



## **"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"**

### **Fourteen Attributes of Successful Book Acquisitions Editors**

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#### **Can Anyone Acquire New Books?**

Publishing a book starts with acquiring a title. And while many book publishing functions can be outsourced, for example, copyediting, design, marketing, publicity, and fulfillment, the one function that cannot be outsourced is the decision what to publish. Acquiring a new title sets the stage for everything else that happens in a book publishing enterprise. New book acquisitions are the lifeblood of a book company.

It is important to know and understand what skills and attributes are required for a successful acquisitions editor. Acquisitions are not for everyone. Book acquisitions requires curiosity, a passion for clear communication, and an honest interest in people. In my experience, there is a high washout rate in acquisitions, much higher than in sales, marketing and promotion, so when hiring an acquisitions editor, it is important to look for and recognize the skills needed for success.

Turnover in acquisitions is undesirable. Acquisitions editors possess historical knowledge about their topical area, books under contract and in development, author prospects, and published authors. Successful acquisitions editors build strong relationships with published authors. The fruits of these relationships are lost when there is turnover in acquisitions. Success in book acquisitions is based on one-on-one relationships. More about that later in this paper.

#### **Fourteen Attributes of Successful Acquisitions Editors**

What attributes should you look for in an acquisitions editor? Here are 14 critical attributes:

- Entrepreneurial Drive
- Initiative Taker
- Persuasive
- Marketplace Savvy
- Friendly and Enthusiastic
- Empathetic
- Strong Listening Skills
- Author Advocate
- Competitive

- Tenacious
- Organized
- Financial Acumen
- Decision-Oriented
- Patience

### Entrepreneurial Drive

Each book is a new business venture and no new book is a sure thing in the marketplace. Acquisitions editors must be risk-takers. Publishing houses, both commercial and non-profit associations, must ensure that all risks are minimized before allowing an acquisitions editor to sign a new book. If an acquisitions editor is habitually risk averse, that individual is in the wrong part of the book business.

### Initiative-Taker

Acquisitions editors must constantly search for new authors. Successful acquisitions editors are energetic and curious. Acquisitions are about making things happen and pursuing opportunities. A passive approach simply won't work.

### Persuasive

Publishing a book is a business arrangement between an author and the publishing house. Authors must be comfortable with the contract (publishing agreement) as the acquisitions editor must help the author understand the contract details and persuade him/her to sign it. This takes an individual who can marshal the facts in order to present the publisher's case in the best light. Likewise, publishing executives, sales, marketing, and publicity staff, all need to be persuaded to get behind a new book, as well. This is the job of the acquisitions editor.

### Marketplace Savvy

The acquisitions editor should understand how the author's book fits into the marketplace for similar books and how the company will market the book. Note the marketing department will sell and promote the book, however, the acquisitions editor can provide helpful suggestions along with the author.

### Friendly and Enthusiastic

Successful book publishing is about positive relationships with authors. Authors must feel positive about their acquisitions editor and their publisher. The acquisitions editor is the face of the publisher to the author.

### Empathetic

Empathy is vital. Acquisitions editors must listen sympathetically to their author's tales of woe, frustrations, and commentary of the company's shortcomings. Authors state their concerns to acquisitions editors about poor sales, lack of bookstore placement, inadequate publicity, etc. The acquisitions editor must listen be positive, and try and attempt to remedy the matter for the

author, and be able to fix things for his/her author. Listening openly and non-defensively is therapeutic.

### Strong Listening Skills

Acquisitions editors must carefully listen to author prospects to determine what is important to an author in the selection of a publisher. Once an author is published, it is the acquisitions editor's responsibility to listen as to what is important to an author in the ongoing author-publisher relationship.

### Author Advocate

Being an author advocate is a major responsibility of an acquisitions editor. Rarely does an author have a seat at the decision-making table after contracts are signed. Acquisitions editors must walk the fine line between representing the interest of the author and the interests of the publisher. This can be a tough task, but it can be done as I have done it many times. As a corollary to this, authors many times have excellent ideas about marketing their book or design and it is the responsibility of the acquisitions editor to bring these to the publisher's attention.

### Competitive

Competition is fierce in book publishing. Book publishers often find themselves in competition with other publishing companies for authors. Successful acquisitions editors want to win at discovering and signing the best manuscripts. An acquisitions editor **must** want to sign top-notch authors and see their published books outsell the competition.

### Tenacious

Signing authors to book contracts is hard, stressful work. Negotiating can be emotionally draining and tiring. The best acquisitions editors stick with it. They don't quit until the author is signed.

Publishing house executives can rebuff acquisitions editors as they vie for the company's finite resources to produce, publicize, and sell an author's book. As the author's advocate, the acquisitions editor must be tenacious in securing the required internal resources, such as production, marketing and promotion, to ensure the author's book has the best chance for success.

### Organized

Book publishing is about keeping track of many details. Acquisitions editors must manage many projects simultaneously. Their projects must be organized so that they can quickly determine what the important priorities are and where they can find important documents. Project management skills are a critical ingredient in successful book acquisitions.

### Financial Acumen

The acquisitions editor need not be a finance MBA or CPA but he/she must understand all the costs associated with each book. Likewise, the acquisitions editor must understand his/her

company's decision-making process and the rules for determining an acceptable return-on-investment. At the heart of financial considerations is that each book is a new business venture requiring the finite resources of the publisher. Advances, royalties, and the costs of production, printing, promotion, and publicity vary for each book. The acquisitions editor must perform the initial feasibility analysis by answering these questions, "Does this book fit into our editorial niche?" "Is publishing this book a solid investment decision for the company?"

### Decision-Oriented

Numerous decisions must be made in a short period. Page and cover design, promotion, and publicity plans need to be reviewed and approved. The acquisitions editor must be decisive. Procrastinators are ill-fitted for book acquisitions, as book publishing is a business fraught with deadlines and micro-decisions.

### Patience

Successful acquisitions editors take the long view. If one is looking for immediate professional gratification, then most likely acquisitions is not the book specialty to pursue. Minimally, it can take two years to publish that first book. Many false starts characterize the publishing process. Many approved book projects can fizzle in the sense they are never completed, or when manuscripts arrive the reviews indicate that more revisions are needed.

The end result is that the acquisitions editor must be patient and wait for the results of his/her efforts. The development of a leading series of books from signing contracts to books in hand, can take five or more years.

### **What I Like About Acquisitions**

Throughout my career, I have done acquisitions even when I was also in an executive role. First, I was either filling in for someone, or, second, trying to increase the number of books acquired. True, it was an extra work load, but I didn't mind. I like acquiring book projects.

The research and scouting appeal to me. I like conversing with potential authors. Book contracts can be a mystery to a neophyte author, but I like explaining contract details to author prospects. With a positive attitude, more often than not, my efforts would result in signed book contracts. And, I like the end part of the process, namely, after a sustained effort, producing a successful book.

### **Don't Neglect Networking for Successful Book Acquisitions**

If I could add one attribute to my list, I would add the ability to network. In a paper co-authored with Liz Novak of IAPD, "Networking Your Way to Success," - we wrote:

Networking, as we will use the term, is the human connection between people for their mutual benefit. Networking is based on the premise that anything good, beneficial, important, or life-changing in your professional life is based on your personal connections with the right people.

So, it is with book acquisitions, the stronger your networking, the more successful you will be in acquisitions. The more subject matter experts and author prospects listed in your file the better. Knowing friendly competitors to call to compare notes can be most helpful in figuring out the

market potential of a particular book. Of course, within your own company or with other publishing houses, knowing the right people in marketing and sales can be a career enhancer.

To learn more about networking, you may want to read the three papers available at my website, <https://bit.ly/2tE3Pjf>

- **N-1**, *Networking Tips and Techniques*, 2017, 5 pages (Co-author Liz Novak, IAPD)
- **N-2**, *Networking Your Way to Success*, 2016, 2 pages (Co-author Liz Novak, IAPD)
- **N-3**, *Networking: Using Social Media and Technology*, 2018, 8 pages (Co-author Liz Novak, IAPD)

## Changes in Book Acquisitions over the Years

Little has changed over the years in book acquisitions. Critical to success in book acquisitions is the human dimension and “emotional intelligence” of the acquisitions editor. Victor Van Beuren, Director of Book Publishing at the American Diabetes Association says it best:

What amazes me about book publishing is how little the necessary skills and attributes have changed in my over 30 plus years doing acquisitions. Sure, there are new delivery platforms and product, and new ways to parse and package content based on technological advances. But the basic of acquisitions are the same — curiosity and an honest interest in people. Probably our biggest change has been exchanging our Rolodex with iPhones to keep track of our contacts.

## McHugh Book Acquisitions Audit

Want to find out how your book acquisitions program is faring? Looking for ways to strengthen your presence in the book, and eBook, markets? How many signed books should be in the pipeline? When was the last time you reviewed your author agreement? Is your author's agreement dated? What questions should you ask to evaluate an acquisitions editor's performance? To get answers to these questions and many more call Jack McHugh to discuss with him a book acquisitions audit.

## About the Reviewers of this Paper

### Harvey Kane

Harvey Kane is a semiretired STM publishing executive, having worked for American Pharmacists Association, American Chemical Society, Springer, Academic Press, and CRC Press, now part of Taylor and Francis. Early in his career he worked for Macmillan Publishing Company and acquired college level textbooks in various fields. Harvey has collaborated with me on a variety of assignments. He is a top contributor to our LinkedIn™ group **Association and Nonprofit Publishing**.

In his career, Harvey has held these positions: Director, Book Publishing ACS; VP Publishing, American Pharmacists Association; Publisher, CRC Press; Consultant, American Home Builders Press, and Senior Editor at Humana and Springer. Harvey has published books,

journals, newsletters, e-books, and a free circulation newspaper. Lastly, Harvey has extensive experience in the electronic delivery of scientific information.

### **Victor Van Beuren**

I wish to thank long-time **McHugh Advisor**, Victor Van Beuren of the American Diabetes Association for his critical review of this paper. A scientist by training (geology), Vic has been actively involved in scholarly publishing for over 30 years. Having worked for both society and commercial publishers (e.g., American Association of Petroleum Geologists, American Diabetes Association, Springer-Verlag, Elsevier), he has direct experience in STM book publishing, journal and magazine management, and marketing to academicians and professional practitioners. Vic's specialties are: managing STM acquisitions, editorial production, and marketing to scholarly researchers.

### **Also of Interest:**

B-67, *An Experienced Textbook Author's Views on Acquisitions Editors*, 2019, 2 pages

<https://bit.ly/2tE3Pjf>

I-49, *Book Acquisitions: An Interview with Claire Reinburg, Director NSTA Press*, 2010

<https://bit.ly/2JpXCIE>

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