

Find a Publisher for Your Nonfiction Book

Report # 107

I am a book editor who also writes a column called “Ask the Book Doctor” for about a dozen periodicals and Websites. I ask for questions from writers, and I address those questions in my columns. Sometimes the questions are so broad an entire book has been written on the subject, as was the question I received recently, “How can I find a publisher for my nonfiction book?”

Here’s my answer:

Whew! A simple question, but a tall order! Research is key to the process, though, and after that, follow-through is essential. Here’s how I found a publisher for my own nonfiction book, though.

Originally I had a New York agent for my book on creative writing. I felt smug that she would find a publisher. After she took my book proposal to three major publishers where she had contacts, one nibbled and put my book in “the serious consideration pile.” Within weeks America was struck by terrorists on September 11, the market stopped dead, the publisher said it was not making any decisions until the beginning of the new year, and my agent dropped me.

I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and set out on my own to find a publisher, and I succeeded. Although it’s not one of the big-name publishers, it is a well-established New York publisher with the right contacts and distribution, and I’m pleased with the way I’ve been treated.

How did I find a publisher? I followed these steps:

1. I set goals. I needed to know what I wanted to achieve, before I could begin. I decided my goal was to get my book distributed nationally, so I could help writers. I did not expect to retire on the sale of my first book, so a major advance was not essential, and good distribution was important. I had a price range in mind that I would like as an advance, but I knew I would be flexible on the price, because getting the book in bookstores was more important to me than getting a large advance. Sometimes top dollar is not the most important part of a goal, especially if your unrealistic demands kill the deal.
2. I had already written a killer book proposal following Michael Larson’s book, *How to Write a Book Proposal*, so I needed only to find some good companies that published my type of book.
3. I got feedback and editing help on the book proposal and sample chapters. I used my peers in a critique circle and a professional editor. Yes, even an editor cannot edit her own work; we are all too close to our work to see our mistakes.

4. I revised the proposal based on the feedback I received. I did not make every change everyone suggested; I followed my gut feelings about how I wanted my book to be.
5. I went to two large bookstores to see what books were available in the same category as mine. This essential step also ensured that no books exactly like mine were on the shelves, but enough were in my category to indicate a strong market for my type of book. I wrote down the title, author and publisher of each book in my category (reference/writing). I also wrote down the selling price of the book, on the chance that I might later decide to self-publish.
6. I subscribed to WritersMarket.com for a few dollars a month. Yes, other sources list similar or the same information (*Literary Market Place* and *Writers Market*, for example), but the online service is updated more regularly than a printed book and is infinitely more user friendly.
7. I looked up all the book publishers interested in my category. If submission guidelines were not listed on the WritersMarket.com site, I went to the publisher's Websites to get the information.
8. I listed the book publishers I planned to approach first, the ones whose books I had found in the bookstores. I located each publisher's guidelines and wrote them down, so I could follow them to the letter. Some of the publishers were not listed with WritersMarket.com, but all had Web sites, and most had submission guidelines on them.
9. Out of the publishers I had selected (those that had released books that fit my category), I first approached the publishers that accepted unagented works and multiple submissions. I temporarily set aside those that required an agent or that did not accept multiple submissions.
10. I prepared appropriate packages, carefully following each publisher's guidelines. Some publishers wanted a full book proposal and sample chapters. Some wanted only an outline and cover letter. Some wanted the table of contents and my bio. One wanted only an e-mail query. I made sure to follow each publisher's guidelines to a T and always enclosed that vital SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope), whenever I mailed anything by snail mail.
11. I individualized each cover letter. If I did not know which acquisitions editor handled books in my category, I called to find out, before addressing the cover letter. In the cover letter I listed the books and authors that publisher had released in my category, which showed I had done my homework.

12. I stored the information and listings on the publishers that did not accept multiple submissions, figuring I would approach them one at a time if I received negative responses from all of the first line of publishers.
13. I also kept the information and listings of the publishers that accepted submissions only through an agent, figuring my former agent or another one could use that information, should I try to go the agency route again.
14. I tracked the dates I sent out each query and when I heard a response. Interestingly, three or four never responded at all.

My approach worked. I received several nibbles, e-mails and phone calls from interested publishers. I chose the best publisher of the lot, in my opinion, and we negotiated an arrangement that made both my publisher and me happy.

Setting goals and handling negotiations are also large subjects worthy of future articles.

In the meantime, if you write anything, from business letters to books, or if you write creative fiction or nonfiction, you'll benefit from reading my book, *Write in Style*, released by Union Square Publishing, an imprint of Cardoza Publishing of New York, and distributed by Simon & Schuster. It's available in bookstores and from dozens of online retailers, and you can get it through my Web site at Amazon.com discount prices.

I did my research and followed guidelines, and I found a publisher. If your book is worthy and you follow all the right steps, you can sell your book, too.

-- Bobbie Christmas, book editor and author of the Royal Palm Literary Award-winning *Write In Style: Using Your Word Processor and Other Techniques to Improve Your Writing*

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