others. This is where all those visits to the bookstore begin to pay off.

Editorial
Today’s book industry is so competitive that most acquired manuscripts don’t require significant editorial overhauls. Those needing lots of attention—whether they’re riddled with technical errors or in need of heavy restructuring—rarely make it past the agent.

Today’s editors more often request minor rewrites or reworks and
otherwise polish the manuscripts they acquire. The secret to starting off right: Recognize that when an editor asks for editorial changes, you are under contract to rewrite and deliver on time. You are the author and always maintain your copyright, but ownership of your writing has transferred to your publisher, which is paying you for those rights and control. Similarly, when it comes to your book’s title, know that it could very well be changed, and it’s your publisher’s prerogative to do so.

Beyond the obvious editor/author relationship, every smart writer knows his editor is also his main contact (and advocate) for all things relating to the publication of his manuscript. Conduct yourself accordingly. Don’t come off as “needy,” but don’t neglect this relationship, either.

**Scheduling**

Once a title is scheduled for publication and a release month has been set, the work begins in earnest. The time from a book’s acquisition to the day it hits shelves is typically anywhere from one to two years. It depends on how timely your topic is, how many titles are under contract in your category and when your publisher thinks your book will have the greatest chance of success in the market.

Publishers meet often to discuss the seasonal schedule and position their titles to maximize sales potential. The biggest consideration is competition, both in-house and from other companies. Publishing competitive titles concurrently dilutes the sales potential of the entire list. This is another reason it’s essential to meet all your deadlines for rewrites, revisions and reviews: Failing to do so can endanger the carefully choreographed timing designed to maximize your book’s sales prospects.

**Numbers**

Publishers work from a set of numbers that is developed during that initial acquisition meeting. Upon agreeing to publish your manuscript, your publisher already knows the number of copies your book needs to sell to be profitable—for the house and for you. Profitability is the cornerstone of everything the company does with regard to publication, and it’s often referred to as the “budget number” for each book. This number is the basis of how much attention to detail your title receives. With limited time and resources to produce thousands of titles, the budget number is one way for publishers to prioritize.

Authors are rarely aware of their budget numbers, and questions directly relating to those numbers seldom receive a response. Again, that initial meeting with your editor or publishing team is the best indicator of where your book stands.
Production
Possibly the most overlooked and underappreciated part of the publication process is the work of the production department, which develops and designs the cover and interior of each book, along with coordinating the printing and binding of the finished products. Readers do in fact judge a book by its cover, and getting it right is something the largest publishers do extremely well.

Awareness of the production schedule for your book is important; knowing when each part of the design and layout process is coming helps you determine when it’s appropriate to ask any questions you might have—and to gently offer your own ideas while there’s still time for them to be taken into consideration. As long as you acknowledge your publisher’s control, you’re likely to find the house will be receptive to your input if it’s based on your keen sense of the market. Always make suggestions a few weeks in advance of the date the production schedule indicates each decision is being made. Don’t be overbearing and don’t be a pest. Make intelligent suggestions based on your knowledge of the need your book is filling in the marketplace, and you will be seen as an asset, not just another author looking to promote her own interests. Speak up too late, and there’s no turning back. Your publisher’s team is making all the decisions, remember; they bought the rights to your writing and can do what they want.

Marketing
There are three major components to book marketing: advertising, promotion and publicity. Advertising includes paid placements of a book in print or other media. Promotion is the creation of anything that draws attention to a book, from corrugated floor and shelf displays in bookstores to bookmark and T-shirt giveaways. Publicity is the art of generating print and media pieces about an author and her book. The key to selling copies at a high sell-through (meaning people actually buy the books off the shelves) in today’s marketplace is to generate lots of publicity. The key to effective publicity is to focus on the area that will generate the most sales for your book.

One quick caveat: The stronger your author platform already is, the better equipped you will be to assist in these efforts. Marketing is not something that starts or stops at any given time. Ideally, it’s an integral part of your writing career that begins long before you land a book deal and continues for as long as you call yourself a writer. (Editor’s Note: For more on this, visit writersdigest.com and see the May/June 2009 issue of Writer’s Digest, which focuses on author platforms and marketing.)
Successful marketing is all about creating the proper mixture of advertising, promotion and publicity within the assigned marketing budget to generate interest that results in sales. Don’t ask for things that are clearly outside the limits of your publisher’s budget. If something is missing from the plan and you offer to help, make sure you get your publisher’s approval, and be willing to work with each department to make it happen. Be prepared to invest your own money in these efforts eventually, but don’t offer to do it up front until you know exactly what your publisher plans to do. Then, partner with your publisher to promote your book, keeping them informed of your own efforts and listening carefully to their expertise so that together you can present a unified marketing plan. Publishers dislike authors going off on their own without consulting them or soliciting input. They also dislike authors who are singularly focused on the writing and want nothing to do with promotion. These are the two quickest ways to lose support, and you never, ever want your publisher to turn its back on your efforts.

Conference
Most major publishers separate their list of titles into seasons. The seasonal designation is significant to the bookseller and marketing staff because each season’s list is presented at one conference to the sales group. Members of this sales group then go and make seasonal presentations to book buyers at major chain and independent bookstore groups around the country.

Any changes that need to be made to your book should be completed prior to this conference. Afterward, you won’t have another opportunity to speak up about your cover, interior design, jacket copy, marketing plans or anything else. As soon as it’s over, your book is already on its way to being presented, sold and distributed to booksellers around the country.

The conference is a well-guarded place and publishers seldom allow authors to attend. If you’re invited, it’s a very big deal; make the most of it. If not, it can’t hurt to ask about attending a portion of the conference. On the off-chance your publisher says yes, it’s a great opportunity to meet people who have a tremendous impact on the success of your book. Observe, network and learn.

Sales
Once the sales representatives leave the conference, they immediately begin making appointments and presenting titles to the buyers for the big chain bookstores (like Barnes & Noble and Borders), and for suppli-
ers of independent ones (like Ingram and Baker & Taylor). Seasonal lists of titles are typically sold months in advance of publication, so most titles being presented are months from the actual publication and release date. This gives the publisher plenty of time to assess all orders, make adjustments as necessary and print the right number of copies for distribution to the marketplace.

Obviously, the books at the top of the list get the most orders. If your book is positioned low on the list, there’s a good chance the big chains will pass or give you a small order, which means you won’t find copies on all store shelves. Don’t get upset! A targeted distribution with a high sell-through trumps having your book placed inside every single store in the country. What makes distribution such a delicate dance is that books are always returnable to the publisher’s warehouse if bookstores can’t sell them. So while you want your book to be readily available to your audience, there’s also a danger in printing and distributing too many copies. Selling large quantities to booksellers without proper marketing support is tantamount to a low sell-through and a high rate of return, which can spell doom to a promising career. (Translation: If your first book isn’t profitable, your chances of publishing a second one are slim.) Be happy with what you get and work with your publisher to promote your book so you can sell those copies. Then the stores will have to order more!

**Distribution**

The most misunderstood and misconstrued term in the wide scope of publishing is distribution. For the largest trade publishers, selling and distribution go hand-in-hand. Proper distribution is not a simple listing of a title in the database of a large book outlet or mailing postcards to bookstores around the country.

Actual distribution begins with the process of sales presentations we’ve already discussed, coupled with skillfully matching booksellers with books that sell copies at a very low rate of return. Different genres—as well as the publishing formats of hardcover, trade and mass-market paperbacks—resonate with consumers who shop in specific locations. Distribution in the truest sense is matching the category, format and price to the right outlet in quantities that make sense for both the publisher and bookseller.

**On Sale**

The cycle is now complete: Books have been produced and distributed, copies are for sale online and on store shelves, and marketing plans are, with hope, bringing enough attention to particular titles that consumers
are buying books. It may seem daunting, but it's actually both repetitive and consistent. As an author, understanding how your book works its way through the process gives you a head start.

Never forget the fact that publishing is a business, your manuscript is a product and you, as the author, are a commodity. When you sign that contract, your manuscript is packaged, priced and sold to make money. Your publisher has acquired your work to profit from the sale of your writing. It’s not so much about great writing as it is about a good book that can generate revenue, and how much value you as an author and your writing bring to the company. As long as your writing is profitable and you continue to produce entertaining, informative manuscripts on schedule, you have a very good chance of maintaining a career as a writer.

Best of luck. [WD]

The 90/10 Rule
Because publishing is a business with limited time and resources, authors should be aware of the 90/10 rule. This states that approximately 90 percent of a publisher's revenue is generated from 10 percent of the titles it publishes.

Authors whose books fall within that lucky 10 percent range are generally established bestsellers. If you are one of the 90 percent of authors whose books generate the remaining 10 percent of the publisher's revenue, this only means you have to be proactive in understanding what goes on behind the scenes and how you can positively impact your book’s performance in the marketplace.

Sell-Through
Many authors think having a large print run for their book is important, when it fact it is not as important as sell-through. All books ordered by bookstore buyers are distributed on a returnable basis—for a full refund—if they don’t sell once they land on the shelves. Because of this, sell-through, or the percentage of those copies that actually sell and are not returned to the publisher, is the key to profitability.

For example, if a bookseller receives an order for 1,000 copies from the publisher and is able to sell only 600 copies to consumers, the remaining 400 are "returns." In this case the author's sell-through would be 60 percent. If 300 copies were returned, the sell-through would be 70 percent. So regardless of how many copies your publisher prints and distributes, the goal is to make sure that people buy the books, plain and
simple. Publishers set their print runs based on historical data and careful profit and loss calculations, so don’t read too much into yours (or bother questioning it). Just know that sell-through, also referred to as “percent of sale,” is the key to a successful career as a writer. The higher the sell-through, the more likely any writer will have a bright future as an author, regardless of the size of the initial print run.

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