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From A University Press-The Publisher as Problem Solver

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From A University Press — The Publisher as Problem Solver

Column Editor: **Leila W. Salisbury** (Director, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS 39211; Phone: 601-432-6205) <lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us>

Next year I'll celebrate my 20th year in scholarly publishing, and I've been thinking about how my role in the process has changed over time. I began as an unpaid copyediting intern, and for a while I was so deeply immersed that I couldn't read a novel without a red pencil in hand, ready to mark typos and other errors that the publisher had missed. Later, I spent ten years in a marketing role, including several years as a publicity manager.

I loved that publicity job, and I felt powerful. I'd spend weeks before media calls in New York and DC reading manuscripts and taking notes, wanting to be prepared for any questions book reviewers might have (they're a very smart lot). It was like readying for oral exams on a wide range of subjects, and I've always maintained that working in scholarly publishing is like being in school all the time in the best possible way. I also felt like I could really make things happen, reviews, interviews, and general buzz. If I worked hard enough, the book would get the attention and recognition it deserved.

While this was a noble and youthfully enthusiastic outlook on my role in publishing, as the years passed, I watched good books get passed over (I often secretly believed that if the same book had been published under a trade house imprint the results would have been dramatically different). I worked hard, but sometimes books I loved didn't succeed in the ways I thought they should. By the end of my tenure as publicist, I had come to a completely different understanding of what it was that I did. Instead of having the ability to make things happen, I realized that what I really did was to create the best possible conditions for things to happen, and the rest was up to the universe.

Today, as a press director and as an acquiring editor, I embrace my chief role as that of problem solver. I likely began to espouse this outlook while I worked in marketing. In that department, one of the chief goals of the job is to make things easy for others. Make it easy for a harried newspaper editor to cover a book by sending him or her a review copy, descriptive materials, a ready-made op-ed piece written by the author. Make it easy for radio producers to book an author by supplying them with suggested interview questions or a sample Q&A. Make it easy for bookstores, wholesalers,
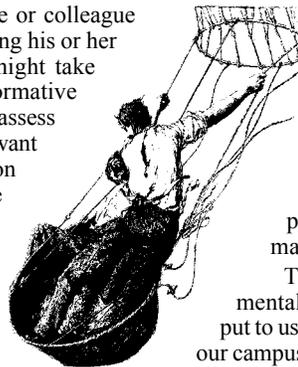
and libraries to order and obtain copies of a book by making sure it is always in stock and by supplying full and accurate metadata about that book to the marketplace. Make it easy for the author events coordinator to say yes to an author because he/she is coming with a ready-made, targeted mailing list of people to invite to an event.

The problem-solver philosophy translated over easily to my work as an acquisitions editor. I am an aide to young faculty needing to put that all-important first book together for a tenure packet. Together with peer reviewers, we map out a plan for turning a dissertation — a document created to adhere to a very specific format and designed to address a sometimes narrow set of concerns — into a work of scholarship designed for a broader audience, work that will add something of significance to the conversations and ideas bubbling up within its discipline. With trade and regional books, I look at project proposals and ask myself, how will the author of this book and I get to the same desired end goal (a well done book that also sells)? What different routes will get us there together? Will switching the voice or tense make a difference in the reader experience? Do we need to discover and thread a stronger narrative arc throughout the project? Will cutting or rearranging parts of the manuscript release the outstanding book just waiting to be published?

Some manuscripts come to my desk requiring little work (sometimes authors are even lucky enough to have a spouse or colleague who is a fine copyeditor wielding his or her own red pencil), but others might take a year or more in this transformative process. My job is not only to assess where it is that the author and I want to go together, but also to put on my psychologist hat to figure out what exactly an author will be willing and actually capable of doing in the way of manuscript transformation and how to motivate us both during that process. I am a translator of opposing peer reviews (not an uncommon situation), working with the author to figure out which set of suggested changes will most benefit the manuscript. Recently I was talking with a retired academic on a book about a remarkable woman who worked for civil rights in Mississippi. We had been working together for several months, and the author thanked me for my candor on the prospects for the manuscript and the assessment of what kind of work it would need to become a book that readers could successfully engage with. I was glad that she felt my comments were useful to her, but I also realized that what she was acknowledging was this problem-solving spirit as we discussed how to make this germ of a manuscript into something that really shines.

As an administrator, there are all kinds of issues for me to solve. In a world of limited resources, where do we put the money so that our goals as a scholarly publisher are best fulfilled? Are staff putting time into the activities that will most benefit the press and its books, and do they have the resources they need to do their jobs fully and effectively? Are we embracing the right electronic strategies, both in and out of house, ones that will allow us to disseminate our content most widely and that will let us compete successfully in a challenging marketplace?

The publisher-as-problem-solver mentality is perhaps most effectively put to use as we think about ways to serve our campuses. We are a resource for faculty as we engage in conversations that (hopefully) demystify the complex and rapidly-changing world of scholarly communication. We are a resource for administrators as they assemble teams to create student textbook strategies or rethink the way a campus LMS is being used. We can be valuable participants in discussions of changing tenure requirements and how electronic publishing figures into new tenure guidelines. We should be at the table when libraries develop fair use guidelines for faculty and part of discussions of how faculty and students want to use and access content.

Like our many campus and academic partners, we want to see scholarship flourish in ways that benefit us all. One of the things the revolution in electronic content has done is to knit us — and our fortunes — together more closely than ever before. So let us as publishers bring our perspectives and our problem solving skills to bear on those questions that vex us all as we map the future for our campuses, our organizations, and our readers. 🐟

The Scholarly Publishing Scene — The Art of Editing Engineering Handbooks

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>

In this column I'm going to talk about how I develop an engineering handbook, comprised of chapters written by contributors, from conception of the idea for a title to submission of a manuscript to a publisher. This process can take as little as eighteen months to two years, but in many cases, perhaps the majority, it can take much longer. Because I make a significant part of my living from handbook royalties, there is an economic need to keep the process as short as possible. But an academic, say, with more professional commitments than I have at this stage of my life, might keep a publishing house waiting much longer than it would like. Generally, publishers' deadlines for manuscript submission have been soft and delays have been granted with no more fuss than an aggrieved sigh. But now one of my publishers has begun to insist on hard deadlines without an ounce of mercy.

The ideas for most of the ten handbook titles — most of them in multiple editions - I've worked on over the past thirty years have come mostly from me. (This is also true of the seven books in a series I dreamed up.) There are a couple of exceptions. The first handbook I worked on was intended to be a new edition of a handbook that had fallen into neglect. (The old title was discarded eventually and the update became my own, entirely new handbook.) In another case I put together the fifth edition of an existing title, and one time I produced a reference book in response to an acquisitions editor's request — although it didn't turn out to be exactly what he'd had in mind.

I favor broad topics — the name of an engineering discipline (mechanical, biomedical, or environmental engineering), a major sub-discipline (transportation or plastics engineering), or an activity like materials selection for engineering applications, environmental degradation of engineering materials, design of machinery used in food production, or how engineers and scientists measure things. Over the years, I've made enough contacts in STM publishing that I can get an acquisition editor's ear for an engineering handbook idea without too much trouble. Unlike trade publishing, an agent is not required.

From this initial, and preliminary, point forward, the process becomes more formal for everyone, even for someone like me who has a leg up in getting a publisher to say yes. Publishers have standard proposal forms which require authors and editors to provide a great deal of information about who they are and what they have in mind. A proposal form can ask for a detailed description of the book being