

10 commandments for first-time authors

How to be an author your publisher will love

BY NICOLE DIAMOND AUSTIN

WHETHER YOU'RE working on your novel in the early morning before the kids are awake, polishing up a proposal to send out to prospective agents or even meeting with an editor to discuss your work, chances are your ultimate goal is to find a publisher. You revise your first three chapters until they're letter-perfect, slave over a fantastic cover letter and read every book on the market about how to get published. If you're talented—and lucky—all of this work pays off. You find an agent who believes in your project, and a publisher begins to express interest. But while this may seem like the final inning, it's really just the beginning of a whole new ball game.

Let us assume that your material is good. You're an accomplished writer with a great manuscript, and the world is full of would-be readers just itching to read your work. The important thing now is that you focus on building a partnership with your potential publisher, one that is based on goodwill and mutual respect. If you can start off on the right foot, you'll find the entire process both more enjoyable and more rewarding.

As an editor at a major publishing house, I saw many good authors make stupid mistakes. You can avoid such missteps if you follow these 10 commandments.

1 Be positive. Whether your first interaction with your potential editor or publisher is via phone or in person, it's tremendously important that you are both positive and enthusiastic. When an

but do express a willingness to at least consider changes.

2 Have a vision. Your career as a writer may begin with the first book contract, but it doesn't have to end with your first published work. Especially if you are a first-time author, it's very important that you convey to the publisher your plan for your writing career. No one expects you to have a point-by-point plan for the next two decades, but if you have some sense of where you're headed, the publisher will take you much more seriously. In almost all cases, a publisher is looking to create a house author, not a one-hit wonder. What is your area of expertise? How do you want to be known? Comparisons to other authors are often helpful here; for example, if you're writing mysteries for young women, you might say that you're a P.D. James for the *Bridget Jones* crowd.



editor makes the decision to acquire a project, he or she is making a commitment to spend at least one year, and probably more, working with you on your book. You want to present yourself as someone who is going to be a willing and passionate partner. Make sure you are prepared for the meeting, with important information at your fingertips, and be flexible, especially if the editor gives you any critical feedback. If you disagree with the editor's thoughts, don't feel you need to keep quiet,

3 Be aware of the big picture. A book is much more than just words and paper, and these days, an author is required to be much more than just a writer. More and more, the packaging and marketing of a book determine not only how well it will sell, but whether a publisher will take on the project in the first place. What do you bring to the table besides your proposal or manuscript? Can you

explain why you alone are the right person to write this book? Whom do you know (and who knows you)? Publishers often discuss an author's "platform" when trying to decide whether to take on a project. Your platform is anything that makes you uniquely qualified to write your book, or that provides you with an obvious audience (e.g., you own a pet store and have a mailing list of pet owners, or you're writing a book on adoption and are the parent of adopted children). Be creative as you consider what you have to offer.

4 Be honest. Don't say Oprah is your best friend if you've met her once. Don't say you have a mailing list of 2 million people when you're talking about the phone book. Don't say you can't wait to get booked on a TV show if you have terrible stage fright. It can be tempting to pump yourself up, especially in the early days when you're trying to impress your editor. But it can come back to haunt you later, and there's nothing a publisher hates more than having expectations that don't pan out. By all means feel free to brag about your actual accomplishments and connections; just stick to the truth.

5 Respect your editor's, publisher's and publicist's time. Working at a publishing company is tremendously rewarding and sometimes exhilarating, but it is also an enormously busy job. As an author, you must respect the fact that you are one in a long list of people who are making demands on your editor's, publisher's and publicist's time. Be patient. Don't feel personally offended if your calls aren't always returned promptly. If you need something or you have a question, make it clear and concise, and be sure to specify how quickly you need an answer. Always have a reason for checking in when you call. No matter how close a relationship you have with your editor and/or publicist, they often will not have the time to chat.

6 Pick your battles. Along the way, there will be things you don't like about the way your publisher is handling your book. Maybe you'll hate the cover. Maybe you'll disagree with the copy editor. Maybe your publicist will rub you the wrong way. No matter where the problem lies, it's very important to remember to pick your battles. Often the publisher knows best. Sometimes you know things they don't. Just be sure to choose wisely before you start a fight. There's nothing worse than getting pegged as a difficult author, especially early on. Remember, you're in this together; you need to trust that your publisher has your best interests at heart, and go from there.

7 Treat the assistants well. If you really want to get things done, you need to get to know the assistants right away. Learn their names, and remember them. Get their direct lines and e-mail addresses. Ask how they're doing when they answer the phone before requesting to speak to your editor

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or publicist. You'd be amazed at what an assistant can accomplish when you need something quickly ... if he or she likes you. Assistants will often get back to you faster than the people for whom they work, since they're frequently the ones tracking down the information in the first place. And they can nudge their bosses to deal with something that might otherwise languish in an in-box.

8 Give them enough information ... Keep your publisher informed, before and after your book is published, especially if they might be able to add to your efforts. If you're going to appear in a magazine, lead a seminar, speak on a panel or write a feature, make sure

your publisher knows about it beforehand. This might be just the information the sales force needs to push for a reorder of your book, or the ammunition your publicist can use to get you on a national show. Don't let an opportunity to promote yourself and your book go by.

9 ... but not too much information. Don't overwhelm your editor or publicist with details. They don't need to know you won an award for creative writing in high school unless you're still in high school. Do give your publisher a list of people who might endorse your book, but leave off the long story of how you met each one. Any memo over three pages is too long. Be selective. When you overload an editor or publisher with information, you run the risk that he or she will stop paying attention. One note: Be very careful not to flood your publisher with e-mail. It's a great way to share information, but consider it like every other form of communication when it comes to frequency and length.

10 Say thank you. This is perhaps the most important piece of advice I can give an author. Most editors, publishers and publicists got into this business because they were in awe of people who could write. Even if they don't always show it, they truly appreciate their authors—without the authors, they wouldn't be able to do what they do. But they also work tremendously hard, and when that hard work is appreciated, it means a lot. So always thank your editor in the acknowledgements. Thank his or her assistant, too (see No. 7). Thank them both when the bound books arrive. Thank your publicist for writing a fabulous press release. In the case of your publisher, a little appreciation goes a long way. #