

# Understanding the publishing process

To someone who has never worked in publishing the way in which a manuscript is turned into a book can seem like magic but in reality, the process is fairly straightforward. However, no two publishing houses (big or small) do things quite alike and the real magic comes in the way that the different departments work together to give every book the best possible chance of success.

Bill Swainson explains the process.

For the purposes of this article I have assumed a medium-sized publishing house, big enough to have a fairly clear division of roles – in smaller houses these roles frequently overlap – and I talk mainly about original (rather than paperback reprint) publishing.

To begin at the beginning. Communication is everything in publishing and while more and more business is done by email, publishers still receive the majority of their submissions by post. So, the post-room staff, the computer wizards, the office management team, the receptionist who answers the telephone or welcomes visitors, all play a vital part in the process of making books. But it is the managing director who is the ‘fat controller’ of a company, and who draws all the threads together and gives the company its direction and drive.

## Editorial

Every editorial department has a similar staff structure: commissioning editors (sometimes called acquiring editors) who take on a book and become its champion in the company, copy-editors (sometimes called desk editors) who do the close work on the manuscript, and editorial assistants who support them.

Every publishing company acquires their books from similar sources: literary agents and scouts, other publishers throughout the world, a direct commission from editor to author and, very occasionally, by unsolicited proposal (known unceremoniously in the business as the ‘slush pile’). The in-house process goes something like this: the commissioning editor will make a case for a book’s acceptance at an ‘acquisitions meeting’ which is attended by all the other departments directly involved in publishing the book, including sales, marketing, publicity and rights. Lively discussions follow and final decisions are determined from a mixture of commercial good sense (estimated sales figures, likely production costs and an author’s track record) and taste – and every company’s and every editor’s taste is different.

Shortly after acquisition, an ‘advance information’ sheet is drafted by the commissioning editor. This is the earliest attempt to harness the excitement that led to the book being signed, and it contains all the basic information needed by the rest of the company, including the title, ISBN, format, extent (length), price, rights holder, sales points, short blurb and biographical note. It is the first of many pieces of ‘copy’ that will be written about the book, and will be used as the template for all others, such as a catalogue entry, jacket blurb or press release.

It is now that the journey of the book really begins, with the finishing line some 10–12 months away. As soon as it arrives in the editorial department the manuscript will receive a ‘structural edit’. This involves looking at the book as a whole, i.e. everything from its structure and narrative pacing to characterisation and general style, and in the case of non-fiction, looking at illustrations, appendices, bibliography, notes and index. The actual copy-

editing usually only takes place when all of the main structural editorial decisions have been made. While commissioning editors may see certain titles through from beginning to end, it is more likely that they'll pass them to their editorial team to manage, while still keeping a watching brief on every aspect of publication. It is at this stage that the more detailed work begins.

The copy-edit is another filtering process done with a very fine mesh net, designed to catch all the errors and inconsistencies in the text, from spelling and punctuation to facts, figures and tics of style. In some publishing houses this work is done onscreen, but surprisingly many editors prefer to work direct on the typescript because it is easier to spot changes and see where decisions have been made along the way. Once the copy-edit has been completed, the author will be asked to answer any queries that may have arisen. When the commissioning editor, copy-editor and author are happy that the marked-up typescript is in the best possible shape, it is sent to the production department for design and typesetting.

From now on the book will shuttle between the editorial and production departments in the form of proofs, usually in three separate stages. First proofs are read by the author and a proofreader. This is the author's last chance to make any cuts or additions as amendments after this stage become tricky and expensive to implement. Both sets of amendments are then collated and sent to the production department to be made into second proofs. (An index, if needed, will be compiled at this stage.) Second proofs, or 'revises', are checked against the collated first proofs and any last-minute queries are attended to. They are then returned to the production department to be made into 'final' proofs. Final proofs are, in a perfect publishing world, what the name implies. They are checked against the second proofs, the index (if there is one) is proofread, the prelim pages double-checked and when all is present and correct – the text is ready for press.

### Design

The design department's work on a new book begins usually 10 months in advance of the publication date. Hardback jackets and the paperback covers are publishing's main selling tool. People say you can't judge a book by its cover, but because most (if not all) buying decisions are made by the trade's buyers before the book is printed – up until that time the cover *is* the book. It's what makes the buyer believe in a book enough to order it, and it's one of the most important things that makes a browsing customer pick up a book in the bookshop and pay for it at the till.

Design also produces all other sales material that the marketing department decides it needs to make a good job of the 'sell in', including catalogues, order forms, 'blads' (illustrated sales material), 'samplers' (booklets containing tantalising extracts), posters, book proofs (bound reading proofs) and advertisements.

Most companies try to develop a distinctive look for their books and it's the design department that creates it.

### Production

The production department handles all aspects of book production including text design, although some of the very big companies have a separate department for this. The production department style (or format) the copy-edited typescript by drafting a brief known as a 'type specification' or 'spec'. The spec may be designed specifically for a unique book,

or if the book is part of a series, the series spec will be used to give the books the same look and feel. The typescript is then usually despatched to an out-of-house typesetter, although some companies do typesetting in-house, to be made to page proofs. Meanwhile, the production manager (working with the commissioning editor) will choose the binding materials and any embellishments, such as headband, coloured or printed endpapers, or marker ribbon. The print run is also decided (based on advance sales and track record) and an order is placed with the printer.

Most publishing companies use only a few printers, negotiating the best possible rate per book depending on the volume of work they agree to place with the printer. A key role of the production department is to buy print at a rate that allows each tightly budgeted book to make money, and equally important (especially when a book takes off) to manage the supply of reprints so that the publisher's warehouse is never short of stock.

## Sales

'Selling in' in the home market (Britain and Ireland) is done increasingly by key account managers working with the chain buyers, as well as by a team of sales representatives. The reps visit bookshops in their designated area and try to achieve the set sales targets for each book. The number of copies sold pre-publication is known as the subscription sale, or 'sub'.

Selling books effectively to bookshops, both chains and independents and nowadays to supermarkets and other retailers, takes time and careful planning. The British and Irish book trade has developed in such a way that the sales cycle has extended to cover the best part of a year. Even though the actual business of selling may not begin in earnest until eight or nine months prior to publication, the work of preparing sales material begins up to a year ahead. It can, however, be achieved in a shorter time frame and this allows a degree of flexibility for the publisher in case of a crisis or to take advantage of prime opportunities, such as issuing instant books on a burning topic of the day.

Many sales are also made in-house by phone, email and fax and, nowadays, the internet. Most publishers have their own websites and provide customers with the opportunity to buy their books either directly or by a link to another bookselling website. Book clubs still remain an important market for publishers, but they are having a tough time of it in the face of stiff competition from the internet and the supermarkets.

Export sales are achieved using teams of international agents and reps run from in-house by the export sales department. While the bigger companies tend to have their own teams and the smaller companies use freelance agencies and reps, all face a different range of challenges to the home sales team. Here format, discount, royalty rates, shipping, and exchange rates are the key components. The margins are much tighter and it requires a lot of skill and *chutzpah* to generate significant sales and then to maintain a successful international presence.

## Marketing

It could be said that the marketing department is the engine room of the sales department. It's responsible for preparing all the sales material (catalogues, blads, samplers, etc) used by the sales team to persuade others in the book trade to buy the company's books. Marketing also works alongside the sales department in dealing directly with the big bookshops on special promotions ('Book of the Month', '3 for 2', etc) that are now such a common feature of the larger chains.

This department also prepares the advertising for the trade, such as the post-publication press advertising that, along with reviews and other publicity, persuades customers into the shops to buy a particular book. It also organises the company sales conferences where the new season's publishing is for the first time presented to the sales reps and overseas agents. The run-up to the sales conference and the event itself is an exciting time and stimulates many of the best ideas on how to sell the new books.

### **Publicity**

As the marketing department works to sell books with the emphasis on the 'sell in', the publicity department works with the author and the media on 'free' publicity with the emphasis on the 'sell through'. This covers reviews, features, author interviews, bookshop readings and signings, festival appearances, book tours and radio and television interviews and so on.

For each author and their book, the publicity department devises a campaign that will play to the book's or the author's strengths. For instance, best use will be made of written features or radio interviews for authors who are shy in public, just as full advantage will be made of public appearances for those authors who thrive on the thrill of showmanship. In short, the publicist's careful work (which like much of publishing is a mixture of inspiration and enthusiasm on the one hand and efficient planning and flexibility on the other) is designed to get the best results for each individual author and book.

### **Rights**

It is the aim of the rights department to make the best use of all the rights that were acquired when the contract was first negotiated between publisher and author or the author's agent.

While literary agents are understandably keen to handle foreign and serial rights, many publishing houses have well-developed rights departments with good contacts and are also well placed to sell the rights of a book. Selling rights is very varied and includes anything from requests for film or television rights, translation rights to other countries, or serial rights to a newspaper, to smaller permission requests to reprint a poem or an extract. All are opportunities to promote the book and earn additional income for author and publisher, and at the time of first publication the rights, sales, marketing and publicity departments all work closely together.

Book fairs are key venues for the sale of foreign rights. At the Frankfurt Book Fair in October and at the London Book Fair in March, publishers and agents from all participating countries meet to form a rights 'bazaar'. Here, editors have the opportunity to hear about and buy new books from publishing houses all over the world. Occasionally rights are sold on the spot, but more commonly the acquisition process is completed later.

### **Paperbacks**

Paperbacks are published approximately a year after the original publication. Paperback publishing is a key part of publishing today but is a quite different skill to hardback publishing, and is in many respects all about marketing. Efforts are made to identify and broaden the likely market (readership) for a book, making sure that the cover and presentation will appeal to a wide audience, and being ingenious about positioning an author's books in the marketplace where they can be best seen, bought and read. The means used vary from in-store promotions and advertising campaigns to author-led publicity and

renewed press coverage in the paperback round-ups. But the energy that drives this inspired and careful work of reinvention comes from the paperback publisher's vision and passion for the book, author and the list as a whole.

## Accounts

Finally, every successful business needs a good finance department. Most publishing houses split the work into two areas – purchase ledger and royalties. Purchase ledger deals with all incoming invoices associated with the company's business. The royalties department deals exclusively with author advances (payable on acquisition, and on delivery or publication of a book) and with keeping account of the different royalty percentages payable on book sales, serial deals, film rights, permissions, etc. This is done so that both author and agent can see that an accurate record has been kept against the day when the book earns back its advance (the point at which the royalties earned equal the advance paid) and the author starts earning additional income.

## A special business

This has been a potted breakdown of the inner workings of a medium-sized company. Publishing is a business, and commercial considerations will be apparent in every department, but it is a very special kind of business, one which frequently breaks many of the accepted business rules and often seems to make no sense at all – just think of the hundreds of different lines, formats, price points and discounts. At times it shouldn't work – but somehow, miraculously, it does.

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