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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Book Proposals

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It should come as no surprise, if you didn't already know, that the first formal step on the road to publishing a scientific and technical reference work is the creation of a written proposal. This sort of formal document is part and parcel of a decades-old crusade to infuse sci-tech publishing with standardization and rigor. There was a widely perceived need to root out hunches, educated guesses, and seat-of-the-pants determinations in deciding whether or not to publish a book that authors had brought to acquisitions editors, or editors had dreamed up on their own. I should know. I was one of the drum majors leading the parade for a modern publishing decision system.

The process leading up to a written proposal can start with a simple email query from a prospective author to an acquisitions editor at a publishing company with this question: would the company be interested in publishing a book on a particular topic? The book could be a monograph or a contributed volume. It could be on a narrow topic or a broad one. It could be for an entirely new book, one that hasn't been previously published, or for a new edition of an existing title.

Recently, for example, a contributor to one of my recent engineering handbooks wrote to me that he had been meaning to share an idea he had been mulling over. He'd searched the various titles I've edited and noticed a void — he named a sub-discipline in earth science — he named a sub-discipline in earth science and asked whether I'd be interested in co-editing a volume on that topic. I wrote to the editor who's publishing the handbook to ask if he'd be interested in publishing a book on the topic my contributor had suggested. He wrote back immediately with word that the topic didn't fit into his publishing program and with the name of the acquisitions editor into whose program the title would fit. I wrote to her. I introduced myself, then told her about the query I'd received from one of my contributors. She responded that the topic sounded "very interesting and would fit" into a monograph series in her publishing program. "Please fill out the attached proposal form, and I will be more than happy to start my assessment and execute the next steps on the book proposal," she wrote. That was quick. Now the hard part.

The form that proposals take is essentially a series of questions from the publisher to which a prospective author (or editor of a potential contributed volume) provides answers and commentary. So what's in the questions?

One obvious thing that jumps out when you peruse proposal forms (I have three examples on my desk now from three different publishers, two of them for new editions of

existing titles and one for an entirely new title.) is that they're geared to academics. Language can be telling: you're asked for your CV, not your resume. Prospective authors of reference works should not be surprised to encounter questions about whether their books are designed for courses they themselves teach or will be suitable for other courses in the subject area that the books address. You can be asked about digital ancillary materials or such pedagogical features as exercises and worked-out examples, discussion questions, or annotated further reading lists.

These issues bear on questions about the market you see for your proposed book: in which disciplines does the book reside, and which does its subject matter relate to? Who would need it — practitioners or students (upper-level or undergraduate) or both? Which groups of professionals — in academia, industry, government, or other areas — would need your book?

Not surprisingly, proposal forms want to delve into your intentions in seeking to get your book published. They will be interested, in one way or another, in the aims and scope you have for your original title or new edition of an existing title. If it's an update or a revision, then what's new and why now? Why are you even bothering? Publishers don't use pointed and direct language, of course, but without explicitly asking, they want to know why you would devote so much time and effort in getting a publishable manuscript to them. And here's what they don't explicitly ask about why you would consider publishing a reference work: is it the money (royalties the book might earn)? Is it professional advancement? Or is it for the other reasons that my handbook contributors spelled out in my last *ATG* column? Such questions are best not put down in writing. Certainly not in publishing, which, in days of yore, was called a "gentleman's profession?" So, now, don't let any cats out of any bags; let sleeping dogs lie; pick your own cliché.

Naturally, publishers are very curious about what an author or editor intends to put in a prospective book. For a monograph, a publisher will ask, in addition to a proposed Table of Contents, for one or more sample chapters. For a new edition of a contributed volume, such as an engineering handbook, a publisher wants to know what's going to be added, what's going to be revised and updated, what's going to be dropped. Before I tackle the proposal form for one of my own handbooks, I survey contributors to learn their views about possibly revising and updating their chapters and any topics they think ought to be added to the handbook.

Into the mix, publishers can now throw online usage statistics. For an existing engineering handbook, there are data on which chapters are accessed most frequently, which less frequently, and which have been ignored. There's even information on the frequency with which individual words crop up during online searches. For authors or editors with new editions of their books in mind, such usage statistics will have to be taken into account during the planning and proposal process.

Publishers' need for information about content doesn't stop here. In recent years, proposal forms have been asking for numbers — projected word counts; numbers of line drawings and halftones; numbers of tables; and even numbers of color illustrations that might be requested.

Always, a due date for a publishable manuscript is requested. Increasingly, the due date is a hard due date.

Another major consideration that proposal forms address is competition. Back in the day, acquisition editors who reported to me routinely asked me to bless the projects they brought to me on the grounds that the proposed books would be unique, that there were no other books on precisely the same topics. Now, suspicious minds can seek confirmation of such claims by consulting **Amazon**, which prospective authors and editors should already have done themselves, of course. There's enough information on **Amazon** to enable you to provide page counts, publication dates, and list prices of competing or related books, as well as to discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Publishers want to know your opinion of why anyone interested in the topics your book addresses would want to buy it instead of, or in addition to, others (which a potential reader may already own or have access to) that deal with the same topics

The result of all this work is a complete picture of what a proposed book will look like, inside and out, essentially, and how it will stack up against competing or related books. Finally, a proposal form will ask for names of potential reviewers, for the next step in the process is to send the proposal to reviewers for their comments. (No surprise: that commentary is also in a structured format.) After you respond to reviewers' comments to the satisfaction of your acquiring editor, he or she will feed information about your proposed book, including information you have provided, as well as projected price and sales information that he or she estimates, into a computer program that is used to determine whether the project can go forward. It sometimes takes a bit of numbers juggling. Always, an acquisitions editor must be realistic. There really is a wizard behind the door — a boss or an editorial board with the power to say yes or no. 🌿

