How To Get Your Ideas in Print

Your published articles may do more to enhance your credibility—and career—than anything you do on the job.

By KIMBERLY A. EDWARDS

There's more to be gained from authorship than the satisfaction of seeing your byline beneath a well written story. Visibility, new clients, leadership in the field and even fortune can be yours when you see books, magazine articles and contributors' columns as business tools. If you take the time to learn how to write well and carefully identify your audience, the rewards are many.

Writing for magazines

Believe it or not, tackling magazine articles can be much easier for you, the specialist, than it is for most aspiring free-lance writers who spend countless hours sending articles on any subject imaginable to any publication imaginable. The smart writer realizes that he or she would be better off with a developed, saleable specialty. As an HRD professional, you already have that kind of specialty, so it's just a matter of targeting your efforts to the publications read by potential clients (and people you want to impress).

Before you begin writing, though, do some research. Who, precisely, are your target clients? What magazines do they read? If you specialize in training engineers, look at what engineers read. Go to the library and find out about engineers' clubs and associations, then write to find out if they publish a magazine. Also, check *Writer's Market*, a listing of thousands of magazines. Send off for sample copies of these magazines and their guidelines for contributors. Now study them. Look at the ads, the letters to the editor, the columns and the major features. Analyze readers' interests and needs. Inspect the articles. Are they short or are they long? Are they how-to's or philosophical pieces? Do the articles start with alarming statistics or funny anecdotes? Each magazine has its own personality; dissect it with fervor.

When you find a magazine whose readers might gain from your expertise, think of a topic that fits the format. Professional magazines won't promote your business, but they do seek articles on topics that solve readers' problems. As in the case of engineers, what problems do engineers have that you can help them with? Keep in mind that an article idea is different from a general subject. "Training" is a subject area. Examples of article ideas would be "The Engineer's Guide to Setting Career Goals" (for a general engineers' magazine) or "Pinpointing Training Needs of Engineers" (for a magazine read by engineers' administrators). Do you see the difference? You must fill a need. Creating an article first, then trying to market, can spell disaster. Instead, pinpoint your interests and passions, find markets that coincide and create only for them.

Regardless of who you want to shoot for, *don't* submit your manuscript until you've sent a query letter to the editor responsible. What's a query? It's a one-page letter describing your specific article idea, why you think it might be appropriate, what particular reader problem it will solve and how you plan to develop it. Include a few sentences on why you're qualified to write on the subject. Always enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope (rule #1 in writing when you write an editor for *anything*). The query saves you from wasting time on the article in case the editor feels your idea won't work or has recently run a similar article. Because your query represents you (as does an interview), you should make it direct, smooth, professional. If you'd like further information on writing query letters, consult a book on free-lance writing or read *Writer's Digest* or *The Writer*, two professional writers' magazines that frequently run query pieces.

Selling a book idea to a publisher means meeting a market need

Small, specialized magazines typically are more tolerant of beginners and will serve as an excellent training ground for you. After you've established a track record, you may want to try top-circulation, general interest magazines. Comb these magazines for "update" sections that run short, interesting articles. Now think of an aspect of training that might be of interest to that readership, whether it be composed of housewives, career women, or sports-minded folk. It's unlikely that the most popular magazines will want a major article from you—they receive thousands of manuscripts each month and prefer to deal with professional writers—but it's always possible.

An interested editor probably will ask you to submit your manuscript on speculation. This means they'll consider it with no strings attached. In other words, it's time for you to write, revise and prepare your manuscript for submission—and you'd better deliver what you promised in the query. But before you start, pull out the magazine. Again, look at format, style, readership. What do readers already know about the subject you're writing on? Start *there*—not above, and certainly not below—because you don't want to rehash what they already know. Now develop a short outline.

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The Rules of Writing for Publication

1. Your idea must be *marketable* as well as good.
2. Study like crazy a publication or, in the case of a book, a publishing company, before even approaching an editor with an idea.
3. Always enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. Make sure to stick on enough postage.
4. Develop a clear, simple style. Put people into your writing. Even the most boring subject will come alive when it's wrapped around a human story.
5. Query letters and manuscripts must be impeccably written! Go through at least 10 drafts and cut, cut, cut. Query letters and manuscripts must also be impeccably typed, double-spaced.
6. Meet all deadlines established by an editor; follow through on your promises.
7. Don't take rejection personally. If your idea is a good one and the writing clear, chances are that the timing was wrong for the magazine (or publishing company). Chin up and try again!

An editor's note: When querying an editor, your own credibility will benefit from addressing the editor by name and spelling the name correctly. To address a woman editor as Dear Sir suggests you don't know your audience. Every magazine lists the editor in the masthead at the front of the publication.

You should go through at least 10 drafts. Saving editors the trouble an unprofessional manuscript causes will save your story. Each time, cut out the excess, even though it hurts. Use simple words rather than big ones—unless the magazine prefers big ones.

People like to read about people, so keep human interest high. Set each draft aside for a day or two. When you pull it out, you'll be able to read it more objectively. Then, when you feel that it's polished, give it to someone who will give you an honest assessment. Is it interesting? Helpful? To the point? Is it organized so that the reader can follow it? If you don't know anybody who can do this for you, consider hiring an editor to read it—a small price to pay for a nice article.

A word about grammar, punctuation and diction: Apply as much attention to these aspects of professional writing as you do to your field. If this is a problem for you, then find someone to check your story.

When you're certain that you've got the best product possible, type it double-spaced on non-erasable white paper. Page one should carry your name, address and telephone number in the upper corner. The title should appear about halfway down the first page. Count the number of words in the manuscript and place the figure in the corner opposite your name and address. Submit the manuscript with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. *Keep a file copy of everything you send.*

There are other issues you may wish to investigate, such as what rights to sell. Writers' groups suggest selling only First North American Rights. This means that, upon publication of the article, the rights revert to you to resell or resubmit to another magazine. Familiarize yourself with current copyright laws.

What about pay? Naturally, large magazines pay the most—hundreds, even thousands of dollars. Smaller magazines pay up to 15 cents per word. No, you won't get rich, but think of the benefits of exposure. That's why many business people write for free for professional journals that do not pay.

Book writing

Selling a book idea to a publisher means meeting a market need. To increase your chances of writing a book that will meet market needs, there are a number of things you should do, according to Sandra Dijkstra, a California literary agent. In a recent talk to the San Diego Writers/Editors Guild, she suggested that an aspiring author first understand the business. Read *Publishers Weekly*, the trade magazine of the book industry. Look at publishers' catalogues and find out what's hot at bookstores. Read *Small Press*, a magazine that reviews books published by the numerous small presses. Read the *New York Times* book review section and weekly *Review of Books* to see what books are being reviewed. Ask yourself these questions: Is my book timely? (Interest in topics comes and goes.) Does my book have a clear focus? Is my book unique? You should research what's already out there. If there are 10 books on your subject already in existence, chances are that no publishing house will want to gamble on another one. But if your idea is truly unique, someone may be interested.

If you've done your research and still think your idea is marketable, put together an outline and three sample chapters, then send them to a company that publishes similar materials. Consult *Writer's Market* for a list of publishing companies and the types of materials they're looking for. If you see a book on a similar topic, the publisher might be interested in yours.

Many authors choose to publish their own books. Only do so if you have the time and energy to enter the marketing and distributing arenas. Buying advertising, sending out review copies, dealing with bookstores (most of which prefer not to deal with first authors): If these activities appeal to you, self-publishing may be the answer. One Massachusetts training consultant who has successfully self-published and marketed books through mail order and with the help of TV appearances and write-ups in national magazines is Jeffrey Lant. Lant is author of *The Consultant's Kit* and *The Unabashed Self-Promoter's Guide: What Every Man, Woman, Child, and Organization Needs to Know About Exploiting the Media* (JLA Publications, 50 Follen Street, Suite 501, Cambridge, MA 02138). In addition to mail order, you can sell your (and other people's) books through your workshops or seminars, as does Al Galasso, director of the American Bookdealers Exchange (Box 2525, La Mesa, CA 92041). If you're at all intrigued by the thought of publishing your own book, you might want to take a class on it through adult education and community colleges. Another excellent resource is Dan Poynter's *The Self-Publishing Manual, How to Write, Print, & Sell Your Own Book* (Para Publishing, Box 4232, Santa Barbara, CA 93103; $14.95).

Contributors' columns

There are many other exciting possibilities for the human resources specialist to pursue. Write op-ed pieces for the editorial section of your newspaper. Write letters to the editor. Contribute articles to the business section of your newspaper. Offer to write short pieces for association newsletters. Think of something interesting about yourself or your business. (Do you advise clients while standing on your head? Are you one of 25 kids, all of whom became millionaire trainers?) Approach local newspapers and magazines with an idea for an article *on* you rather than *by* you.

The opportunities are endless. This article is just meant to get your wheels going. The bottom line is that you start with a small publication and with a lively, problem-solving idea. Make sure you know the audience and understand its interest, problems and needs. Come up with an idea that will make life easier for the readers.

Make copies of everything you publish. Distribute them to clients, colleagues, supervisors, even new editors you want to write for. Nothing establishes your professional credibility as much as your name in print. Soon you will be perceived as a leader whose opinion counts, and who knows how to write about it. As word gets out, you will be asked by bulletin and magazine editors to analyze trends, report on trade shows and interview other industry leaders. Knowledge, enthusiasm, timing and a unique twist will get you everywhere in the print media.