

Meg Schneider Interview – How To Create A Killer Book Proposal

Garrett: Hello everybody and welcome to another expert interview for how to write a book ASAP. This is Garrett Pierson and today I have the wonderful opportunity to interview Meg Schneider.

Garrett: I want to welcome you to the call and Meg is an award-winning writer with more than 20 years experience in journalism and public relations. She's the author of co-author of eleven books including two for writers, *The Everything Guide to Writing a Book Proposal* and *Everything Get Published*, 2nd Edition, both published by Adams Media.

Meg's journalism honors include awards from the Iowa Associated Press Managing Editors, Women in Communications; the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association, Gannett, New York State Associated Press, and the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. That's a mouthful. She's got a lot of awards and honors and Meg, welcome to the call.

Meg: Thanks for having me.

Garrett: Today everybody, we're going to be talking about how to create a killer book proposal. I contacted Meg because she's written the book on writing a book proposal, and this call today is going to be packed full of information to help you write a book proposal yourself. Let's start out and dive into you, who you are, and how you got into the writing industry, and a bit more about your bio.

Meg: I've been writing since I learned how. I turned that into a journalism degree and career because that was the easiest way to make money at writing. I fell into book publishing. I always wanted to publish a book since I was a little kid, but I had no idea how this was going to happen.

I met my agent almost 20 years ago now, when she was giving a seminar on selling your writing. It turned out she lived in the area that was covered by the newspaper I worked for so I did a profile on her for our newspaper and we just stayed in touch for several years. One day she had a project she needed a writer for and she asked me if I'd be interested in doing it.

I kind of lucked into getting into book publishing but I've learned a lot over the last ten years about how the publishing industry works and what writers need to do in order to be successful. I should note too that those two books you mentioned I wrote with my agent, so she is the expert on this. The information in there is really good. She's been doing this for almost 30 years now. She's got a lot of experience.

Garrett: She was your literary agent, is that right?

Meg: Yes.

Garrett: Let's talk about the importance of a literary agent. The traditional publishing route, more times than not a literary agent is very important, so how important is an agent? You have one. Are they really that necessary?

Meg: It depends on what kind of writing you want to do. If you're writing for magazines or websites or you're writing children's books then you don't need an agent. In fact, you probably won't be able to find one. The agents make their money off of

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selling their writers' work. If you're selling short stories or magazine articles or children's books, I'm talking about not young adult but honest-to-goodness children's books, then the money involved doesn't make it worth the agent's time.

The publishers of those materials know that so they don't require you to have an agent. If however you want to publish book-length fiction or nonfiction then I would recommend seeking an agent first, before you try admitting directly to publishers. Some publishers will accept un-agented submissions, but the problem becomes that if you shop your proposal or manuscript around to publishers and get a bunch of rejections, and then you try to look for an agent after that, you've already made the agent's job more difficult because publishers have already said no. I would recommend seeking an agent first, before you go directly to publishers.

The reason my agent is worth her weight in gold as far as I'm concerned is she has the contacts in the publishing industry; she has relationships with editors; she knows what they want; she knows what makes a good contract for me, and her motivation is to get me the best deal possible because that's how she and I both make money.

The other thing is she handles all the business stuff, so I don't have to worry about that. I don't have to worry about what the royalty rate is because she knows what the standard is and she knows what a good royalty and bad royalty rate is. She negotiates all that.

In addition, when I have problems with people I'm collaborating with or with editors or what have you, she's my first point of contact. She can take care of smoothing over a lot of problems which preserves my reputation with the people I'm working with and allows me to step away because writers, we're a bit loopy, and we get in our snits every once in a while, and that's okay. But it's not professional to expose the editors or your collaborators to those snits. My agent serves as a sounding board for me so I can write her an email and say I'm just venting, I'm frustrated, and I don't know what to do about this. What are your suggestions? Then she'll tell me.

The other thing that's happened a couple of times to me was something has come up when I'm on deadline and I'm not going to be able to meet the deadline. I explain what's going on to my agent and she can handle talking to the editor or whoever else is involved and making that a bit easier, smoothing out the rough spots.

Garrett: I think you've really given some great insight on why a literary agent is important and how they help you. Going into more in depth of the traditional publishing route, what is an editor? How does the editor play a role in getting your book published? You get your literary agent and I assume they contact the publishing house and their first point of contact, I'm guessing, is probably the editor. Is that right?

Meg: Yes. This is the other nice thing about the agent, because they have these relationships with editors they know what kinds of material these editors like and so they know better than us poor writers could ever know how to really pinpoint the target markets for their proposals, which is good.

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It depends on where they work because every organization has a different structure, but in general the editor is the gatekeeper. Their job is to read the material, screen through the material, and make the first yes or no decision on any material that has come across their desk. If they say no we're not interested, this doesn't fit for whatever reason, they'll still do that. If they like something they are rarely the final decision maker on whether to offer a contract. Even in magazine publishing, if an editor finds an article or a feature story or short story they like, they're going to have to pitch it to their editorial team for publication. They may not win that pitch. Other people may decide it doesn't really fit for what we're trying to do.

In book publishing, the editor also has to convince her boss that this is a good idea and then she has to convince the sales department and the publicity department that this particular book has the potential to make money. Remember, publishing is a business, so this is always a consideration. I'll tell you now if the sales staff doesn't think they can get orders for you book proposal they editor is going to have to issue a rejection.

Garrett: Wow, that was great insight. Let's talk about that book proposal because from what it sounds like, if you can convince the editor -- first of all your literary agent and then the editor, they're going to have to convince the sales team and the board essentially of the publishing house. I'm guessing that proposal has to be very powerful in the sense of letting them know how the book is going to sell and make money. Let's get into the book proposal and how to write a killer book proposal and my first question is; is a proposal different for fiction verses nonfiction?

Meg: The main difference between fiction and nonfiction is that for nonfiction you do not have to write the entire book before you shop it around to agents or publishers. Nonfiction books are sold on the basis of a proposal which usually includes an outline of what the book will cover, as well as one to three sample chapters. I would say if you don't have any book credits to your name then write three sample chapters because the more you can show that you can follow the project through the better off you are when you're just starting out. When you're established then you can sometimes get away with just doing one sample chapter, but I wouldn't recommend that for new writers.

In a fiction proposal, although you may only submit the first fifty pages to begin with, you have to have the manuscript done before you start pitching to agents or editors because too many of them have been burned by new writers who cannot carry through an entire novel. Most agents and editors, and I would say by most I mean probably 99.5% of them won't consider looking at a fiction proposal unless it is clear that the manuscript is complete.

That's the big difference. Each proposal you need to have a cover letter. For fiction you'll need to have a synopsis of the plot and that has to include how the novel ends. A lot of writers want to build suspense but in the synopsis you need to give away all the spoilers because this is what the editor is going to read to decide how well your story is structured and whether they want to read more. Every editor and agent is going to read the synopsis before they start reading the actual manuscript. So like I said, all the spoilers go in your synopsis for fiction.

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For nonfiction, you should include a discussion of the potential market for your book, and this requires doing some research but the more you can show that readers will want your book, that there's a sizeable market out there for it, the better off your proposal will be.

For instance if you're doing a book about crafting, then include numbers about how many people engage in scrapbooking and sewing and knitting and that kind of thing. Find out how much people spend on those kinds of activities. Include that in your discussion of the market.

The other thing you need to include in your nonfiction proposal is a discussion of competing books. You don't need to do sales figures for those books, like how many copies they've sold, because publishers have much better access to much numbers than you'll ever be able to find for that. But you need to talk about what other books are on the market, how your book stands out and is different from the existing market, and you'll want to show where your book would fit on a bookstore shelf, and what other books people will be looking at when they're browsing those shelves, and what will make them pull your book off the shelf and decide to buy it.

The key to the competition is to be positive and professional. Point out what's lacking in the competing books but don't be snotty about it because you never know whether the agent or editor that you're pitching has worked on that book that you're criticizing. Make sure you're professional in your criticism about it.

Garrett: Interesting. If you had to paint a picture of all of the elements of a book proposal, what would the first page be to the last page, quickly going through painting a picture?

Meg: For a fiction proposal you would need a cover letter. I always recommend including a copy of your original query letter because that saves the editor/agent the hassle of going and searching and finding your original query in their files. It serves as a reminder as to why they asked to see more material. So cover letter, original query letter.

For fiction, your next page would be a synopsis of your novel. Then whatever the agent or editor has requested, which is sometimes the first two chapters, or the first 50 pages, or what have you. That's really all you need for your fiction proposal.

For a nonfiction proposal you want the cover letter, the original query, and then you would want an overview of your book, which would explain what your book is about, what it covers. Then an outline of that book which is a chapter-by-chapter discussion, one or two sentences per chapter of what that chapter covers. Then you'll need the market overview, the discussion of competing books. You'll also need a promotion plan and this can be a one-page thing, where you provide ideas on how to promote your book when it's published. That's where you say you're available for interviews, and personal appearances, book signings, and that kind of thing. But also include any other marketing ideas you have. For instance, if your book would fit in well with trade shows, and you're willing to go to these trade shows to promote the book you'd put that in there.

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Then you include the sample chapters, one to three chapters, and they don't have to be consecutive in a non-fiction book. They do in fiction but not in nonfiction. That would be it. Then of course if you want your materials returned then you have to include a self-addressed stamped envelope, and that would be it.

Garrett: To you, what makes a proposal a killer proposal? Give us some tips and insight into what you think really makes a book proposal pop out and get to the next level of getting the book published.

Meg: If you can show an agent or editor that you've really done your homework, that you know who will read your book and how many people there are in that potential readership, that's probably the single most important factor. Too many new authors think everyone is going to want to read their book. Not everyone reads, and not everyone reads the same book, even bestselling novels don't get read by everyone. You really need to narrow down and focus on who your target reader is, and then how many of your target readers are out there. That's a big thing.

The other big thing is making sure you are marketing your book, your proposal to people who will be interested in it. I can't tell you how many times agents and editors list in their market listings that they don't handle romances, for instance, but every month they will get dozens if not hundreds of queries and proposals for romance novels. If you can't even target your proposal to the agents or editors who are most likely to be interested, your chances of being successful are just slim-to-none. Remember your primary market is who your final readers will be but to get to those final readers you have to go through the gatekeepers who are interested in reaching those readers.

Garrett: Interesting. Those were some amazing tips. I love that. To me, doing your homework is a huge piece, one of the biggest tips that I just heard you say. What are some other common mistakes authors make when creating a proposal?

Meg: Probably the biggest one is not doing their research on the kinds of agents and editors who would be interested in that work. That's probably the number one mistake. Second is being very demanding. The fact is that agents and editors are incredibly busy people. Most of them work 60 or more hours a week. None of them get overtime. They have to deal with the demands of the business day before they can even begin to start looking at the submissions they get every day, and they get pounds and pounds of submissions every single day. Their inboxes are full of queries and proposals and all kinds of stuff.

So patience is difficult, but it is absolutely essential. You don't do yourself any favors if you are nagging or harassing an agent or editor to respond to your submission. It's perfectly appropriate, what I recommend is in most of the submission guidelines they will tell you what their usual response time is. For instance if an agent says she will respond in two months to a proposal, then mark on your calendar when you sent your proposal, and two weeks after the expected report date, fire off a very polite and professional email saying "I sent you this proposal on such-and-such a date, and I haven't heard back yet. I just wanted to make sure it didn't get lost in the shuffle."

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Then wait. If you don't hear back, don't start nagging for them to speed up the process. You don't know what's going on in their lives in addition to their professional obligations. Everybody has personal lives too and all kinds of things can blow up. Being a pest is a really good way to ruin your reputation before you even get started. Always be professional. Those are probably the two big things, do your homework and be professional.

Garrett: On the submission process, whether it's a query letter or the proposal, is there a better way to do it or should the author just find out what the editor or literary agent wants? Is it better to mail it or email it?

Meg: It depends on what the editor's or agent's preferences are. Most editors and agents these days will accept email queries but a lot of them will not accept attachments via email until they've white listed your email address in their accounts. Read the directory information very carefully. Most of these places have websites and they have submission guidelines there. Follow the instructions because if you can't follow the instructions for submitting a proposal, or a query, then the editor/agent already knows that you're going to be difficult to work with. That puts a black mark against you too.

Garrett: So thank you so much. You've given us amazing tips on writing a book proposal. Do you have any resources or places that the author can go to see example query letters or example book proposals? Are there any good places someone could go to see examples so they could have somewhat of a blueprint to follow?

Meg: There are all kinds of books and online resources about writing query letters and writing proposals. I would caution you though, that especially on the query letters if you're looking for examples that's fine but don't copy those letters. Agents and editors get a whole bunch of cookie cutter stuff anyway and that's not going to help you. When you're looking at examples look at the mechanics of it, the format, and use that but make sure that your query expresses your ideas in your words. That's how you're going to catch somebody's attention.

Garrett: Perfect.

Meg: The books that you mentioned, we have in the *Everything Get Published* book, there are sample query letters and proposals in the back of that book. There are several websites that can help out. For instance I recommend especially for new writers, there's a lot of good information on writersweekly.com. They have success stories, they have Ask the Expert column, they have really good information for new writers.

The other thing would be to trust your instincts. Everybody's ideas are different and the way we express them are all different. Don't be afraid to express your own personality and ideas because that's really what you have to sell.

Garrett: It sounds like be the authentic you and that's what's going to help you get that book proposal into the right hands and catch their eyes. Just so the listeners understand, under this audio I will have links to both of Meg's books to help you out and to the resources that she mentioned, so make sure that you go and buy her books that she's written with -- your literary agent, is that right?

Meg: Yes.

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Garrett: Last question, in your opinion where is the publishing industry currently and where is it going?

Meg: To be perfectly honest I don't want to be Johnny Raincloud here but the publishing industry is having a tough time right now. The reason is because few of the big publishers have really embraced the digital media era. Some have, but a lot are still struggling to catch up to figure out how ebooks fit into their business model, and how they can still make money, pay authors, and get all this done.

In many ways, the great recession -- I don't know that we're officially out of it yet or not, sometimes it doesn't feel like we are -- in many ways publishing got hit really hard by the economy in the last few years. That has led them to be very cautious.

On the flipside of that, all kinds of new opportunities have shown up for writers to self publish and promote their own works and there are still an awful lot of charlatans out there that take advantage of new writers' egos. But there are some legitimate self-publishing firms and you need to do your homework and make sure the investment you're making if you decided to go the self-publishing route makes sense for you. There have been several cases where self-published books have done so well that they've been picked up by traditional publishers.

There are all kinds of avenues for writers to take these days and in many ways there are more opportunities than there ever have been before. All of my books have been traditionally published and I'm certainly not saying that that's not the way to go but if your market, your target market is small, chances are you're not going to attract a traditional publisher; self-publishing may be an option for you.

This is another reason why I'm so pro-agent, because agents understand what's going on and they understand which houses are in good shape, and which ones aren't. You can avoid a lot of heartache and hassle by just letting the agent take care of the business side for you.

Garrett: Thank you so much Meg, for your time, the tips and strategies that you've given us today on how to write a killer book proposal and the publishing industry. If someone wanted to learn more about you and your services where should they go?

Meg: MEGSCHNEIDER.COM and they can contact me through there as well.

Garrett: Cool, and again I'll have the links to Meg's books below and go check out her website; check her out and the books that she's written, and thanks again Meg.

Meg: Thank you.