

Editors: Appreciate Your Authors and Contributors

By

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Characteristics of Successful Editors

A successful editor will possess several different types of characteristics. There are the “mechanical” traits, such as knowledge of grammar and punctuation, as well as project management skills. There are also softer, less obvious traits that make an editor successful. For example, it’s important to have an innate curiosity about people. Getting to know them, their expertise, and developing a rapport with them will help you when you need an article about a specific topic. If you’ve established a relationship and put your networking skills to work, you’ll build up your contacts of subject matter experts that you can call on when needed.

If you work with contributors who don’t typically write for their “day jobs,” additional soft skills come into play. You may need to provide a little more guidance up front than you typically might with an experienced author. You may also need to assign a deadline that will allow for a second draft if needed. Plus, you may have to step into the role of coach or mentor during the article development process.

Perhaps most importantly, a successful editor must keep communicating with contributors. This article provides a cautionary tale as well as tips for successful partnerships with your contributors.

Why Write?

Let’s look at the reasons people write for publications, so we can understand the authors’ motivation. In some cases, as in academia or medicine, publication is expected. Therefore,

there is pressure on the author to “publish or perish.” In other cases, the reason might be more pecuniary. For example, in Liz’s previous career as the editor of publications for software developers, most of the contributors were independent consultants. Writing articles for the flagship publications in their respective technologies was a way for them to show their expertise to the industry and, ultimately, build their consulting customer base.

Jack, on the other hand, when he has time, writes because he enjoys writing about non-publishing topics that interest him, such as career management, politics, his military service and public causes he supports. Unfortunately, he just had an experience that left him feeling unappreciated as an author, which we’re sharing to help editors understand the importance of communicating with their authors.

“I wrote an article for a quarterly newsletter published by a state advocacy group,” according to Jack. “The editor, a retired IT professional, was a volunteer and new to the world of publishing. I submitted my article in February 2022 and was surprised that it did not appear in the next issue — or the one after that. These two issues were mostly comprised of stories reprinted from national sources, as well as news about the sponsoring organization. My article would have added some original content to the editorial lineup.

“I wondered what was going on with my article. I wasn’t unhappy about the delay in being published, but I wanted to know the status of my article. As someone who has started two journals, published association trade magazines and journals, I understand the concept of having a healthy backlog of publishable articles in the pipeline. However, the silence from the editor felt like bad customer service to me.”

“From an author’s perspective, time can drag on interminably between submitting an article draft to finally seeing it published,” Liz said. “I’ve usually worked on bimonthly publications, so I try to set expectations with the contributors for each issue. It’s important that they understand the timeline involved, especially for a print publication. If they happen to submit their articles prior to our agreed upon deadline, I will let them know how much I appreciate their work, then remind them about the anticipated date the publication will be out.”

Authors Are Assets

Our experience is that authors are assets and an editor must consider the human element of publishing. We contend that authors’ good will and willingness to write articles on a gratis basis are critical to a periodical’s success. Based on our experience, we offer the following tips for showing appreciation and maintaining good will with your authors.

Six Tips for Maintaining Good Will with Authors

- Communicate, communicate, communicate. Keep authors informed about the status of their articles. If there is going to be a delay in publication, let them know right away.
- Respond promptly to authors’ queries.
- Be respectful in all communications, written and oral, with your authors.
- Reject an article as gently and diplomatically as possible. If the article can be salvaged, share your feedback with the author and ask if they would be interested in revising it. If the author has a positive experience, even if you can’t use their article, it will contribute to the PR for your publication.

- Think through all text messages and emails and their potential impact on authors. Sometimes a hasty message can be perceived as rude or insulting. Better yet, pick up the phone and call them, especially if you need to communicate a delay.
- Show your authors appreciation. Send your prolific authors an occasional hand-written note thanking them for their article. If you are producing a print publication and get advanced copies, consider sending a note with a hard copy of the publication and praise their work. Even if the author is on your regular mailing list, they will appreciate having an extra copy or two.

Editorial Pipeline

We write these suggestions keeping in mind the *editorial pipeline*. The editorial pipeline means you should maintain a backlog of at least two issues of publishable articles plus various features. Sometimes at least three issues are wise for a monthly periodical.

We also suggest that you have an editorial calendar posted on your website. As you work with authors who produce excellent articles and seem to enjoy the process, share that editorial calendar with them and suggest that they think about writing for future issues.

It's also helpful to understand what motivates your authors to write for your publications. In a perfect world, you'll have some anecdotes to share about how writing for you has helped an author in the past. For example, Liz shares these two stories from her career in tech publishing:

"One of my regular authors was interviewing for a consulting gig, and he was asked if he knew anything about the technology required for the work. The interviewer happened to have a copy of a recent issue of my magazine on his desk, featuring that person's article about that technology as the cover story. All my author had to do was point to the issue and say 'yes, I know something about that.'

"An author for a different publication wrote an excellent article about integrating a database with accounting software. Years after it was published, she was still getting inquiries from companies that wanted to hire her to do that work, because people were finding her via online searches."

The bottom line is that if you can share stories like this, you can help build a healthy editorial pipeline.

Dealing with Difficult Authors

You will have authors who will challenge your patience and aggravate you. Don't ever respond in kind. It's your job to get along with difficult authors. If someone rubs you the wrong way, step back and take a day to cool off. Then call or write a polite note explaining the situation and how it can be resolved. Sometimes this approach will cause a cantankerous author to become an ally. In some cases, the problem might be a simple misunderstanding. In other cases, it might help to explain how their approach is causing problems.

For example, part of Liz's process is to send a PDF proof of an article after it is edited and formatted for her hard copy magazine. She asks authors to send any corrections based on that PDF. One author consistently sent a new Word document, which was causing her to edit and lay it out again. Once she explained to the author how much extra work that was causing, he started calling her to talk through his changes.

The Bottom Line

You need authors willing to write for you more than they need you. Your reputation as a fair, competent editor is invaluable in achieving career success. Key to that reputation is even-headed communication with your authors.

As an editor, your authors' good will and willingness to write for you is your most important asset. Don't take your authors for granted or ever treat them badly. Maintaining your authors' and contributors' goodwill is one of the most important aspects of your job. Plus, if you do your job well, your authors will excel in their jobs. That's a win-win for everyone.

Also of Interest, free at Jack McHugh's website

- A-12, *Is There a Job for You in Association Publishing?* Co-author David Beacom, 2020, 5 pages <https://tinyurl.com/24samxrd>
- B-18, *Fourteen Attributes of Successful Book Acquisitions Editors*, 2019, 4 pages <https://tinyurl.com/2synv5yc>
- B-67, *An Experienced Textbook Author's Views on Acquisitions Editors*, 2019, 2 pages <https://tinyurl.com/2z348f5r>
- B-78, McHugh & Beacom's 32 Book Acquisitions Tips, 2020, 4 pages <https://tinyurl.com/yc4dz3y5>

McHugh and Liz Novak, of IAPD, have also co-authored 11 articles on career management and networking available free at http://www.johnbmchugh.com/career_management.htm

About the Authors

Liz Novak, MBA, CAE

Liz Novak has held various roles with the International Association of Plastics Distribution (IAPD) since joining the organization in 2011. She is currently the Director of Advocacy and Publications/Deputy Executive Director. She is responsible for IAPD's government relations initiatives and political action committee, the editorial content for IAPD's publications and assists her CEO with responsibilities related to IAPD's Board of Directors and Executive Committee. During her tenure at IAPD, she served as Marketing Director for seven years before promoting her protégé to the role. Liz holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Loyola University of Chicago and an MBA from the Pennsylvania State University Smeal College of Business. She earned her CAE in 2018.

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About 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

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