

Five must-do steps to prepare you as business owner for published author status

Are you an expert in your field? Or perhaps you'd just like to look like one? Whichever you are, a book with your name on the cover can do a lot to secure your status as an authority in your line of work and attract more customers. In fact, it's the most powerful business card you could ever have.

Dreaming up your business goal, of course, is the easy bit. Getting there can be that much harder – but by no means, impossible. I've worked in the publishing business for more than 15 years, and many of my authors were nervous, excited unknowns, signing a publishing contract for the very first time. Why did I choose to contract them? I'd probably have a different answer for each one, but one thing they all had in common – they'd done their homework. So take some time out to prepare yourself and your 'big idea' for public distribution. And these are essential steps for everyone, whether you're thinking of approaching a publisher, hooking up with an agent or going it alone as a self-publisher.

1 Check out the competition – and take a notebook

Go to your favourite bookshop and comb the shelves for books on your area of expertise. Where in the bookshop are they stacked? Are they in the business books section? Are they on the self-help, or 'mind, body and spirit' bookshelf? What sort of books are there? Are they academic in approach or 'how to' type books, and in what style are they written? At a quiet time, have a word with one of the bookshop staff. Ask them what the most popular books are in your line of business. Which are the fastest-selling – and why do they think that is?

Make a note (or buy!) those titles you think might be similar to the one you want to write. Don't be scared of the competition. Competition is good. Publishers are often shy of publishing where no one has gone before – it raises the gambling stakes for them. But you do need to have a good idea of competing titles and why someone would want to buy your book over any one of them.

2 If you want to write - read first

You can't expect to be a best-selling author and write well-crafted text if you don't read what others are writing. How do you know your work makes for a more motivating read? Read anything: those newsletters you often discard or the business section of your local newspaper. Don't forget to examine all those competing titles – from front to back. You need to have a good idea of where your book fits into this world of the written word.

3 Serve your writing apprenticeship

Blogs, ezines, newsletters, online articles – even letters to friends - are all great opportunities for a creative wordsmith to learn the craft of writing. You need to find a style of writing that you think works best for you and that you know will serve the needs and bookloving wants of your potential readership.

4 Are you good author material?

Publishers are for ever striving to find their perfect author. They might believe they'd found one if you are accurate, creative, deadline aware, can sensibly organise your thoughts and are a good communicator. Your specialist expertise – and passion - are a given, but you've also got to be in it for the money (even if the rewards are not up to a lottery win). Fuzzy, warm notions about wanting to write to make the world a better place won't encourage the most dewy-eyed publisher to heat-seek you out. You've got to reassure them you're commercially determined to drive it to its financial best. After all, that's why they're in business.

5 Have you got a platform to promote your book?

Of course, publishers are not actually looking for authors, they're looking for well-known, 'connected', in-demand speakers whose ease on the podium is queue-getting. Because books don't sell themselves. Creating a platform for yourself means getting out there, becoming known for your expertise and developing a fan base who are supportive of what you do. A book will help you do that but it will also turn your book into a publishing success.

If reading this article has inspired you to decode the secrets of non-fiction publishing and bring your author dream into focus, come along to the everywoman workshop '**A book is a powerful business card**' where Mary will help you create a 'get-published' programme for the next 12 months.

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Mary James is an ex-Editorial Director and now combines her publishing expertise with a hands-on knowledge of the female enterprise market to work with individuals who dream of how a book might enhance their status as experts and get their talents spotted, but don't quite know how to go about it. For more information, go to www.getpublishedadvice.co.uk.