
Skills and Attributes of Successful Acquisitions Editors

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CAN ANYONE ACQUIRE NEW BOOKS?

In book publishing, each new book starts with acquisitions. And while many book publishing functions are outsourced including editing, design, marketing, publicity, and fulfillment, the one function that cannot be outsourced is acquisitions. Acquisitions set the stage for everything that subsequently happens in a book publishing enterprise and are the lifeblood of a book company.

It is important to understand what skills and attributes make a successful acquisitions editor. Acquisitions are not for everyone. Book acquisitions take a special passion and there is a high washout rate in acquisitions, much higher than in sales, marketing and promotion.

Turnover in acquisitions is undesirable. Acquisitions editors possess historical knowledge about 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.

12 ATTRIBUTES OF SUCCESSFUL ACQUISITIONS EDITORS

What attributes should you look for in an acquisitions editor? Here are 12 critical attributes:

- Entrepreneurial Drive
- Initiative-Taker
- Persuasive
- Sales-Oriented
- Friendly and Enthusiastic
- Empathetic
- Strong Listening Skills
- Competitive
- Tenacious
- Organized

- Analytical
- Decision-Oriented

Entrepreneurial Drive

Each book is a new business venture and no new book is a sure thing. Acquisitions editors must be risk-takers. The company must ensure that all risks are minimized before allowing an acquisitions editor to sign a new book. If an acquisitions editor is habitually risk-adverse, that individual is in the wrong part of the book business.

Initiative-Taker

Acquisitions editors must constantly reach out to author prospects. Successful acquisitions editors are energetic in their approach to the job. Acquisitions are about making things happen and pursuing opportunities. A passive approach will not make for successful acquisitions. Acquisitions editors must take the initiative in locating new authors and selling the company to author prospects.

Persuasive

Authors need to be convinced to sign contracts for a new book. 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 be persuaded to get behind a new book as well. This is the job of the acquisitions editor.

Sales-Oriented

Authors need to be "sold." Prospective authors are not buying a one-time service but what is a complex, life-time relationship. Sales skills also come heavily into play when the acquisitions editor must close the deal by motivating the prospect to sign the contract.

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 critique 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 fix things for her authors. 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 as they select 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.

Competitive

Book publishers find themselves in competition with other publishing companies for authors. Successful acquisitions editors want to win in competitive manuscript signing situations. An acquisitions editor must want to sign top-notch authors and see their published books outsell the competition to become the top-selling book in the field.

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.

Executives can rebuff acquisitions editors as they vie for the company's finite resources to produce the book, to publicize the book, and to promote an author's book. As the author's advocate, the acquisitions editor must be tenacious in securing the required internal resources to ensure the author's book has the best chance for success when it is published.

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.

Analytical

Each book is a new, unique business venture. Advances and royalties plus the production, printing, promotion, and publicity costs vary on each book as well. The acquisitions editor must perform the initial feasibility analysis by answering the question, "Is publishing this book a solid investment decision for the company?"

Decision-Oriented

Numerous decisions must be made in a short time. Book design, cover design, promotion, and publicity plans all 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.

TAKE THE LONG VIEW

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.

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

SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

Should an acquisitions editor possess knowledge of the publisher's subject matter? Ideally, yes. If you can find an individual who has knowledge of your company's editorial specialty—and possesses the 12 attributes listed above—you have found an excellent candidate.

LINE EDITING AND ACQUISITIONS ARE DIFFERENT

Line editing and acquisitions are entirely different functions. The only commonality is that both titles have the word “editor.” Acquisitions editors are proactive and market focused and should be forward-looking and aggressive. The professional skill package required for line editing and for acquisitions is entirely different. The line editor works directly with author in rewriting and editing the manuscript with the goal of improving the clarity and focus of the manuscript.

Clearly, these two different types of book editors should work together as a team, but the functions should be separated. Your company may have line editors who have the requisite attributes to move into acquisitions; many line editors do make a successful transition. But don't automatically assume one type of book editor can be successful as another type of book editor.

INTERVIEWING CANDIDATES

As you interview candidates for acquisitions positions look for these 12 attributes. Ask the candidate's references about these attributes that lead to success in acquisitions. Does the candidate possess these attributes? How do you feel after an interview with the candidate? Have other colleagues interviewed the candidate? How do they feel?

About John B. McHugh

Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers

John B. “Jack” McHugh is a 40-year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary's Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. Jack's specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, organizational design, and startups. He serves as an advisor to the Friends of Kletzsch Park in Glendale WI <http://goo.gl/6PhtU4>. Jack is the manager of two LinkedIn™ groups, Association and Nonprofit Publishing and The Self-Employment Forum.

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