



An Experienced Textbook Author's Views on Acquisitions Editors

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Rationale for This Interview

Much of what I have written over the years is from the publisher's perspective, which you would expect as I am paid to advise publishers. However, it is in the interest of the publisher to understand the author's viewpoint as the author is the critical component of the publishing mix. Stated another way, without loyal authors, you have no publishing enterprise.

For that reason, I thought it would be instructive to get the perspective of an experienced college textbook author, Gary Porter. He is the successful co-author of two leading accounting textbooks, now both in tenth editions. Over the years, Gary has worked with a number of acquisitions editors. I was his first acquisitions editor when he signed contracts many years ago. The following is a Q & A about Gary's expectations of his acquisitions editor.

JM-What qualities have been important to you in an acquisitions editor?

GP-The key to any successful business relationship is communication. Nowhere is this any more true than in the partnership between publisher and author. And, of course, for the author it starts with the acquisitions editor. The editor is responsible for clearly defining the publisher's goals for a book and its responsibilities as well as those of the author.

JM-What has frustrated you in working with acquisitions editors over the years?

GP-Again, communication is the driver for a successful relationship. And this means that the editor must communicate with not only the author but also other members of the team, whether those people are in production, marketing, sales or IT. The inability to operate as a team hampers the long-term success of a book project.

JM-What sort of orientation/training should a new acquisitions editor receive?

GP-Familiarity with the market is essential for a new acquisitions editor. Regardless of how formal or informal the training is, a new editor needs to understand what drives a particular segment of the market. For example, as I am an accounting textbook author, the editor should understand that how accounting books are developed, produced, marketed and sold is vastly different than for a text in the humanities. And in today's competitive market, the editor must absolutely understand how, and to what extent, technology has changed the landscape.

JM-How have you coped with the turnover of your acquisitions editors over the years?

Turnover is a fact of life in any business. How authors adapt to changes in their primary contact with the publisher will dramatically affect the success of new editions of a book. Understanding a new editor's personality and style help ensure a good working relationship.

JM-What has been your experience in working with book teams?

GP-A team approach is absolutely essential to the success of a book. No one is more qualified to explain to a salesperson what is important to an adopter than the author. The author can bridge the gap between the salesperson, who may cover many disciplines, and the faculty member who is totally immersed in his or her field. Another example is the working relationship between production and marketing. The marketing group may have specific ideas as to the image and message for a book and it is up to them to convey these to the designer.

JM-How has the position of acquisitions editor changed in the 30 plus years you have been an author?

GP-The traditional role of the acquisitions editor to seek out and sign new titles has become less important over the years. With consolidation in the textbook industry, editors have assumed much more the role of product managers. And, without question, technology has changed the responsibilities of the acquisitions editor. With the advent of course management systems, the editor must manage the relationship with not only the textbook author but with other contributors to a product.

JM-What advice would you have for a newly minted acquisitions editor?

GP-Ask questions. Talk to successful members of the sales force. Learn as much as you can from professors in the discipline. And keep open the lines of communication with your authors.

Also of Interest: Nine free papers on book publishing and 41 others on various aspects of publishing management. http://johnbmchugh.com/free_pub_guides.htm

John B. McHugh

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. He is a member of the ASAE Advisory Board for Publishing, Communications, and Media Issues and Practices.

Jack's specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, new ventures, organizational design, and social media strategy and policy. Mc Hugh is also the manager of the LinkedIn™ group, **Association and Nonprofit Publishing**.

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