

## **Marketing and Acquisitions**

Notes from Both Sides of the Fence  
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I'll give a brief introduction to my experience with both marketing and acquisitions departments, as I've worked in four different roles in the marketing/acquisitions dynamic. I began my career as an acquisitions assistant, and nearly turned down the publicist job that was offered me because I was also getting a master's in English, and who from an English MA department necessarily looks kindly on "marketing people"? Of course what I quickly discovered is that university press book marketing bears no resemblance to a boiler room call center, and at the time, four of the department's five employees were grad school refugees. I went on to be a marketing director for almost eight years, and during the last four of those years I began to acquire books in film studies. And for the last two years I've been a press director.

I'll spend a few minutes outlining things I learned about the marketing/acquisitions dynamic from each of these roles, and then I'll address the relationship from an organizational perspective and talk about some things we've done at Mississippi to strengthen interdepartmental communication and to develop a sense of a common purpose.

**Publicist's perspective:** As a publicist, I needed compelling, accurate information about our books. If an acquiring editor said that this was the first book on the topic X, it had to be true because my and the Press's credibility with media was on the line. I once had a book review editor at a major magazine ask me to wait while he did some online research—in front of me—to confirm a statement I was making about the book, and if I had had incorrect information (or hadn't done just the same search myself to confirm the information) the meeting might have gone very differently. The other thing a publicist desperately needs from acquisitions are media hooks. Is there an anniversary or other notable date associated with the book coming up? Is there a connection between an author or topic to a news story of national import? If an acquisitions editor can provide this kind of information, the promotion of the book becomes not only easier but more effective.

**Marketing director's perspective:** Once I moved into this position, I began to look at the books from two perspectives: how they would sell and how they would enhance (or not) the list and reputation of the press. Interestingly, these are the two questions that I think acquiring editors should also be asking themselves when they take the steps towards signing a book. As a marketing person, obviously I cared about sales, and my thoughts about the list and reputation question were directed more towards how the resources available to my department could be best put to use in service to a book or list. Subject area outliers were difficult because they required a lot of time and expense that wouldn't benefit other groups of books. I was also alert to the times at which I felt I was being sold a bill of goods about a particular title (and probably every acquiring editor has done this so I'm not assigning blame here). If it was a book that I felt was problematic for some reason, then I wanted to be able to express that concern and to get more information about why this book was being signed. That answer may be list building, signing one book to get the second one that you really want, the author is the best friend of the provost, you get the idea. I may not have always agreed with the answer, but having an up-front explanation of the rationale for publishing a book does go a long way in establishing open and productive exchange and a sense of trust.

**Acq. editor's perspective:** I am eternally grateful for having come to acquisitions via marketing. I think it made me a better acquiring editor because I had to be a devil's advocate about my own projects, and the bar was very high. If I failed with a book, it meant that I either wasn't that good an acquiring editor or a marketer, or both—there was nowhere to pass the buck when you're wearing both the hat of acquisitions and marketing. I learned how key it is to be an advocate for your books. If you don't care about them and give people the information they need to do a good job promoting and selling the books, no one in marketing is going to care either. Incomplete or lackluster presentations to staff about the book in launch or other early meetings sets the tone for the whole process. And the reverse can also be true. Knowing you have a good book, explaining in detail its key markets, being honest about how a book builds a list and fits with your other publications, and offering accurate sales points will give a book the best start an acquiring editor can give it.

Director's perspective: First, all acquiring editors should communicate regularly with marketing about projects. Now that I'm back on the flip side of this relationship, I regularly ask our marketing and sales director to offer his opinion on proposals and manuscripts (even if I sometimes know I'm not going to like the feedback). There was recently a memoir I had read twice and had gotten two good readers' reports for, but something still didn't feel right about this book, and I asked our marketing director read parts of it. He pointed out all the book's now-obvious problems—clear to him from the marketing perspective. He was right in how he suggested shaping the book differently to appeal to a market we had well established. Happily the author is amenable to changes, and I'm working with her to present the first two-thirds of the book for publication.

To a director, the issues of sales and list prestige are equally important, and intertwined in a new way. The strength and prestige of the list, if managed well, directly contributes to sales. But sales have to be monitored so adjustments to the list can be made. Importance and popularity of lists wax and wane, and if an organization misses the fact that the focus of a discipline is shifting, the press will be left with a strong list of books that no one will want to buy. Periodic list analysis—using hard sales figures and involving staff from both marketing and acquisitions—is crucial. Using the numbers is especially important. It depersonalizes the discussion—or should—to some degree, and the focus should be on how the books are doing and where they are selling, and not on whether anyone thinks editor X isn't working hard enough and brings in boring books and not on whether marketing is uncommunicative with authors or doesn't care about real scholarship. The numbers and markets are either working or they aren't, and that's the place to start the discussion.

To make all this work as it should, there has to be trust. Staff have to be willing to take constructive feedback, see both sides of the issue, and defend their positions with evidence and numbers (we're trying to make better use of sales data from B&T's Publisher's Alley to present comp title information at meetings and in early discussion of projects). When I came to Mississippi, we began a new monthly meeting involving all the acquiring editors and the marketing and production directors. At these meetings, all the acquiring editors present projects they're considering—usually before they go to readers—and get feedback from the entire group. There are several factors that make these meetings work:

1. Projects are presented at the early stages, not when they're on the docket for the editorial board meeting the next week. If there's a problem with a project, then the acquiring editor has time to work with the author to fix it, can reject the manuscript, or can build a good case—based on actual feedback—for why the book should still be moving toward publication. In interviewing our staff a few weeks ago about this meeting and how it had changed the acquisitions process, our marketing director commented that he had gotten to a mode of “deeply passive acceptance” of books presented to him at launch meetings. But when the books are discussed at an early stage where their fate is not yet decided, staff are more participatory and understand that their input on the decisions that shape the list actually matters.

2. Results happen from these meetings—this is also key. If no one ever acts on the recommendations made, the process becomes meaningless and ineffective. At our meetings, projects are recommended for rejection and then rejected. More commonly, the acquiring editor will sense when something will not pass muster with the group, and he is then able to gently decline the author with the phrase “our editorial group has decided that this book is not for us.” Even more often, good discussions happen around projects that are imperfect but have potential. The group brainstorms about how the project might be improved, given a stronger focus, or be fashioned to better fit our list. Example of NO photography book.

The meeting took about six months to really gel and to get people talking, but once it did, it has become wonderful. This meeting represented a real shift in organizational culture among a group of people who had been working together in one particular way for nearly a decade. I credit all the individuals involved for sticking with the meeting and truly participating. Feedback from the group often gets me more excited about my own projects. Of course, we also still have a great deal of informal exchange. I frequently go down the hall and talk with our marketing director and editor in chief about potential projects between meetings. I personally happen to really enjoy this type of collaboration, but even if seen from the most coldly opportunistic perspective, early communication = greater buy in. The staff has to support the books you want to publish, and editors must start the advocacy process early.

So is conflict unavoidable? Probably not. But it doesn't have to be divisive, and it can force right, if difficult, decisions. Is the marketing/acquisitions relationship changing? In recent years, marketing does seem to be gaining a much stronger voice in the process. However, in light of any tension caused by that shift, I would posit that the interdependence of the two departments is greater than ever. Acquisitions needs marketing to make the books they bring in work in a very difficult marketplace, and marketing (and everyone else) needs acquisitions to bring in strong, successful books that both sell enough to keep the lights on and to contribute to the press's image and ability to attract more of the right books.