Secrets of Successful Writers

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I am an author, the Chief Editor of Books at Harvard Health Publications, and the director of an annual Harvard CME publishing course. Much of my work as an editor and writing instructor is about helping healthcare professionals translate their knowledge into a powerful consumer health message. With increasingly shorter office visits, a growing trend towards prevention and self-help, and a public that is being encouraged by the availability of electronic media to do research to educate themselves health articles and books fill an important need and the public can't get enough.

Despite a difficult national economic situation and the decline of print publishing, there are still plenty of wonderful opportunities for writers to publish, especially healthcare professionals who have much to offer readers. Whether you are a nurse writer, editor or reviewer, there are still plenty of excellent ways to bring healthcare information to consumers and others.

Plan to Succeed

Writers don’t plan to fail, but they often fail to plan. Succeeding as a writer is easier if you have a plan. Many writers wait for the right mood to hit them before they’ll commit words to paper. But most successful writers will tell you they write regularly - even when they are tired, sick, cranky and overwhelmed. Whether it’s 1000 words a day or finishing one article for a deadline, successful writers produce—whether they feel like it or not.

There are many ways to develop a plan, but the most important thing is to set goals and consistently work toward achieving them. People often ask me about how to set writing goals. Many successful writers have formulas that they use such as the classic “1000 words a day.” But what works for one person doesn’t necessarily work for another. For example, some writers get up early in the morning and write before their day begins, but for me that would be torture. So, here’s what I tell writers about how to set goals:

1. Goals get you to where you want to be, so definitely set them.
2. Figure out what is realistic for you over the next year. Set monthly goals that will lead you to accomplish what you want to in the course of the year.
3. Write your goals down.
4. Set a date on your calendar to check them every month.
5. Revise them if necessary. Goals that work are those that are somewhat flexible.

Think of your goals as a means to achieving success. Don’t be discouraged if at first you don’t reach your goals; understand that just as with an article or book manuscript, revising them is part of the process.
Find Stories Around You

Most writers need fantastic stories—whether they write fiction or nonfiction. I have talked to many young writers who have gone off on wonderful adventures seeking material for their great American novel. But most of us cannot drop everything we are currently doing to live among tribes in Africa or Afghanistan. And the truth is, there are many golden stories waiting to be sifted out of even the most seemingly mundane of life’s experiences.

Jill Grimes, M.D., a family physician, realized this about one of the routine procedures she performs during the course of her day in the office: the Pap smear. Pap smears are commonplace, a normal part of every female patient’s yearly visit. What Jill became fascinated by were the stories her patients shared with her during these visits. Often these were well-educated, middle-aged women concerned about sexually transmitted diseases. When Jill attended my publishing course, she participated in “Shameless Pitches,” a session during which participants are given one minute to pitch their book ideas. When it was Jill’s turn she strode up to the podium and after a quick introduction described her book, “Stirrup Tales,” about sexually transmitted diseases (her title had everyone smiling at the get-go). It was a fascinating proposal and she finished right on time, just as the buzzer sounded.

One editor, who was part of the panel of judges, was so impressed with Jill’s book idea, that she offered her a contract - then and there! (Stirrup Tales is now a new release from Johns Hopkins University Press, re-titled Seductive Delusions: How Everyday People Catch STDs - check out the provocative cover on Amazon.com). Jill turned her ordinary life experience into an important self-help book for the public.

In preparation for “Shameless Pitches” I offer participants the opportunity to attend a workshop on how to give a great book pitch. A lot of editors refer to this pitch as an “elevator conversation” in which you have a very short time, perhaps the length of an elevator ride, to convince someone that your idea is worthwhile. This is an important skill to learn because in this busy industry, most editors don’t have a lot of time to listen to new ideas. Those of you who are nurse editors understand this. You likely receive pitches all the time, and you know that pitches can get old fast, especially if they are long winded and unfocused.

Move the Chain

Many writers who speak at my course are published book authors, but not all. One graduate, Suzanne Koven, M.D., asked if she could come back to the course to speak. Suzanne had been writing online for an interfaith e-zine and was taking literature and publishing courses at the Harvard Extension School. One year had passed since she took my publishing course and she was still honing her book proposal.

In her inspiring talk Suzanne pointed out that like her, most people don’t find instant success in publishing. She used a football analogy; she thought of her writing goals as a way of “just moving the chain” -- which is what happens in football when the offense tries for a first down. Along the sidelines, the chain is moved and marks the progress.

I often think of Suzanne’s great analogy, and I share it with my students at my course every year.
It’s important for them to know that publishing is a process. Success usually comes in the form of “moving the chain” rather than scoring a touchdown right away.

**Package Your Writing**

A great book idea, combined with your education, training and clinical experience, add up to what publishers call platform, your entrée to becoming a book author. However, going from the idea phase to the published book phase takes knowledge and contacts.

It is important to understand publishing protocols and how editors expect prospective authors to present their work for consideration. In nonfiction book publishing the author presents an idea in the form of a book proposal that includes an overview or summary of the book, a competition section describing similar books that have been published, a markets section that details the book’s audience, and finally an about the author section that highlights the author’s expertise.

Many authors are inclined to write their books before approaching a publisher, but editors don’t have the time to read entire manuscripts before deciding on their merit. Also, most editors at publishing houses are quite skilled at helping authors to shape books and often prefer to be included in the creative process.

As with medicine, which has many protocols of its own, the publishing industry has accepted ways of doing things that make for a smoother process—and ultimately a better book. Imagine the chaos that would occur if an ICU physician wrote an order that read, “Give the patient something for his blood pressure—it’s sky high.” No matter how highly skilled the ICU nurse might be, he or she depends on orders that follow a certain protocol. In the same way, writers must submit their work to editors appropriately. If you fail to do this, it may mean a rejection--even before the work gets reviewed.

**Network and Make New Contacts**

Every successful writer needs to have a long list of contacts in the publishing industry. This can be a challenge for nurses and other healthcare professionals to develop, because publishing professionals are often not part of our everyday work environment.

However, if you are trying to get a book published, the next step after packaging your writing into a proposal is to get a literary agent or an acquisitions editor at a press to read it. A literary agent is a broker between the seller (you) and the buyer (the editor at a press). In the bigger publishing houses, editors usually only respond to proposals that are submitted by literary agents, because they assume the proposals will be in the correct format and ready for review. Editors at university and smaller trade presses will often read a proposal that is submitted by an author directly.

It is not unusual for a literary agent or acquisitions editor to receive between 50-100 proposals a day. This makes it impossible for them to take more than just a few seconds to review each of them. Here is where establishing a personal connection with an agent or editor can make all the difference in the world. The best way for most prospective authors to do this is to attend a publishing course that offers networking opportunities with publishing professionals.

Debbie Carvalko is a senior acquisitions editor in psychology and health for Praeger Publishers.
has been a faculty member at the publishing course that I direct and has made connections there with many of the authors whose books she has represented. Debbie says, “There are authors that come to the course with book proposals that are already gems, and others who have ideas that could easily shine, with a touch of editorial polish or reshaping...this is a great opportunity for me to spend quality time with budding writers.”

Janice Bell Meisenhelder, DNSc, RN jump started her publishing career by taking a publishing course. As an associate professor at the Massachusetts General Hospital’s Institute of Health Professions, she had a lot of ideas about what she wanted to write. However, honing those ideas and then pitching them to editors is something she focused on at the course. Janice advises others to do the same, "Taking a course will save you significant frustration as you attempt to make a dent in this highly competitive field."

Whether you take a course or network some other way, contacts are an essential part of a successful publishing career.

Julie Silver, MD is an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and an award-winning author of more than a dozen books including Super Healing (Rodale) and What Helped Get Me Through (American Cancer Society). She is founder and director of the popular Harvard CME course, Publishing Books, Memoirs and Other Creative Nonfiction (www.HarvardWriters.com), coming up on March 25-27, 2010.