

Publishing a Book About Your Company's Products

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on publishing.

My previous articles have shown you how to get into the usually exciting and occasionally high-paying field of book writing. Now I'm going to tell you how to arrange for a book through a publisher about one of your company's products. (**Note:** Although I will be using software as the focus for the examples in this article, the principles I'm describing will apply to *any* non-fiction book about *any* product or service, such as stereo gear, cars, legal services, or specialty catering.)

Why Is A Book About Your Product Important?

Having a third-party book about a product is an enormous marketing boost. Regardless of the size of your user base, a book gives users additional information about the product. A book also gives potential users a chance to evaluate the product and (hopefully) decide in favor of buying it. Most importantly, a book adds mindshare: when people see the product's name on a book in the bookstores, it validates you and your product as a contender in its field. Having a book about your product can mean substantial differences to sales.

How Do Publishers Decide To Write A Book About Your Product?

The normal chain of events is for a publisher to solicit a company about one of its products that's selling well and arrange for a book. At other times, the product manager may approach the publisher to interest them in doing a book about a new product. In fact, many companies maintain relationships with publishers just to keep them apprised of new developments.

Publishers like to sell at least 12-15,000 copies of a book because they'll make a reasonable profit on that volume through normal distribution channels. To figure out if it's going to be worth it to do a book, publishers normally use a metric that looks something like this: you can usually sell books to 5-10% of your potential market over two years (the average lifespan of a technical book), assuming that there's not a ton of competition for the same market slice. Various weighting factors come into this, such as:

- **How hot is the topic?** In the computer/high-tech field, security, high-level programming techniques, and XML have been very hot topics in the last few years. Social media and networking are hot topics right now. What are the next hot topics going to be? (And consider this: if the topic isn't hot now, will it be hot in six months?) There are also endorsements to consider—if the book is endorsed or (better) co-authored by a major industry figure, featured on a national TV show or in a motion picture, or otherwise plugged by a celebrity, then you can sell more books.
- **What's the competition for this book?** Hot topics will pump up the potential sales for a book... but they'll also increase the number of competitors in the field. Are there a gazillion other books

aimed at the same market share, as was the case with the Internet in the late 90s and whatever the latest version of Windows is? If so, can you focus your book to provide some differentiation in the marketplace, such as *Internet for Cats* and *A Field Guide to Windows Icons*?

- **How complex is the product?** Some products are more complex than others. A book about the latest Nintendo or Sega games and game systems, for example, is not going to have nearly the depth of a book about Java programming (but it may have a much wider audience).
- **Does the product desperately need a third-party book?** It may not be politically expedient for the publisher to say so, but if you have a pretty good product that also has pretty bad documentation, there may be a strongly increased market for a third-party book that will fulfill the promise on which the documentation failed to deliver.

Now, if you have a user base of, say, 150,000 users or more, or if you're a big enough company to be able to guarantee that kind of user base for a new product, you'll probably have publishers eating out of your hand. But most companies *don't* have a user base large enough to interest a publisher in their products under normal circumstances. And for a lot of companies, a user base of even 10,000 would be something they only dream about. What can you then do to get a book out on the shelves? The answer is for you to subsidize the printing of the book by arranging with the publisher to purchase a large number of copies beforehand. Purchasing a large number of copies means that the publisher doesn't have to justify sales exclusively through normal channels, which minimizes the publisher's risk for doing the book.

If I'm Paying for It Myself, Why Not Just Self-Publish?

Would self-publishing actually be a better way to go? Suppose that the book is going to list for \$29.95, a typical retail price for a 500 page software technical book these days. The normal wholesale discount is always at least 40% off of the cover price, so a book that lists for \$29.95 will usually wholesale for about \$18. But the big chains and wholesalers buy books in hundreds, sometimes thousands, and they don't get just a 40% discount. When you buy a few thousand copies of a book, you can usually negotiate a 60% or 65% discount off of the cover price, so that same \$29.95 book may only cost a wholesaler \$12 or even \$10.50. On a very large book order (15,000 copies and up), the discount may be as much as 70 or 75%, which would knock the cost for each book down to as low as \$7.50.

To determine if self-publishing is really the best way to go, you need to see how much of the book's price is profit margin as opposed to actual cost of goods. The raw cost for printing a typical book—slapping the ink on the paper and wrapping a cover around it—is around \$3-\$4. Added to this are the publisher's costs for editing, proofing, desktop publishing, cover design, advertising, and so on, as well as additional costs if there's a CD or DVD included in the book, which will add maybe \$1-\$2 a book. And finally, there's the publisher's profit margin, at least another \$1 a book. The fixed costs of doing a book will vary some from these numbers, but you can assume that you're unlikely to get the publisher down below \$7 per copy unless the book was very inexpensive to print or the pre-purchase order is extremely large.

If you're thinking of a small-to-medium order (say, less than 5,000 copies), you may well save a dollar a copy by printing the book yourself, but it's very likely that the amount represented by the

publisher's profit margin will be completely eaten up by production costs. Remember, the publishers are able to negotiate economies of scale that you, a one-time publisher, aren't.

There's something else you should consider. The publisher is also providing advertising and distribution. You're going to get a number of copies of the book for yourself, but you also want the publisher to distribute as many copies on the shelves as you can so you get the maximum marketing whack out of having the book done. Doing the book with a little 2-person publisher is hardly going to give you the distribution you're looking for; you might as well publish the book yourself. So unless you have a need for just a few thousand copies of a book, or you're dealing with a very specialized topic that has specialized distribution requirements, you'll probably want to use a large publisher that already has an extensive array of books in their catalog and a solid reputation for quality, such as Osborne/McGraw-Hill or Addison-Wesley.

Choosing an Author

The author's first responsibility is to create the outline for the book. You may have a broad idea of what you want the book to look like, but the author will flesh out the outline. The author submits the detailed outline to your company for approval. Once the outline is approved, the author should submit a schedule. The outline should have been reviewed by the time you start contract negotiations with the publisher, and both the outline and schedule should be approved by the time you sign the contract with the publisher. You and the author should be ready for the author to start writing the instant the ink dries on the publishing contract.

The first question companies usually have about the author is "Do we pay the author, too?" No, your company doesn't have to worry about paying the author; the publisher will do that. As a matter of fact, the author will probably be rather pleased with this kind of book deal, as they'll be able to calculate their royalties on the pre-sold copies up front and possibly negotiate a bigger advance as a result. In the example above, if the author got a 12% royalty against publisher's net, the royalty on the pre-sold copies alone would total \$17,976. In addition, with a \$60,000 down payment, the author could reasonably expect an advance of \$7200 for 12%, higher than the typical \$5000-6000 advance payment. On top of all of this, the monies due the publisher would all come in within the first 90 days of the book's life, guaranteeing the author a substantial and predictable payment within the first year of the book's life, a much faster rate of return than most third-party books will produce.

Who you choose for the author will depend on the nature of the book, of course. You may have someone in your company who can write the book, either as part of their duties or as a special project. (**Note:** if they're writing the book in addition to their regular duties, don't expect great job performance or even full-time hours from them during that period. They'll be too tired.)

On the other hand, you may want to bring in a special writer with specific industry expertise and name recognition (this may cost you a little extra). Some companies like to split the difference and have two people listed as authors: the company founder or other luminary as the first author, whose name may be purely for the swank value, and the second author, who actually does most of the writing. The circumstances for this will differ from book to book. Be flexible, and don't be afraid to ask the publisher for suggestions, either; they'll probably have a much larger stable of potential authors from which to choose.

Finally, it's reasonable to expect to have control over the choice of author; after all, it's your company's money. Choose an author you have confidence in.

Scheduling the Process

Getting a book written about your product takes a lot of advance planning. Here's a sample timetable showing some standard benchmarks and the *minimum* times for a typical book.

- February 1: Draft the initial scope, purpose, and outline, and start looking for author.
- March 1: Author submits detailed outline and writing schedule to company for review and approval; start contract negotiations with the publisher.
- April 1: Detailed outline and writing schedule is approved. Company signs contract with publisher, publisher signs contract with author. Writing begins.
- April 15: Publisher starts design effort for the cover and initial marketing materials (such as catalog copy).
- May 1: Author submits first chapter for review to publisher, company. Outline and focus may be adjusted at this stage.
- May 15: Review comments for first chapter are incorporated; chapter sent to editing at publisher. Some fine-tuning of the scope possible at this stage, but no substantial scope changes can be made without affecting the delivery date.
- June 1: Cover design circulated between publisher and company, changes made.
- August 1: Author completes manuscript; last chapters are sent in for editing.
- September 1: Final pre-production work completed, cover design finalized and signed off, book is sent off to printing.
- October 1: Book back from printer.

This schedule shows you that it will take at least **8** months to create a book from start to finish. Remember that this schedule assumes that absolutely everything will go smoothly, but there have been many cases where the schedule took a lot longer. It would be wise to make plans in your marketing efforts to allow for potential delays. Some common reasons for delays are:

- difficulty in finalizing an agreement with the publisher,
 - difficulty in finding an acceptable author,
 - difficulty in deciding on the outline (usually more of a problem inside the company, with Marketing, Engineering, and the CEO duking it out),
 - difficulty getting timely reviews and technical information from the company,
- and the ever-popular
- delays in producing the final version of the product being written about.

Above all else, though, the most significant reason for delays in getting the book out is a problem with the writing. The author may get sick, the schedule may be overly optimistic, information may not be available, reviews are held up, some sections may take longer than expected, or the author may simply be late. Do what you can to prevent these obstacles before they start, and budget for the likelihood of the rest.

Putting It All Together

Now that you've got all the pieces, here's how the mechanics of a typical deal would unfold:

Suppose you've a product that only has a user base of 25,000: very respectable, but probably not enough to get a publisher to do a book about it on its own merits. You figure that you can use 10,000 copies of a book for a marketing effort as a giveaway item bundled with another product, and another 10,000 as a registration premium for this product, for an initial order of 20,000 copies. The publisher figures that they can probably sell another 3000-5000 through their normal channels, so the total copies in the market will be about 25,000.

Assuming a cover price of \$29.95 and a 75% discount, each book will cost \$7.49, so 20,000 copies will cost you \$149,800. You'll probably need to pay the publisher \$60,000 on signing the contract (before the author starts writing), another \$60,000 on publication (the day the book first sees the light of day), and the balance within 90 days. Depending on how you've set up the contract, you'll probably receive a large portion of the books you've purchased at publication, and the remainder within a few months.

By the way, if your marketing effort is very successful, you may use up your pre-purchased copies of the book sooner than you expect. If you do, there's no reason why you can't go back to the publisher and ask them for another 5,000 or 10,000 at the same price. They'll be glad to do this: after the first purchase, every additional copy the publisher sells is gravy. You should be able to get the same or similar terms. (If you're really planning ahead, you'll want to put a clause in the original contract that guarantees you the option to buy additional blocks of, say, 500 or 1000 copies at the same price.)

What Do You Do With a Warehouse Full of Books?

There are lots of things you can do with copies of a third-party book about your product. You can use the book as a giveaway at trade shows, a value-added product in your company's product catalog, or as a bonus for registration. Avoid trying to use the book as the primary product documentation. Customers tend to expect that a third-party book will be a secondary source of information, not the sole source, and will probably view this behavior for what it is: cheap. (On the other hand, Dan Gookin's *DOS for Dummies* was so blindingly good, Microsoft bundled it as the primary printed documentation for DOS 6.2, for which they deservedly received rave reviews.)

Perhaps the best use of third-party book is as a marketing piece to be added to other product packages. Consider how you open your software packages: you pull out the disks, the manuals, and the envelope containing the loose sheets of information. You sift the envelope for the registration card, the quick reference card, and the clearly important material, after which the ads and come-ons frequently hit the recycle bin right away. By packaging an entire book, you guarantee that the purchaser will save it and probably take a look at book at some point: *no one* throws away a book right out of the package, no matter how irrelevant it may seem at the time. At worst, it'll go on the user's shelf, with the product name on the spine constantly reminding the user of your product.

Other Considerations

You're going to need someone at your company who is the primary information contact for the author (and initially for the publisher as well). This person could be a senior writer, the technical publications manager, the product manager, or the engineering lead. They will be responsible for running around and tracking down information for the author (who may well live in another part of the country) from anyone directly connected with the product—the developers, the documenters, the sales people, the product manager, and so on. Management must also grant a fair amount of authority to this person so they can get this job done and not be shuffled to one side. (Depending on the tightness of the book schedule, a mandate from management that allows the primary information contact to pre-empt all but the most critical tasks is not inappropriate.)

The primary information contact will also be responsible for coordinating reviews, identifying potential problems to management, and generally removing as many obstacles to the creation of a good book as she or he can. When the book is done, the primary information contact should get a large acknowledgment in front of the book for their work, as well as a cash bonus from the company.

The publisher will usually have a clause in the agreement about “final editorial control.” If you like the look of the publisher's other books (and you probably will, or why did you choose them in the first place?), then it's in your best interests to trust the publisher's judgment. They're in the book biz, not you, and they're unlikely to make a decision that will adversely affect their ability to sell additional copies of the book. However, you will be able to heavily influence the shape of the book by approving the initial detailed outline and by working with the author for effective reviews. Similarly, while your company will usually have the clout to negotiate substantial input into the cover design, the publisher will have final control over the design. Again, the publisher's design choices will be aimed at selling as many of the books as they can. Relax and let them do it.

If you're considering doing a really small book (such as a pocket reference or tip guide), the cost per unit is likely to go down. The cover price will be around \$7.95 or \$9.95, so 20,000 copies might cost as little as \$2.50 each. You can probably accelerate the writing and production schedule as well, and produce the book in as little as 3 or 4 months rather than the usual 8.

If you're planning on doing several books, you might want to talk to the publisher about a specialized *imprint*, with its own special logo or a snipe across the spine. An imprint will set the series off on the shelves and further bolster the market position of your company and its products in the minds of shoppers. The imprint will also probably appear on a separate page of the publisher's retail catalog, drawing the casual shopper's attention to the books. For example, Sun Computers arranged for a special SunSoft imprint through Addison-Wesley. Keep in mind, however, that getting an imprint or a series of books for products and companies that don't have a significant mindshare is pretty ambitious. The bottom line here is “Money talks.”

What if your company doesn't have a lot of visibility in the marketplace for a specific product or venue and you don't have a need to underwrite the number of books necessary to justify the book to a publisher? You might propose a book on a more general topic that has a strong market appeal and then include a version of your software. For example, suppose your company has developed an amazing tool for developing Java scripts using a visual interface. The book might be about developing and using Java scripts in general and then be illustrated with examples that use a cut-

down version of your product (conveniently available on a website for download or, less frequently now, included on a CD in the back of the book). The value that's been added is usually not only an inexpensive version of the product, but a number of additional tools, libraries, scripts, and information that is not currently available anywhere else. For a demo version, you can also include a discount or an upgrade option for users who want to get the full retail product.

Long-Term Considerations

In addition to the marketing and documentation considerations already discussed, there are some significant long-term advantages to doing a book about your company's products. The first of these is the substantial savings for customer support. Consider the following: the actual amortized cost of a typical customer support call—figuring actual time on the phone, research and callback time, initial and ongoing support rep training, workspace costs, and general administrative overhead—starts at \$25-\$50 and can go as high as \$115 for particularly technical products. Each book sold can be counted on eliminating at least one support call; moreover, these support calls are going to be the type of calls usually covered within the typical grace period for a new product (“How do I install this?” “How do I configure this?” “How do I get this to work with other products?”). Assuming that books cost your company \$10 each and they save one call each at a cost of \$40 per call, buying and distributing 1000 copies of the book can save the company \$30,000 in direct overhead costs.

Harder to measure but no less valuable is the level of customer satisfaction provided by having a good product book. Your customers will feel a measure of comfort in having a book about the product. It leads them to believe that you have anticipated their needs and taken steps to answer their questions.

Summary

The advantages of doing books about your company's products are many: you can control your marketing niche, you establish yourself as a force to be reckoned with in your field, and you will reduce your support costs while increasing customer satisfaction. Keep in mind that, if the author's point of view is that writing a book is a lot of work with only minimal amounts of fun during the process, coordinating the effort necessary to create the same book is at least as much work... but probably with most of the fun removed. Nevertheless, creating a book for your company's products is a lot like having a baby: when you finally see it, you tend to forget all the pain and effort that went on in the months before and you say “I'm *so* proud! This has to be the most beautiful one in the whole world!”

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About the Author

John Hedtke is an award-winning author of 26 non-fiction books. He has also written documentation for many leading software products. John is a Fellow of the Society for Technical Communication. He is also a frequent speaker at regional and international conferences on writing, publishing, and finding jobs. A complete bibliography of books, manuals, articles, and awards can be found at his web site, <http://www.hedtke.com>. John lives in Eugene, OR. He can be reached at john@hedtke.com or at 541-554-2189.