



“Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers”

McHugh & Beacom’s 32 Book Acquisitions Tips

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“Content is King”

This slogan was much in vogue years ago when so much content, including books, was migrating from print to digital. These days, the quote is admittedly a shop-worn cliché, but it still rings true. And, to get down to fundamentals, we contend that the key to generating publication-worthy book content—however it ends up being delivered—is the acquisitions editor.

“New acquisitions are the lifeblood of any successful book business.” That’s how a long-ago boss of Jack’s characterized the driving force in every book publishing program. In just a few words, he made clear that the book publishing process can’t even start until the acquisitions editor has identified likely authors and acquired their prospective books—by signing contracts that commit those authors to delivering clearly-defined products, on a mutually-accepted schedule, and at a fair price. Without these essential first steps as a foundation, no book publishing enterprise has the slightest chance of success.

Then, just what is the job of an acquisitions editor? It boils down to this: Studying the market, scouting and identifying qualified authors, selling these authors on the benefits of publishing a book with the editor’s publisher, and then executing appropriate contracts. In the following sections, we provide 32 tips and suggestions that will improve your efficiency and effectiveness in acquiring books.

Eight Core Responsibilities of the Acquisitions Editor

- Research the market and the competition—learn what your potential readers care about, and become familiar with companies or groups currently serving those needs.
- Scout and locate author prospects—for associations, prominent member-volunteers (journal or magazine authors or reviewers, “star” conference presenters) often constitute the first and best place to look.
- Sell the author on your organization, as your direct access to the market is merely one advantage most professional associations have over commercial publishers.
- Negotiate a mutually beneficial contract with the author and get it signed in a timely manner.
- Develop the manuscript with the author, who is to be handled with unwavering respect; all while you keep both schedule and budget firmly in mind.
- Deliver the edited manuscript to production.
- Serve as the author’s liaison to marketing, production, and sales staff.

Three Reasons Why an Author Selects a Publisher

- The publisher’s reputation as a respected source in the field.

- The author's relationship with the acquisitions editor (is it characterized by mutual respect and trust?).
- The publisher's marketing prowess and reach.

Three Tips for Promoting Your Group or Company to an Author

- Answer this question: "What's in it for the author?" Stress the unique benefits that your organization brings.
- Think of authors as valuable clients and treat them accordingly.
- Share tales of previous successes that your group has achieved.

Five Items to Include in a Contract Signing Kit (essentially, a grown-up version of "Show and Tell")

- Catalogs and brochures
- Positive publicity about your group
- Favorable reviews of your books
- Contact information for satisfied authors willing to serve as references
- A sample marketing plan

Four Reasons Why Authors Write Books

- To share knowledge and make a contribution to the field
- To increase their professional stature and reputation
- Personal pride and sense of accomplishment
- To earn money (for most of your authors, this may well be the least powerful driver)

Four Tips for Dealing with Unsolicited Proposals

- Establish screening criteria for judging unsolicited proposals.
- Be decisive, don't dawdle—quickly opt to reject or consider.
- Develop a standard rejection letter outlining your company's editorial policies and practices.
- Log all rejected proposals in a database.

Five Key Metrics for Judging an Acquisitions Editor's Performance

- Number of contracts signed
- Number of manuscripts submitted to production (and rough relationship to original schedules)
- Number of books published annually
- Total sales, by units and dollars
- Average profitability

In the End: Successful Book Acquisitions Come Down to Strong Author Relationships

We started this paper with: "We contend that the key to generating publication-worthy book content is the acquisitions editor." Success in this realm depends *overwhelmingly* on the acquisitions editor developing strong relationships with authors, a connection consistently based on mutual respect and trust. Why is this so important?

Simply put: The author's only window to any publisher is the acquisitions editor, certainly until the book goes into production. In fact, the author and acquisitions editor are "birthing" partners in the complex undertaking of writing and publishing a book. All along, the author's in-house advocate is the acquisitions editor. And, throughout the publishing process, the author looks to the acquisitions editor for updates on the status of the book and for guidance on matters both small and large. Every item is vitally important to the author, especially for novice writers.

Acquisitions Advice Worth Following

In the **McHugh Expert Interview** with Claire Reinburg, Director of NSTA Press at the National Science Teachers Association (available at <https://tinyurl.com/y54mtufg>), we asked, "How do you ensure that your authors have a positive experience?" Claire's answer is one that all acquisitions editors should heed:

"I see the publication process as a collaborative venture where author, acquisitions editor, and manuscript editor refine an idea and shape a book's final outline and content. It's important to consider the author's point of view at every step, particularly when you are working through reviewer comments and suggestions about a manuscript. Every book idea and every manuscript can benefit from shaping and polishing. If you look at the publication process as a building project with different craft experts applying their talents, I've seen the result is most often a positive outcome."

Consider a McHugh/ Beacom Book Acquisitions Audit

Does your book acquisitions program need a tune-up? Revitalization? Are book sales slumping because of a lack of new product? To get advice on improving your book acquisitions program, consider a **McHugh/Beacom Book Acquisitions Audit**. A McHugh/Beacom Book Acquisitions Audit will exam every aspect of your group's program. Acquisitions metrics will be evaluated. Your acquisitions staff, freelance editors, subject-matter experts, and authors will be interviewed. You will then receive a thorough report addressing these questions:

- Are you optimizing your acquisitions performance, given the level of resources invested?
- What should be changed to improve acquisitions operations?
- How can you do the best possible job of commissioning and signing the authors you want?
- Is your editorial mission statement viable in today's publishing environment?
- In what other formats, beyond print, should you publish?
- How can acquisitions help you reach the next growth level?
- What role should technology play in an effective acquisitions program?
- Are the resources devoted to acquisitions sufficient to reach the next growth level?

Call either David Beacom or Jack McHugh to discuss your acquisitions needs—contact information below.

Also of interest, free at http://johnbmchugh.com/free_pub_guides.htm

- B-17, *How to Think About Author Advances: Six Tips*, 2014, 1 page
- B-18, *Fourteen Attributes of Successful Book Acquisitions Editors*, 2019, 4 pages
- B-67, *An Experienced Textbook Author's Views on Acquisitions Editors*, 2019, 2 pages
- B-74, *Book Publishing—A Key Part of Your Content Strategy*, Co-Author David Beacom, 2020, 2 pages

About the Authors

David Beacom

David Beacom is a long-time publishing executive, primarily in the nonprofit sector. For more than 15 years, Beacom served the National Science Teachers Association ([NSTA](#)) as Chief Content Officer (formerly Publisher) and Associate Executive Director. Under his leadership, NSTA evolved from a distributor of other providers' resources into a leading publisher of books and other content in its marketplace. (Book revenue alone rose from \$1M to \$6M.) Previously, Beacom spent two decades with the National Geographic Society, where he was long the lead creative and editorial voice in education—and where he effected a bottom-line turnaround of its school publishing group.

Beacom has contacts and resources across the industry. A few years back, he served as (elected) President of the Association of Educational Publishers (AEP) and, in that role, was part of the leadership team that negotiated AEP's merger with the then-AAP School Division. After the merger, he served on the AAP's Learning Group Executive Council, including one year as co-chair. David is now collaborating on consulting assignments with John B. McHugh.

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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***.

McHugh and Liz Novak, of IAPD, are co-authoring a series of papers on ***Networking Techniques***.

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