

Sharon Goldinger

Sharon Goldinger, owner of PeopleSpeak, is a book shepherd and editor specializing in the nonfiction book industry. Her business, marketing, and editorial experience ranges from small publishers to Fortune 500 companies and from national organizations to Capitol Hill. Under her guidance, Sharon's clients have published and authored award-winning books.

1. What do book shepherds do, and what kinds of clients do they work with?

Book shepherds are full-service contractors for book publishers. A book shepherd takes a book through all the necessary steps—writing, editing, design, printing, marketing, distribution—in the most time- and cost-effective manner possible. Some of the steps that a book shepherd leads a client through—in terms of setting up a book publishing company and publishing a book—include creating a name for the publishing company; finding, engaging, and coordinating the interior and cover designers; managing the crafting of the book; completing all the necessary paperwork (such as copyright forms and Bowker paperwork); obtaining a distributor and a marketing firm; creating a marketing campaign; and arranging print reorders.

Book shepherds usually work with small and new publishers and then help them grow. Most publishers I work with are authors who have ideas for more than one book. Having more than one book greatly increases an author's credibility. Also, national distributors usually do not accept one-book publishers. They want to see that publishing is a full-time venture (not just a hobby), and that includes a full publishing program—usually at least one book every twelve to eighteen months. This is a business, and everyone in it needs to earn a living. It is much easier for the author, publisher, and distributor to do that if a publisher has more than one book. Several of my client publishers plan to publish other people's works in addition to their own.

So much information about publishing is available in print, online, and via consultants that it's hard to know what's true, what's false, and what's applicable to a specific book. Some of the advice you find can be really good – but not for your book. A strategy that works for one book may not be appropriate for another (for example, nonfiction versus fiction, business versus self-help). A book shepherd brings his or her list of contacts, experiences, and war stories to each project. That's why it's important to find the right book shepherd for your particular book.

Changes in book publishing used to occur about every five to ten years; then the widespread use of computers made changes happen faster, but it was still possible for authors to keep up with what was going on and make the necessary adaptations. Now those changes have accelerated to warp speed – sometimes occurring from week to week. How can any one person, especially someone just entering the arena, keep up with all of that information, as well as the subject of the book he or she has written? It's almost impossible. That's where a book shepherd can be of most help: keeping up with the industry, what's new, what's being phased out, what's working, what's not working, which vendors are doing a good job, and which ones are not.

In short, a book shepherd helps prevent the “I don't know what I don't know” syndrome and associated costly mistakes and time wasters.

2. Are book shepherds similar to book packagers?

Historically, book packagers have brought a “package” to a publisher. For example, let's consider a book on arthritis. The packager would put together the book idea (proposal), which would include finding the author (most likely a medical doctor), hiring the designers, and developing the marketing ideas for the book. The publisher would buy the whole package, and the packager would produce the book (sometimes including printing).

Book packagers were the contractors for a book – hiring and paying for the book editor, proofreader, and indexer and overseeing the production process, up to and sometimes including printing.

3. What kinds of publishing options are available in the industry today?

Three basic choices are available for publishing a book today:

- ❖ **“Traditional” publishing:** This choice involves finding an agent or a publisher; that is, an agent who will find you a publisher, or a publisher that does not require an agent.
- ❖ **Independent publishing:** This usually applies to small publishers and can include self-publishers.
- ❖ **Subsidy publishing:** This involves working with a company that provides some publishing-related services (for example, editing, design, and printing); however, all costs are paid for by the author. With subsidy publishing, the author is not the publisher—the subsidy press is. An author using the subsidy publishing route cannot contract with any entities as the publisher. (For example, only a publisher can have a contractual relationship with a distributor. If an author wants to expand the distribution of his or her book, the subsidy publisher would have to enter into the contract.) Many authors think that since they are paying for everything, they are the de facto publisher and can enter into contracts, but that’s not the case. The most important lesson here is be sure to read every contract, ask every possible question, and understand every provision before signing.

In the past, the term “self-publisher” had a negative connotation. It often meant poor-quality editing, design, production, and printing. In other words, if you placed a self-published book next to a book from a big publishing house, you could see the difference in a second.

With the advancement of computer technology and desktop publishing, the only reasons why small presses could not compete with the big houses were lower production quality and poor distribution into the marketplace. Today, a knowledgeable and experienced person can create and produce a quality product. (Modern technology has allowed this capability in terms of the actual production mechanism as well as the lower cost.) Distribution is still difficult but not impossible with the assistance of one of the national distributors that will work with small presses.

4. **How does a book shepherd differ from a vanity press?**

A book shepherd is a consultant. A vanity press is a subsidy press. Originally, vanity presses were created so that anyone who had the money could have a book published. It didn’t matter if it was edited or what it looked like. The point was, no editorial staff screened the book to make sure that it met industry standards (in terms of writing

and editing) or that an audience for it existed in the marketplace. Years ago, many of these companies charged an exorbitant amount of money because there was always someone who wanted to have a book published no matter the cost (because of the cachet of being a published author). These companies often promised that they would produce the book to industry standards (and did not), market the book (and did not), and get the book into bookstores (and did not). So vanity presses got a well-deserved reputation for being scams or rip-offs.

Since desktop publishing software has made it easier to produce a high-quality product, more vanity presses have been created than ever before. This avenue is the ideal one for some people, depending on their goals. For example, if an author just wants to have a few copies of his or her book available for family and friends, a vanity press might be the most appropriate option.

5. What circumstances bring authors to your company rather than self-publishing their books on their own or submitting them to a publisher or agent?

Books still hold a sacred place in the marketplace, so it's not unusual for someone to approach me and say, "I have this book I want to publish. I don't care if it makes money; I don't even need to break even. But I feel this book will help people" (or "I want to create a historical record of this information"). This is a realistic goal, so we can reach a clear understanding of the costs and potential results. (However, when clients say this, I do challenge them by responding back, "There is nothing wrong with producing this book and making money. It's not against the law; it's not even immoral.")

The author's goals are very important. For example, if an author wants to write a history of his small town with the understanding that it will not be picked up by a national distributor and will be sold only in his local bookstore, that's realistic (if the person wants to spend the money). But if an author comes to me with a manuscript that could not be a viable book (which could mean the writing is too weak or the marketplace is not broad enough to sell through, based on the author's goals), I won't take the project at all. If the book needs writing help, a ghostwriter can be brought in or the author can hire a "book doctor" to rewrite the book.

Most often, people call me to discuss their options for having a book published. I ask a series of questions to reveal whether or not they have a national platform (required for nonfiction by most agents and

publishers today). If they don't, then the conversation steers to whether they have the time, budget, and inclination to independently publish.

6. At what point would an author hire you? Before the manuscript is written or after?

A book shepherd can be engaged at almost any time in the process – while the manuscript is being written or when it has been completed. Some authors approach me even before the manuscript is written to evaluate whether the premise of the book is viable. I've helped create and shape books, starting with marketing research into what's in the marketplace already and what's missing from or needed in the marketplace. I've also guided authors through all editorial phases, including developmental, content, and copyediting.

7. What sorts of questions should someone be prepared to answer when contacting a book shepherd?

People who contact a book shepherd to have their manuscript reviewed and assessed should be prepared to answer these questions:

❖ **Who is the audience for your book?**

Answer: Every woman in the world.

Better answer: Women ages 20 to 50 in the United States.

Best answer:

– Career women ages 35 to 45 in the United States who read *Ladies Home Journal*.

– Married women ages 30 to 50 in the United States who want to improve their relationships with family members.

❖ **What is the goal of your publishing plan?**

Answer: To have a book.

Better answer: To have a book available for my clients and potential clients.

Best answer: To publish a book that will offer answers to a specific problem.

❖ **What is your time availability?**

Answer: I have some time. How much time will this take?

Better answer: I know this will take time. I'm ready to start now, and I hope to be able to have some time available each week.

Best answer: I know this is a long-term time commitment. I've read several books about the publishing industry and how to market a book. I've started researching where and to whom I can sell my book in addition to bookstores and have already started my two-year marketing plan.

❖ **What is your budget?**

Answer: I have some money put aside.

Better answer: I have researched what this will cost. Please confirm the numbers with me.

Best answer: I have researched what this will cost. Please confirm the numbers with me. I have also set up a line of credit that I can tap so that when the book is ready for reprint, I will have funds available to pay for the reprinting while waiting for the money from the distributor to come in.

8. What should an author consider when looking for a book shepherd? Is it possible to know the difference between an ineffective one and an effective one? What questions should an author ask?

Whether you're building a house and need a contractor or have written a book and need a book shepherd, conducting your due diligence is vital. Here are some good initial questions:

- ❖ What types of books do you work with (nonfiction, fiction, categories)?
- ❖ How do you work with your clients (meet with them in person or by phone, have weekly meetings, delegate the project to a staff member, provide guidelines and lay out steps to take)?
- ❖ How long does the process take?
- ❖ How much or how little can you help me?
- ❖ How much do your services cost?
- ❖ What kinds of projects have you worked on? Can you tell me some of your clients' successes and failures and why you think they occurred?
- ❖ Do you charge for an estimate or assessment of my project?

If you like the answers to these questions, you should check the person's references and ask those publishers and authors the same kinds of questions that you asked the book shepherd.

9. What rates can authors expect to pay for a book shepherd's services?

Rates can be by the hour or the project. Much of this decision depends on how many tasks the book shepherd is going to do versus the publisher (or his or her staff). Every consultant is different and provides different services (sometimes directly contracted). You should ask what the book shepherd's typical project fee is. The needs of a project can vary so much that it is hard to say what fee is and isn't appropriate. However, the amount should be examined in light of how many books need to be sold to break even. Developing a cost

analysis or creating a P&L (profit and loss) statement for each book is a good step.

10. Do you walk authors through every phase of publication? What are those steps?

Book shepherds can do as little or as much as the author or publisher needs. Some clients have more time than money; some, the opposite.

A book shepherd can assist with any or all of the following:

- ❖ Creating the publishing company and obtaining all necessary legal, business, and publishing paperwork and forms, including resale permits, ISBNs, copyright, cataloging in publication data, and more
- ❖ Coming up with a book's title and checking to see what other books already are using it
- ❖ Determining if permissions are needed
- ❖ Setting a publication date
- ❖ Recommending and/or checking out interior and cover designers and indexer
- ❖ Assessing comps for the book (price, size, features, etc.) and determining the price
- ❖ Setting up or updating the author's or book's Website
- ❖ Making decisions about fulfillment and storage
- ❖ Developing an "elevator speech" (brief description of the book)
- ❖ Determining the audience (specific statistics: gender, age, generation, buying habits)
- ❖ Establishing the benefits the book brings to readers
- ❖ Obtaining endorsements and testimonials (whom and how many to include)
- ❖ Developing a marketing strategy
- ❖ Budget
- ❖ Author's participation – speaking, writing, Website, book tours, blogging
- ❖ Branding
- ❖ Other public appearances (libraries, colleges, book fairs)
- ❖ Media training
- ❖ Networking opportunities (for example, via groups the author belongs to)
- ❖ Email and direct marketing
- ❖ Partnering with an organization
- ❖ Number of galleys to be sent out
- ❖ Length of the publicity campaign (e-blasts, galleys)

- ❖ Collateral materials (postcards, bookmarks, flyers)
- ❖ Bookstore promotions (co-op and advertising dollars)
- ❖ Internet publicity (which websites to target, time, method and length)
- ❖ Special sales opportunities (via trainings, workshops, conferences, reading groups)
- ❖ Foreign language translations and serial rights

The book shepherd ensures that all the tasks get done, whether by the author, the publisher, the book shepherd, or a virtual assistant. What's important is not who does the tasks, it's that the tasks—all the right steps in the process—are done when they need to be done.

11. Can you get an author's books on the bookstore shelves?

With more than 200,000 books in print each year and the average superstore carrying 100,000 books, it is impossible to get every book on a bookstore shelf. The question a publisher should ask a book shepherd is, "Can you get my book into the bookstore system?"

Getting into the bookstore system generally means having a book listed with the nation's wholesalers (for example, Ingram and Baker & Taylor). While there are exceptions to every rule, most of the time a publisher needs to be represented by an exclusive national distributor. Having a national distributor (which does all the warehousing, invoicing, billing, collections, etc.) has many benefits, but the bottom line is that a publisher needs a distributor more than a distributor needs a publisher.

Remember that publishing is a business: everyone has to make some money in the publishing process. How does a distributor make money? By selling books. How does the consumer know that a book is available for sale? Through marketing. Who's responsible for that marketing? The author and the publisher. Once those responsibilities and relationships are understood, it will be easier to partner with a distributor.

A distributor wants to know what a publisher's marketing budget will be—in detail. What's the total budget? Who is the publicist? How long is the publicity campaign? How big are the author's and publisher's mailing lists, and how often will the people on the lists be notified? How, when, and where will the consumer be pushed into bookstores to buy the book? And, since there are so few "one-hit wonders," what are the next books that the author will be writing, and when will they be published?

12. Competition for shelf space is tough. Do book shepherds help with marketing and promotion? What tips do you have to share with authors to help them stand out from the pack?

Book shepherds often help with marketing and promotion. Services can range from providing a referral to a competent and experienced marketing company and publicist or doing the work themselves. The decision depends on the project, the genre, and the budget. When it comes to marketing, specialists are important. A book can be viable, but it may not be the best fit for certain experts. I always check to make sure I create win-win situations with my clients, projects, and vendors. While every book goes through similar marketing and publishing steps (for example, reviews need to be sent out four months in advance to *Publishers Weekly*), every marketing plan needs to be tailored to the audience. Should direct-mail pieces be created and sent out? Where can the author write and speak to gain attention (local and national networking groups, local and national publications)? What should the book's Internet marketing campaign look like, and how should it be built?

13. Fiction is tough to sell these days. How do you help authors get their novels noticed?

I specialize in nonfiction—although I'm pleased to say that when I did make an exception for *Rashi's Daughters*, it was a great success story. The key to my accepting this project was how it was referred to me (by an experienced colleague who is a fabulous fiction editor) and the amount of homework that the author had done. She was an exceptional client in terms of producing an exemplary product and following directions.

The author's primary goal was to create buzz about the book. Her first step was to research her audience. She knew that her historical fiction book would appeal to a niche audience of Jewish women—a group that reads and buys a lot of books. She then had to find where they were and how to reach them. An Internet search of Jewish women's organizations revealed a number of national associations, all of which she joined a year before her book came out.

She wrote articles for and bought ads in their newsletters. And she contacted them to speak at their local and national conventions. She spoke for free—all she asked was permission to sign and sell her books at their events. A critical element was her relentlessness. She sent emails, made phone calls, and followed up, followed up,

and followed up some more. She also created a Website for the book where she could direct people if they wanted to learn more. She spoke at libraries and bookstores. One final note: she made sure to get the names and addresses of everyone who attended her speaking engagements so when her second book was released, she already had a mailing list of thousands of interested readers.

14. How much importance do you place on cover design? Interior design? Do buyers and readers really notice these elements?

I think all the elements of a book (editing, cover design, interior design, back cover copy, marketing and publicity) are important. I believe that buyers and readers notice them, especially if they're done poorly, and we work with our clients' distributors in these areas as well.

Book shepherds ensure that every book they work on meets industry standards, which means that the interior and cover designs are created by experienced book designers. It's important to note that there is a difference between a graphic designer—even an award-winning graphic designer—and an experienced book designer. Creating a Clio-winning advertisement is not the same as knowing which fonts to use in a book and what colors to use on a cover. Just as you would not ask a dermatologist to treat your broken leg (dermatologists and orthopedic surgeons are both doctors, but their experience and knowledge are obviously quite different), a publisher needs to use an experienced book designer—not just a designer.

15. Will you recommend how many books an author should get printed? How do you determine this number?

A book shepherd should be willing to make recommendations on every aspect of a book's life (font, cover design, marketing, printing, etc.). Depending on the market (Is the book a calling card? How many copies does the distributor want? How many presales have occurred?), I provide recommendations for that number as well as the appropriate printer type (digital for short runs, offset for longer runs).

The number of books that should be printed depends on how many the distributor wants and how many pre-orders have been received. Book shepherds help determine that number for the first run as well as re-printings.

I have found that many people don't plan for success. I ask my clients to consider this: What happens when you sell out your first

print run? You won't see any money from your distributor for three or four months, but you need to print again now.

16. Do authors ever come to you with an idea that has little market potential? If so, how do you handle this?

I come from the land of straight shooters. If I don't think a project is marketable, I will tell the author and turn down the project.

17. What are some of the frustrations you encounter with your clients?

I'm pleased to say that I don't have any, and that's due to one simple reason: I gather good information up front. I know the client's goals, I feel that I can assist him or her in meeting them, the client has been truthful with me regarding the goals and budget—it's that straightforward.

In conclusion, I call publishing a game—but it's a winnable game. Like any game, you need to know the rules, have the proper equipment, know what players you need on your team, have a good coach, develop a winning strategy, and be willing to put in a lot of hard work and money.

My final advice: do your homework, check references, and read and understand every sentence in a contract before you sign it.