Business

3 CRUCIAL Questions for a Winning Proposal

So what? Who cares? Who are you? Find out how to address these questions in your nonfiction book proposal.

By Diana Tonnessen

When I decided to make a career move from magazine editor to nonfiction book author, I had no trouble finding a hard-nosed literary agent in New York to represent me. My editorial experience got me in the door. But when I tried to describe my first book idea to her over the phone, she wasn't exactly bowled over.

"It's an encyclopedic book on menopause," I said. "Something like the menopausal woman's version of *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*."

"So what?" she snapped.

At the time, hardly any books had been written on the subject. I explained that while the topic was practically taboo even a generation before, baby-boomer women wanted more information than their mothers had received. And there was plenty to write about—hot flashes, mood swings, heart disease, osteoporosis, hormone therapy.

"Who cares?" It was more of a groan than a question.

I cited statistics that there were 45 million menopausal women in the United States, and that the number was growing annually.

"Who are you?" she shot back.

I was so flabbergasted that I blurted out my credentials, along with those of my co-author doctor, even though the agent had already agreed to represent me and had represented the doctor before.

As much as I despised my agent's probing questions, they worked. I soon crystallized the answers into a book proposal that she auctioned off to St. Martin's Press.

In kinder, gentler terms, what my agent really wanted to know was: "What is your book about and how is it different from what's already out there?"; "How big is the market?"; and "What are your credentials?"—key questions every successful nonfiction book proposal must address.

I still use those questions to goad myself into writing effective queries and book proposals. You can, too. Here's how.

1. So what?

There are really two parts to this question, both of which need to be addressed. The first is, "What is your book about?" Another way to phrase the question, and to help you zero in on an answer that will appeal to an editor, is to ask yourself, "What's at stake here?" How serious is the problem or the issue? How far-reaching? And what evidence do you have to back up your claims? You can look at the introductory chapters of almost any nonfiction book on the market for examples of what information answers "So what, Part I."

The other part of the "So what?" question is, "How is the information in this book new or different from anything else that's already out there?" To find out, consult *Books in Print* (which catalogs some 3.5 million titles), pay a visit to any major bookseller or log on to an online bookseller. Chances are good you'll come across at least one book on the market that has tackled the same subject as yours.

If you find recently published books that are similar in concept to yours, read them carefully. You're bound to find something you can do differently to make yours stand out. Look for gaps in the research or differences in the author's credentials. How is the information in these books organized and presented? How will yours be different and better? In what ways will your book fill the voids left by the existing books?

By answering the "So what?" questions, you'll be fleshing out two core sections of your book proposal: the concept and the competition.

2. Who cares?

How many people will want to read your book? How big is the market? How well defined is it? A book that targets a large, clearly defined audience helps assure agents, editors and bottom-line oriented publishers that the book will sell well.

When defining your target audience, ask yourself, "Who is affected by the issues outlined in my concept?" Who would care enough about the subject to buy your book in search of understanding, advice or guidance? Think about novel ways in which your book could be marketed to these people—could it be advertised or sold through a club or professional organization? At a meeting or conference?

You don't need fancy flow charts or complicated market analyses to size up your target audience. You can probably find the information you need online. Government Web sites are good bets, as are nonprofit professional organizations, trade/professional journals, and recent newspaper and magazine articles.

3. Who are you?

Editors are looking not just for authors who have sufficient mastery of the language to write books. They're also looking to create books that carry authority on the subject. A writer's credentials are a crucial part of the formula. Here are a few ways to start building yours:

To Learn More

WritersOnlineWorkshops.com offers online courses that cover the basics of crafting nonfiction and fiction book proposals. For nonfiction, you'll learn how to assemble a book proposal, complete with an outline and sample chapters. For fiction, you'll learn how to put together a solid proposal that includes a synopsis and sample chapters. For details, visit **www.writersonlineworkshops.com.**

• **Be an expert.** If you have at least three to five years of professional experience in a particular field, you probably have marketable expertise. A magazine editor or journalist writing for a major metropolitan newspaper is also considered an expert.

If you're just starting out, you can develop a track record for yourself by offering workshops, lecturing and developing handouts, pamphlets or booklets on the topic. You also might try writing a regular column for your local newspaper.

• **Hook up with an expert.** As much as publishers crave expertise, they also recognize that many professionals have neither the time nor the talent to write. If you do, and you are a published writer, you can team up with an expert and co-author a book.

If you haven't got any clips, consider writing (alone or with your co-author) one or more articles on some aspect of your book for a local newspaper or a magazine. This way, you'll be able to test your concept in the market and get a nice clip for your portfolio.

• **Interview the experts.** If you don't have expertise in a particular area, you'll want to convince your editor(s) that you have the ability to find experts, interview them and distill the information they've provided into crisp, clear writing. Begin by collecting the names of at least three

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Fiction

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story as they read it. The more exact words you give them, the more clearly they see it, smell it, hear it, taste it. Thus, a dog should be an "Airedale," not just a "dog." A taste should not be merely "good" but "creamy and sweet" or "sharply salty" or "buttery on the tongue." Is your heroine's dress "red," or is it really "scarlet" or "wine" or "copper"?

Two warnings about specificity, however. First, you can overdo it. If every sentence drips with richness, the reader may get mental indigestion. Choose the exact word, but don't choose 10 exact words for 10 facets of the same thing.

Second, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar and not a Havana. That occurs when the thing is being described through the eyes of your character, not the author, and the character doesn't know the difference. To my grandmother, not an animal lover, all dogs were "dogs," period. If your garage mechanic identifies his girlfriend's dress as "a teal Prada," he either has a very interesting employment history or else he cross-dresses.

Will choosing the exact word, the connotative word, the intelligible word, the temporally right word automatically make your story salable? No, of course not. There are still those important matters of plot, structure, character, ending … the list is long. But the right words can help, and I guarantee you one thing: *Le mot juste* will get the submission editor's attention. That's a pretty good start. **WD**

Nancy Kress writes science fiction, often about genetic engineering. Her most recent book is *Probability Space* (St. Martin's/Tor Books).

Questions

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experts (you'll undoubtedly interview more than three for the book itself; you're just providing a sampling in your proposal), contact them to make sure that you can at some future date interview them at length, and drop their names and credentials into your book proposal. If the book is intended for a national audience, you'll want to comb the country for experts with national recognition in their field. If the book is for a regional audience, those who are considered experts in the region will do.

You'll also need to demonstrate that you have the ability to write, and you'll be expected to do this by writing an irresistible cover letter and proposal. These two documents are essentially your writing test for the job, so plan to put some energy into them.

Be sure to study the publisher's submission guidelines and follow them carefully. An editor will want the assurance that you can follow directions in the event the manuscript you submit needs major revisions. The editor will be reading for style, tone, authority of the subject matter, command of the language and cleanliness of the copy. Be aware that grammatical and clerical errors can and will be held against you.

"So what?" "Who cares?" "Who are you?" Use these three questions as a guide, and you'll write the kind of book proposal an editor will be eager to snap up. **WD**

Diana Tonnessen is the editor in chief of *Managing Menopause*. Her feature articles have appeared in *Health*, *Glamour*, *Parents*, *Self* and *Working Mother*.

PR

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For More Help

- Public Relations Society of America (**www.prsa.org**), with more than 20,000 PR members, offers information about chapters and other resources on its site.
- *PRWeek* (**www.prweek.com**), a weekly magazine, offers news of interest to PR writers.
- *Handbook of Strategic Public Relations and Integrated Communications*, edited by Clarke L. Caywood (McGraw-Hill)

expert to credit.

The sidebar on Page 25 includes a sample from an article I wrote, and an explanation of how and why the article came to be.

Selling yourself

After you've done your research and identified a genuine interest, write a related sample article using a fictitious company complete with graphics. Mail it to your prospective client and attach a letter of introduction for yourself and your services. You're selling your ability to produce publishable material. Ideally, you'll include clips of other successful PR you've written—not just the releases, but how they were used by the publications you targeted.

As you develop a portfolio, your value will increase. The current cost of a full-page, full-color magazine ad starts at $3,500 and goes to well over $20,000. If you consider that a well-placed article is more effective than an ad, your value as a writer is evident. **WD**

Michael Valverde has more than 10 years of public relations experience and has published more than 100 articles.