

Preparing for Success: The Author Questionnaire

by Linda Rohrbough
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Very few pre-published authors have any idea what's coming after they sign their first book contract, because no one talks about that part of the process. So imagine the surprise when about two weeks signing a rather lengthy questionnaire shows up from the publisher that I'm going to call the "Author Questionnaire."

Some new fiction authors get afraid, choke, and don't do it because they don't understand why they should. Other authors say most of the questions could be answered from the proposal. Either way, if you don't know it's coming, the Author Questionnaire which I'll now refer to as the AQ, is a lot of work that some authors just avoid doing altogether. There's nothing in your contract that will require you do this task. But you want to prepare as far in advance as you can for the questions you're going to be asked so you can do a good job answering. Here's what to expect and why.

You need to know that the marketing people at your publisher will never see your proposal. But they will study and use the AQ to plan promotion angles for your book and to answer questions from the media. So the worst thing you can do as an author is to blow off this rather arduous task. That's because the message you send the marketing department if you ignore the AQ is you don't care if they promote your book. And if you don't care, or worse, if you insult them by not bothering to offer any assistance to them, how much effort do you think they're going to put in?

Let me give you an example. A co-author I worked with said to me the information asked for in the AQ was already in the proposal, so they slopped it out, just filling out the basics on the first couple of pages and ignoring the rest. I, on the other

hand, had been preparing for this (and asked them to as well), so I had pages of information ready to go that I simply cut and pasted into the AQ, including material I lifted directly from the proposal. So my completed AQ was twenty pages while my co-author's was five with lots of blanks.

When our title appeared on the publisher's website, my co-author was upset. Not only did they leave out the professional credentials after my co-author's name, but the only author described under the book was biographical information about me. There was nothing about my co-author. The editor eventually got the problem fixed after a bunch of calls and e-mails from my co-author, but clearly a message was sent.

So what kind of information can you expect to provide? You can expect questions about your background, where you grew up, if you're related to or affiliated with anyone famous (like Oprah's cousin, for example). You'll also find questions about contact information for your local media outlets, such as your local newspaper, radio and television stations. You'll be asked who you believe is the typical reader for your book and if there are any publications that might be of interest to these readers where the book could be promoted. For example, in the case of my latest book on weight loss surgery with the adjustable gastric band, I listed all the magazines aimed at people who had weight loss surgery. I'd also been compiling a list of groups I belong to that offer mailing lists of their members that could be rented.

I'd also compiled a list of media people who might be interested that I had either talked with or knew, and was prepared with their detailed contact information. I also had about ten questions I could be asked in interviews along with my answers. This particular

publisher only asked for five questions, but other publishers asked me for ten, so I was ready.

Obviously, the kind of information I'm talking about here takes some time to compile. Since I knew this was coming, I started collecting information when I started the proposal for the book and continued collecting while my agent sold the book and negotiated the contract. I was still adding to it until I actually got the AQ, which was about two weeks after the publisher got back my signed contract but before I received the first advance.

One thing I know about marketing people is they have a short attention span and so the quicker you can respond to their requests, the better. Since I'd been tucking away information for this purpose, I turned in twenty pages of answers in just a few days. This sent the message to the marketing people that I respect their time and value their efforts on my book.

Now, having said all that, let's ask some hard questions. Did I get a radio interview or a talk show interview as a result of filling out the AQ? Not yet. Most of the promotional opportunities I've gotten are ones I made myself. However, I got attention from the marketing people that my co-author didn't get. I also had their cooperation when I asked them to send copies of my book out to reviewers or ask questions about things they might be able to help me on.

I think some authors blow off the AQ because they spent a bunch of effort on it a couple of times, didn't end up on Oprah, and got disappointed. They are the same ones who remain mid-list authors, barely eeking by, cranking out books that few people notice but that are technical niche books so they have a market. I can't help but wonder what

would happen if they took the time to prepare for this part of the process, which actively enlists the help of the marketing people. You never know. But I am not going to be someone who leaves a stone unturned. If someone is offering to help me promote and market my book, I'm going to give them all the help I can.

Questions you can expect to be asked on an Author Questionnaire (This is not an exhaustive list but it's a great start.)

- Personal information such as full name, SSN, contact information, website, any other names you write under, where you were born, where you grew up, famous relatives, etc.
- A one or two sentence summary of your book.
- The typical reader for your book.
- Media information for your home town, as well as your current location.
- Any media contacts you might have who might be interested in knowing about your book.
- Any unusual angles you have for your book or your expertise in writing the book. In my case, I have an adjustable gastric band myself and have lost 150 pounds, with significant improvements in my own health, so I put that information down. If you're a police detective and you're publishing a mystery, you'd want to put that down.
- Any publications who might be interested in covering your book.
- Ten questions you could be asked about the book along with your answers. (Make this interesting and not a restatement of the obvious.)

- Any mailing lists of people you might have access to from organizations you belong to or groups you are affiliated with.

Biography:

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda's latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo Lifelong Books, March 2008). Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com.