SECTION ONE

All Aspects of the Proposal—And Some Advice Thrown In

CHAPTER 1

The Concept
Shaping Your Idea

A good idea is the foundation for any nonfiction book proposal. It's the intangible product you're trying to sell to a publisher. Good ideas are everywhere. But it takes a keen eye and know-how to shape an idea into a book proposal and ultimately a sale.

Finding Your Hook

What makes an idea good? Innovation and a focused target market give any idea an edge—or hook. Finding a hook is the process of taking a complicated idea and describing it in terms that resemble a "soundbite" teaser for . . . the next Oprah Winfrey show. Your hook is the focal point from which your book proposal can be formed. This hook must be intriguing enough to pull an editor's attention away from your competition.

As you scan the universe for book ideas, you have to find just the right focal point. But your book idea does not have to be entirely original. If you can write a unique or superior treatment of a particular subject, it doesn't matter if there are similar books on the market. If you're confident, innovative, and can meet the competition head on, you might have what it takes to convince a publisher.

The first thing to consider when choosing an idea for your nonfiction book proposal is whether the idea can be expanded into a book. Many ideas can sustain a CNN factoid, but not a 200-plus-page book.

Some ideas can support only a magazine article. Magazines are good places to introduce concepts, but books require much greater depth.

Targeting Your Market vs. Market Saturation

Even if your idea can fill the pages of a book, the key consideration is whether anyone would buy it and read it. If you want commercial success, you must think commercially. The mating habits of obscure sea creatures may appeal to a certain segment of the population, but a book on the subject would not be a hot topic at most dinner parties.

If you want to write for the commercial market, you have to be aware of the possibility of market saturation on any given subject. When you're forming a book idea, you should first research the topic to see what's already out there. Go to a bookstore; go to a library and check *Books in Print,* a periodically updated publication available in book form and CD-ROM that contains extensive listings of books by category.

If there are complementary books but yours can fill a unique and necessary gap, move forward. If you can't find anything that would separate you from the fold, move on to another subject. Don't be overly alarmed about books that are old and not currently being distributed. Many very good books simply have been ahead of their time. If a subject is important enough it can often be cleverly resurrected in an updated format.

If several books in your topic area appear suddenly in the bookstores—from different publishing houses—take this as a good indicator of market saturation. For example, after the first books on codependency appeared on the shelves, we received innumerable book proposals on different aspects of this recovery movement. While there are still territories yet uncharted, we found publishers tired of the subject and reluctant to see anything more.

The Makings of a Good Idea

One way to spot a potentially marketable idea is to be aware of popular trends. But being tuned in to what is happening now is not enough—you have to be able to gauge where the public's interest may be when your book comes out. Nothing is more dated than a time-sensitive idea whose time has passed.

Keep in mind that the publishing industry operates at least six months to a year ahead of the bookshelves. Spotting trends and potential new markets requires an almost visionary quality. You can get around the "I can't stand to hear another word on that topic" syndrome by being creative. If you can distinguish yourself through a new approach to the material, you can

still write in a somewhat saturated topic area. Start your own bandwagon; don't wait to jump on someone else's.

Spot trends and then try to stay ahead of them. Spotting trends also requires a good understanding of popular interests. Do not rely solely on the electronic media to reflect trends in the types of books people want to read. One does not necessarily offer an accurate guide to the other.

Popular culture magazines are helpful in seeing developments in the reading public's interests. They are often more immediate and should be included in your research. Even "rag magazines" such as the *National Enquirer* reflect popular taste and are useful for getting a sense of what people find interesting. Some people say the readers of the rags don't buy books. They are discounting the people who read them at the checkout or those who sneak them home so their neighbors don't find out.

Don't forget the Internet. Writers today are fortunate to have such a limitless resource. You can check which books are hot sellers or can check out newsgroups and chat rooms. The Internet offers a tremendous amount of information at your fingertips.

Trips to the library and bookstore will help you, but your greatest wealth of ideas will come from leading your life. Attend workshops and lectures that interest you. Pay attention to the questions people ask and the topics they focus on so you can get a handle on what kinds of books they might need. Look to your own profession and what you know best. If you are passionate about something, you can develop it into a book idea.

Once you find your hook and begin to shape your idea, you need to look at it objectively. If it is a thesis that can be expanded and fleshed out to support an entire book, then review the following questions:

- Why would anyone want to read this book?
- Who is my target audience?
- What is my unique hook in 25 words or less?
- Can the hook support an entire book?
- Will I be telling my readers anything they don't already know?

For example, if you're like most of us, the straight details of your life would not sustain a book. But if you can tell a good story or spin a good yarn, you can certainly liven up your book with entertaining anecdotes. You then need to put your anecdotes into a context that will serve as your hook.

Sharpening Your Focus

To shape an idea into a book proposal, you need to refine and polish it so it can be communicated in a logical fashion. Nonfiction writing is intended to

convey information. Do not try to be literary. Concise and readable means that no one has to refer to a dictionary after every paragraph. In nonfiction, there should not be several shades of meaning, as you would find in classic literature. Narrative nonfiction may use creative techniques, but with the exception of examples, the proposal should stick to basic, clear language.

Having a focused idea is imperative. An unfocused idea is one of the main reasons why a book proposal will be rejected. Aside from your hook, you'll need to state your expanded thesis in one concise paragraph.

If you can't convince someone of the book's merit in six lines or less, you need to be more focused. We've seen some exceptionally talented people waylay their careers with unfocused book ideas. Even the best lecturers and speakers in the world can't find a publisher for a bad book. If your idea would only lead to something self-serving or dull, give it up and start again.

You need to be both objective and flexible in the writing business. You need to be tenacious and persistent, but not stubborn. Do not try to force a bad idea into the system. If you become too emotionally attached to an idea, you may not see a better one when it comes along.

Sometimes a book idea has a gestation period of many years before it's ready to be born. Don't give up if some of your efforts never seem to go anywhere. Keep a file of good ideas that need more time to develop. With time, you might acquire the insights or ingredients to make them work. Let the book grow with you as you learn how to package and market yourself.

When you have an idea for a book, you should see where it takes you. Good ideas can have a life of their own when you give them a chance to thrive.

CHAPTER 2

The Title

Creating an Image

Coming up with a title for your work is no trivial matter. A smart title can greatly multiply a book's sales, while a poor title can have the opposite effect.

You might prefer to believe that what truly matters is what's between the pages—and you'd be absolutely right. But when it comes to selling your work, your title has substantial power.

For a demonstration of how important a title is, stroll through your supermarket and pay special attention to the soap and cereal products. A close examination of ingredients and prices will reveal that most of the competing products are remarkably similar. When quality and price are essentially equal, it's title, packaging, and overall image that determine market share. Popular brand names such as Ivory, Tide, and Total were not selected arbitrarily. Companies spend quite a bit of time and money on idea-bouncing, research, and testing to develop titles like these. They work because they trigger a positive image in the consumer's mind. The most successful titles, regardless of the product, bypass the intellect and go straight for the emotions.

That infamous automobile the Ford Edsel, which got its name through nepotism, not merit, was poorly rated by consumers and was short-lived in the marketplace. But even with good ratings, the car's title probably would have doomed it. The name "Edsel" simply doesn't appeal to the imagination.

Guidelines for Nonfiction Titles

Here are some basic guidelines to use when naming your book:

The title should be relevant to your primary thesis. Don't hit the consumer with riddles or incomprehension. When scanning bookstore shelves, the consumer's eyes and mind are moving as quickly as any computer. Your book only has a few seconds to get its foot in the door. Develop a title that will make sense to virtually all English speakers and will state lucidly what the book is about.

There are important exceptions to this guideline, for which there are a variety of explanations, including luck. A prime example is the bestselling career book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* by Richard Bolles. (Initially, skydivers may have thought this one was for them.) A book may succeed in spite of an incongruous title, but it's always smarter for your title to be an asset, not an obstacle. As a general rule, clarity is best.

The title should not contain more than five words. A title with more than five words requires the consumer to start thinking instead of feeling. "What's wrong with that?" you may legitimately ask. Perhaps nothing. It may sometimes even become a big advantage.

But if the choice were ours, we'd go for the gut whenever possible, and leave the brains alone. Once the sale is made and the actual reading begins, the brain will have enough to do. But brains are not what usually spur people to buy things. Why would they? Brains don't even have nerve endings.

You need not feel overly constrained, however. Immediately following your title comes the *subtitle.* Here's your opportunity to elaborate intellectually upon your title. We've seen many successful subtitles go beyond 10 words. And that's fine—because if the consumer makes it to your subtitle, that means your title probably worked.

The suggested five-word limit for the main title isn't a hard-and-fast rule, of course. Many excellent titles are much longer. Some titles, because of the subject, simply have to be longer.

Two successful tides that meet the word-count guideline are *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill, and *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale.

An example of an excellent title that seemingly breaks this rule is *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie (seven words). However, those first four words pack an emotional wallop and win instant attention. In other words, going beyond five words can work if the first few words provide the emotional grabber.

The title should create a motivating visualization. Studies show that humans think in pictures—our minds translate everything we perceive into pictures. That's why it was never a contest between radio and television. The best communicators (and sometimes the most dangerous) are the ones who can make people *see* and *feel* what they are saying.

You want the consumer to scan your title and visualize your promised message in a favorable way. The book *Sales Power* by José Silva and Ed Bernd Jr. achieves this. Upon scanning that title, a salesperson would probably visualize gaining access to and closing big accounts. Such an image would be a motivating factor to buy the book.

For the same reasons, you have to be careful not to trigger negative or threatening images. For instance, it would have been a big mistake for Silva and Bernd to have titled their book *Stop Losing Sales.* Such a title would likely just evoke the image of the consumer's stomach and head hurting.

Titles for Biographies, Histories, and Exposés

Most of the titles we've used as examples so far are in the how-to/self-help realm. The rules are slightly different for titles in such areas as biography, current affairs, investigative works, and the like—though it doesn't hurt to apply the principles given above. You still want your title to create a dramatic and relevant visualization of the subject. However, impulse sales tend to be less important for books outside of the how-to/self-help categories. Sales for books in these categories are often driven through word of mouth, reviews, advertising, and publicity.

All the President's Men (about Richard Nixon and the Watergate cover-up) by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward falls in this category. The authors' timing and credentials couldn't have been better. It happens to be a good title because of the Humpty-Dumpty connection, but in this particular case, the book was not title-dependent. It would have succeeded even with a poor title because the authors were widely known for uncovering the Watergate affair, the subject matter was timely, and the media gave almost obsessive attention to the scandal.

For a biography, a frequently used option is for the title to capture something personal and recognizable about the subject, and then to use the subtitle to identify the person by name. *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill* is a good example of this kind of title.

Titles for Noncommercial Books (Textbooks and Books for Professionals)

The rules here are much different than for commercial titles. A slick title would probably be unhelpful—perhaps fatal. If you wrote a textbook for freshman physics majors, *Introductory Physics* would be an ideal title. For these books, staid, unprovocative, right-to-the-point titles are preferred. It would be unwise to name such a book *Einstein's Revenge*.

Final Caveat

Be aware that the title you create may not be the title your book ends up with. Publishers virtually always demand final discretion over titles. As the author, you have the right to try to persuade them, but the final decision is theirs. Publishers figure it's their job to know what works, and they legitimately assert that if they have to sell the book, they should get to name it. But don't fret; they—and their savvy marketing staff—often come up with titles that sharpen a book's focus and boost its sales.

CHAPTER 3

The Overview

Writing Power Paragraphs

Almost every editor at every publishing house has a stack of book proposals or manuscripts waiting to be reviewed at any given time. If you start your proposal with a powerful statement, you can distinguish yourself from the pack.

The overview portion of your proposal is—or should be—that powerful statement. The overview is your first opportunity to grab an editor's attention and presell your idea. This first impression will strongly influence the potential for an ultimate sale.

The overview should convey these four major points:

1. What your book is about,
2. Why your book should be written,
3. How you plan to write it,
4. Why you are the best person for the job.

Leading with Your Best Shot

Writers are sometimes too close to their project to be objective about its presentation. They assume that an editor will read between the lines and see how great their book is going to be. Don't conserve your energy here in order to save the "important stuff" for the outline or the sample chapter. The overview can open—or close—the door for you.

In general, the overview should contain a synopsis of your proposed book as well as any persuasive material that supports your case. It's a sales tool much like a prospectus. View it as your opportunity to have five minutes of a publisher's undivided attention. If you had just five minutes face to face with a publisher, what would you say?

Your lead paragraph is important. There are many possibilities for a powerful lead paragraph that will catch an editor's attention. But powerful does not necessarily mean fancy, creative, or clever. In nonfiction, you are not trying to impress an editor with your mastery of five-syllable words or metaphoric didacticism. You are trying to communicate information.

If your book calls for it, you can use some of the same techniques you'd use in writing a magazine article:

- An anecdotal lead—one that tells a story leading into your book idea,
- A startling statistic that would support your thesis,
- A clear and concise statement of exactly what your book is about.

The last approach is usually the safest and most effective. If you haven't said what your book is about by the third paragraph, you're pushing your luck and trying the editor's patience.

Using Powerful Techniques of Structure and Style

Think of each paragraph in your overview as a sound bite of information. Each should be short and to the point, while conveying only one idea at a time.

Your first paragraph should be your strongest, with each subsequent paragraph supporting your case.

The length of an overview can vary from 2 pages to 10 or even more. It depends on the complexity of your subject. If your writing is tight, persuasive, and well thought out, detail will be an advantage at this stage of your presentation. If you tend to ramble and repeat pertinent points, then edit your material down to a shortened version.

If you cover the basics, you can still be creative in your overview. Where appropriate, include examples and anecdotes so the agent or publisher will get an immediate sense of your voice. You don't want to tell what you are going to do without also showing how it will be executed.

Do not pontificate. Impress the editor with what you have to say and how well you say it, but do not include extraneous information intended only to impress. This usually conveys an image of amateurism and will dilute your effectiveness.

Take risks. Some overviews are so understated that they don't do their job of enticing the editor to read more. When you've found a strong hook for your book proposal, you should make every statement in your overview reflect the strength of your idea and the confidence you have in your ability to carry out the task.

Do not be boring. No matter what your subject matter, you must find a way to make it appealing. If your writing shows a total lack of passion, why on earth would anyone else develop any enthusiasm for it?

Do not be grandiose. Agents and editors see so much material that puffery is not going to impress them. Find a good balance of effective writing, persuasion, and appropriate confidence.

After you write your first draft, put it aside for a while. Then look at it again and see if there's any way you can turn up the volume.

Some final points: Always choose active over passive voice in your proposal writing, and never say anything negative about yourself or your idea. You can't turn a bad idea into something it is not, but you can make sure a good idea gets noticed.

CHAPTER 4

The Markets Section

Who Will Buy Your Book?

We know you want to write the book. But do we know who will buy it? In the markets section, you will answer this question by justifying your proposed book's commercial existence.

For example, if you're proposing a sales book, you'd want to present documented data about the number of Americans who earn all or part of their income through sales, and cite available figures pertaining to any expected growth in these numbers.

It's best to present this information in a visually accessible way, such as using bullets (■) to highlight each point. Remember, a book proposal is similar to a sophisticated sales brochure. The most effective way to communicate important information is to make it as easy as possible for the editor to absorb it without diminishing its substance. The more arduous it is to read something, the less useful it is as an efficient sales tool—even if the document contains important facts.

If you don't already know everything about your market, several sources can provide up-to-date and comprehensive data. Many public and university libraries have reams of government data on file, such as the latest U.S. census results. University research studies, private polling organizations, and industry trade associations are excellent sources for recent facts. You are expected to be an expert on your subject, so investing in extra research will not be a waste of time. The additional knowledge will likely be helpful when you begin writing the book.

Some subjects require a more extensive markets section than others. For instance, business-oriented editors should already know about the market demographics for sales books. If you're proposing a sales book, your markets section will be more like protocol than revelation to a knowledgeable editor (though you should always present it as if your editor knows nothing). But if you're proposing a book in a more obscure or arcane subject area, you'll be expected to go to greater pains to prove that a sufficient market base exists for your project.

It is rare, if ever, that the markets section alone will carry or demolish the entire proposal. But there are definitely ways that it can either enhance or diminish the proposal's effectiveness.

Some potential enhancers:

- Presenting strong visuals that make it easy for an editor to glean and comprehend the facts.
- Liberally using genuine facts that are relevant to your subject and help support your expertise.
- Presenting relevant facts that even an expert editor may not know—and suggesting several potential secondary markets.
- Describing professional societies or trade associations that underscore the numbers and vibrancy of your targeted market(s).
- Showing an overall sensitivity to the fact that your book needs and will have your commitment to earn its existence and make it successful.

Some common diminishers:

- Claiming that your friends and relatives all love the idea. When pitching your work to editors (and agents), pretend that you're a product of spontaneous birth of unknown origin. You have no relatives, no friends, and no literate pets.
- Making improbable or irrelevant claims. Doing so will damage your credibility.
- Sweeping, unfocused generalities. Most editors know that there are more than 50 million adult women in America—but few if any know how many buy drugs to treat PMS.
- Failing to address the obvious competition. If you do this, you may appear to be a charlatan, sloppy, or both.
- Making stuff up. It's too easy to get caught—and it's not a nice thing to do anyway.

In the end, you want the editor to feel secure that your book won't end up overstaying its welcome in the publisher's warehouse. The markets

section of your proposal establishes who will potentially buy your book. It is a realistic assessment of natural markets that flow from your thesis. It reflects what direction your book will take regardless of how you and/or the publisher plan to promote it.

The markets section is often blended into the promotion section. However, we have found that it gives greater clarity to separate markets and promotion as a matter of focus. In "Markets" you are strictly describing to whom you are writing. You are painting a clear picture of why the book should exist.

In the promotion section we will show you how to develop an overall strategy to bring your book to the marketplace. Therefore we are renaming what has often been referred to as marketing, as simply "markets." "Marketing" connotes strategy. We want you to think in terms of marketing and what you can do to sell, sell, and sell. But you will have plenty of room to explain your marketing ideas under "Promotion."

CHAPTER 5

The Competition Section

What Else Is Out There?

Many excellent manuscripts are never published simply because there are too many other books like them already in print. Some writers become intimidated by similar books in the marketplace and give up on their idea. Others present their ideas without distinguishing them from what is already out there and are dismissed by agents or editors as being nothing new. There is nothing truly new if you think about it philosophically. However, what is new is how you approach a subject and present it. "Great minds think alike." If you have an idea, it's safe to assume that many others have had it, have it now, and will have it soon enough. Only a fraction of those who think of it will attempt to turn it into a book. But you are fortunate. You are reading this book. If you have a completed manuscript, by researching the competition you can cut your losses and redraft/reposition your manuscript according to what the market will bear.

If you are writing a proposal from an idea alone, you can

- Make an assessment of the viability of your idea.
- Determine how to turn competition into an opportunity to persuade.

In the competition section of a book proposal, you can acknowledge the books that are most similar to yours, and then show how yours will distinguish itself in the marketplace. Like a zealous lawyer, you will plead your case showing precisely why existing books on the subject:

- Complement yours,
- Show there is a market,
- Don't actually compete at all.

Step 1: Make Sure You're Familiar with the Competition

There is a good chance your editor knows about the competition. If not, he or she soon will. Editors won't acquire a book before doing their own basic research. If the editor discovers that you've omitted some key titles, your expertise and credibility may become suspect.

Also, by knowing the competition, you'll be better able to navigate around it and create your own unique identity. Editors are quickly turned off by an approach that has been sung by too many others too many times and too many places before. The editor wants to be the last one to the party. Their careers depend on carefully selecting books that can make an impact in the marketplace. A recycled idea may only be able to collect the crumbs of those who got there first.

Take us as an example. We wanted to write a book about proposal writing (you're reading it). But we knew it wouldn't be wise to employ the same instructional formulas that others have already published. After some thought we stumbled upon a fresh twist that everyone else missed. The competing proposal books are rich in theory but poor in example. We've always felt that the best way to learn is by example, not commentary. Using the wide array of sample résumé books as our model, we developed and proposed a parallel concept for this book: lots of real and successful sample proposals, supplemented by our critiques and essays.

In other words, while we entered a relatively crowded category, books for writers—a situation that our research confirmed—we came up with a concept that had no competition because there was and still is nothing else like it. We emphasized this strongly in the competition section of our own proposal.

When you begin the process of refining your idea in light of the competition, you always look first to what you have to say. A book must always start with its own central point. Never try to write a book to fit a gap in the market unless it is something that reflects your own passion. That said, look at your idea and determine how to present it in an innovative way. The competition section of your proposal is an opportunity to persuade. Keep it concise, but treat it with respect.

If you're unfamiliar with and uncertain about the competing titles in your area, there are several ways you can fill that gap:

- Ask your local bookseller. Don't ask a clerk; ask the person who actually runs the store and orders the inventory. Browse.
- Ask your librarian.
- Check *Books in Print,* a periodically updated publication available in most libraries as well as many bookstores that has extensive listings according to category.
- Check on-line booksellers.

Step Two: Using the Competition Section to Persuade in Your Favor

If many successful competitive titles are in print, that means there's a healthy book-buying market for the subject. Frequently, once a lucrative market segment is discovered, publishers will step all over each other to throw books at it. This practice will often oversaturate the market's ability to reasonably absorb everything that's being published, and many titles will fail. Eventually things will settle down, and supply and demand will become more synchronized.

Sales books are a good example of an ongoing lucrative market. There have been some big books that generated a sales-book feeding frenzy, but the market seems to have settled into a very steady pace. If you're proposing a sales book, for example, you'll want to mention a few successful titles that are a most similar—and state the primary factors that distinguish your proposed book from those titles. Then emphasize that the impressive ongoing success of the sales category shows a vibrant demand for these books, and that it's prudent for publishers to continue to introduce new and innovative products for this market—which is what your book will do.

Don't overwhelm your editor or agent by listing everything that's in print. Many books in print are effectively dead as far as sales activity is concerned. In addition, it would be wasteful to discuss obscure or unsuccessful titles, since (a) they're really not competitive, and (b) if they're unsuccessful, you may end up condemning the marketability of your entire category. Instead, concentrate on two to six of the most successful and visible tides.

Step Three: Directly Confront a Lack of Competition

Be very careful. There are many subjects for which the book-buying market is exceptionally specialized (e.g., horse breeding, managing mortuaries). If there is no competition, you don't want to leave the impression that there is

no market. Instead, you want to make the editor think there is a sizeable *untapped* market out there that nobody has yet had the foresight to service. And by acquiring your book, the publisher will now have exclusive access to it. (Incidentally, there is a decent market for books on both horse breeding and mortuary science. But most of these titles are not sold in traditional bookstore outlets. If the kind of book you wish to write falls into a less commercial category like this, you'll have to seek out a specialty publisher.) By the way, if you do not find any books on your subject, you should be aware that there could be a good reason. Maybe no one wants to or will ever want to read a book on the subject. Never be afraid to return to the drawing board. Many of the most successful writers have come up with ideas that seemed very good to them at the time, but nevertheless had to be scrapped.

Remember that you want the competition section to reinforce what is special about your book, and create the image that your project will have its own place in the sun regardless of how crowded the category may seem to be.

A few final thoughts:

- Keep your competition section concise; three to six titles should be enough.
- Never sound catty. It is not to your benefit to distinguish competition by saying the writer of a book is a no-talent nincompoop. Nor is it wise to say anything about a competitive book's lack of quality (i.e., it stinks).
- To describe a book you feel lacks the quality of your own, use such phrases as "lacks detail," "not comprehensive," "difficult for the average reader to understand," or whatever you feel you must say to get it off your chest.
- You can better distinguish your book by talking about its positive aspects and what it has to offer the reader. A positive statement is always more persuasive than a negative statement about another book. You don't want to sound apologetic or defensive. Because a book exists that is similar to yours does not mean your book can't find a successful niche. As long as there are readers, there will be a need for new books. And all subjects can be considered from many perspectives.
- Be confident but not grandiose. Never make statements implying that there is no competition because no one has ever been as brilliant as you.

CHAPTER 6

The Promotion Section

What Can You Do to Help Your Book Sell?

The promotion section of a book proposal is the most difficult to assign a precise definition because it is where you can be the most creative. If you do it well, it can push your book over the top. Publishers think in terms of numbers and what you bring to the table.

The promotion section is where you state ways to promote the book upon publication. In practice, publishers tend to do very little to promote the majority of the titles they publish. You are free to offer a rational wish list (including getting on *Oprah*), but this is not going to catch a publisher's eye, unless, of course, you are already a regular guest or are a celebrity in your own right.

However, there are at least two ways to make this section go beyond pie-in-the-sky filler.

Specifying What You Can and Will Do

If you plan to use the book as a marketing vehicle to promote you, your company, and/or your cause, and you've got your own substantial budget to do it, then this section may be the most important part of the proposal.

It's not uncommon for businesspeople to buy themselves onto the best-seller list by hiring a public relations firm, buying ads, networking with powerful people, or buying a large number of copies of their book to either give

away or resell at public appearances. If you are one of these people, then the promotion section should be a detailed and extensive plan that leaves nothing out. Of course, you'll be expected to promise all this in writing as part of your contract; but you'll be able to leverage an above-average advance. While mainstream publishers shy away from obvious vanity deals, they're attracted like bees to honey to authors who have the wallets and egos to virtually guarantee their publisher a sizable profit for editing, printing, and distributing the book.

Here are some other examples of efforts, less grandiose than the previous approach, that you can list in this section:

- If you're a public speaker, perhaps you can sell a significant number of autographed books at your events. State approximately how many events you do a year and what the average attendance is. If you've sold a large number of other books you've authored, you'll want to state how many.
- If the media frequently interview you for your expertise, you can probably get your book mentioned much of the time, perhaps even displayed on camera. List many of the important broadcast and print interviews you've had during the past year, and emphasize that these valuable contacts can be capitalized on once the book is published.
- If you're well connected and can get prominent people and celebrities to endorse and help promote your book, list them in this section.

Creating Innovative Ideas That You Can Help Implement

Any mortal can suggest a 10-city media tour, to which your editor will usually respond, "Uh-huh," while thinking, "Fat chance, Charlie." Your challenge is to go beyond the usual and give the promotion section genuine teeth. Fortunately, you can pull this off even if you have limited resources.

To get your juices flowing, here's what other writers have done in their promotion sections (always be careful to distinguish your suggestions from binding commitments that you're prepared to have inserted into your contract).

- Organize a contest relevant to the book.
- Call up all the bookstores within a 100-mile radius of your home and persuade (beg?) them to stock your book. If you succeed, expand the radius another 100 miles.

- Persuade large corporations to buy your books for their employees or to use as giveaways to potential clients.
- Promise to get yourself booked on radio interviews (by telephone) across the country.

The possibilities of what you can do are endless. Showing determination here may impress publishers. They appreciate authors who'll work to sell copies—as opposed to those who only complain about the publisher's promotional deficiencies. Research the Internet. Every day there are new opportunities for access to your carefully selected market and secondary markets. Locate web sites that could review or sell your book. List any relevant sales or places where your book could gain attention.

If your subject lends itself to this, try to become connected with appropriate web sites or create your own. Cross-promote with writers or organizations with similar interests and audiences. List what you find in this section.

If you have the resources, one of the best things you can do is hire a publicist. There are many levels of financial commitment. At minimum, you will learn many things about book promotion. You can also develop valuable contacts along the way. Don't forget to list that you have a publicist.

Read our book *Make It Big Writing Books* to learn many ways that top-selling authors have creatively promoted their books as well as promotion ideas from top book publicists.

The promotion section of your book proposal will build confidence in the potential for your book. A solid promotion section automatically builds a perspective of you as a hardworking, professional team player.

Publishing houses allocate only limited resources toward book publicity. There is a disproportionate allocation toward books they perceive as "big hits." Most books start out in the so-called middle range. However, by being creative in your promotion section, you not only persuade the agent or editor to consider your book a good risk, you also create a blueprint for how you will make your book a success once it finds its way to print.

CHAPTER 7

The Author Background Section

Presenting Yourself in Your Best Light

In the author background section, you will state why you are qualified to write the proposed book. Without reservation or modesty, you should reveal everything that reflects affirmatively upon you as an expert, a writer, a promoter, and a human being.

How Impressive Is Your Profession?

As with other aspects of the proposal, the importance of this section depends upon your subject. For instance, if you're proposing a business book, it's important to note your professional accomplishments, whereas if you're proposing a lighthearted trivia-type book, the fact that you're breathing may be enough. In all cases, you should list any writing experience you have—even if it was just garage-sale reviews for your local *Pennysaver*.

For many nonfiction subjects, having relevant professional credentials is the most important consideration. Publishers usually prefer to have M.D.'s author medical/health books and Ph.D.'s author certain self-help psychology titles, for instance.

Even if it's not directly relevant, it's generally a good idea to list your career experience. That's one way to say a little bit about who you are as a person. Obviously, if you have an exceptional background or are a celebrity, you can use this to leverage a significantly higher advance.

If Your Background Is Undistinguished

As with the example of the trivia book, in this case what you can write is more important than where you've been. Simply say whatever there is to say about yourself without seeming defensive or embarrassed. Even if you have never been published, if you are submitting a book proposal with a well-thought-out idea and good execution, you are a writer. Be confident and don't whine about anything, ever. Find a balance between egotism and saint-like humility.

Sometimes explaining your passion for a subject might be enough. However, if you're proposing a book about a subject that usually requires professional expertise, you'll be at a disadvantage. Your burden will be to prove that you have the requisite knowledge. Compensations include (a) a strong proposal and sample chapter(s), (b) strong promotability, or (c) getting someone with the relevant credentials to be your co-author.

Additional Materials

In addition to the author background section, there are various self-promotional materials that you may attach to the front or back of the proposal. These include:

- A formal résumé,
- Writing samples from magazines or newspapers,
- Publicity about yourself,
- Your corporate or self-promotional materials,
- Reviews or publicity about previous books.

The author background section can add favorably to the viability of you proposed book, but do not let it intimidate you. See how other authors have handled it, and use it as yet another opportunity to persuade. Anyone can find something positive to say about him- or herself.