

TEN ENGAGEMENTS

My remarks here apply to a small house with a diverse list where we change gears quickly to go from one activity to another. An urgent call might mean we stop editing and speak to an author or our designer, or printer, or typesetter. When a particular phase in a book's publication suddenly demands attention, we attend to it. In fact, the three of us at Paul Dry Books work on all aspects of producing our titles, which include memoirs, novels, short stories, poetry, philosophy, biography, and essays.

I want to tell you about the activities that have made an impression on me during my relatively short, five-year career at Paul Dry Books. As on a ten-speed bicycle, where the rider has to learn how and when to engage each gear in order to use his strength most efficiently to reach the speed he wants to go, so in publishing you have to think about how you engage your resources to publish the best books you can. Using the image of "engagement" to describe that condition of being in gear, I call this list TEN ENGAGEMENTS.

To begin at the beginning, the first thing to do is:

FIND MANUSCRIPTS

1. Look for writing you love (and then find its market).

Some people advise, “Publish for a distinct market. The reader who buys and enjoys one book will return to buy another title in the same area.” Indeed, small publishing companies have traditionally used niche marketing to find their readers. However, I want to publish writing I really love, even if the writing does not fit into a specific niche. But as a publisher, I cannot afford to be precious about my tastes. I can’t finance the reading habits of just a handful of people. I have to be convinced that I can find enough readers to pay for the venture. Sometimes you may be lucky enough to get a manuscript you love *and* that has bestseller potential. In that case, don’t close your eyes to good fortune; make that as good a book as you can.

2. Read with the Principle of Charity.

Give enough time to each manuscript you read to make a fair evaluation of it. Assume the writer has something to say; but don’t waste your time. I intend these two suggestions to be in tension. Charity requires imaginative understanding, but my time is limited and there is always another manuscript that needs my thoughtful attention.

3. *When selecting a manuscript, seek advice from others, then trust your own judgment.*

In almost all endeavors that involve other people, we do best by listening to advice from others (though following their advice is not always the best course). When you start reading a manuscript, you have to apply your own judgment and taste. But how do you develop “your own judgment and taste”? The more you read on your own and talk about your reading with others, the more you’ll appreciate a good piece of writing. The Principle of Charity in reading implies a kind of modesty on the part of the reader. Would you have been Joyce’s first publisher, or Kafka’s? Sometimes a book reads us better than we read the book.

4. *Be open and direct with authors and don’t overpay for manuscripts.*

Just as a publisher has to sell his books, so he must pay his authors. The business relation with the author should be as positive as the literary one. No matter how large or small the advance and royalty are, the publisher should pay the author in a timely fashion, grateful for the chance to publish the work. On the other hand, overpaying for a manuscript is counterproductive: it reduces my ability to buy and publish another book.

Having found and chosen a manuscript, now turn to:

EDITING

5. Edit to show the author's design.

Work to reveal the author's intention, to make it as vivid as possible for the reader. As editor you are one reader—maybe representative but maybe not. So talk to others about what the shape of the book should be and how to best express it in the finished product. And don't be shy about talking to the author. Authors might think they don't want to make changes, but once they realize that their editor is also a thoughtful reader, they may be more amenable to suggestions.

6. Copyedit, in the fashion in which the stonemasons built the cathedrals, sub specie aeternitatis (under the aspect of eternity), but know when enough is enough.

Getting the details correct is one of the great happy labors of editing. Nevertheless, as with most endeavors, at some point, concern for details no longer improves the text. How will you know you have reached that point? Let experience and thoughtfulness guide you. Be reasonable and meticulous—again, I mean these two to be in tension with each other. Sometimes you will overdo your editorial meticulousness, and pay for it; other times, you will underdo the editing, and regret the results. Let balance guide your judgment; keep in mind each book calls for its particular level of copyediting.

7. *Regarding the design of the text and cover, listen to the author, designer, and distributor. Make the final decision yourself.*

We all know the look of the book is important. If the cover and interior will entice a prospective reader to pick the book up and consider buying it, then you have the beginning of a successful design. The book's design should enhance the author's design of the work, so try to make the physical object a decent representation of the intellectual object.

Now, *sell* the book:

8. *Get the book into the hands of its likely readers.*

As with the points on a Euclidean line, so with books: Between any two books, a third can always be found. There are so many books in the world, publishing another one requires brashness, hopefulness, and perhaps a little obtuseness. As a publisher without a big advertising budget, I think the only way to sell books is to work to have a book capture the attention of advocates who will speak on its behalf. Who are a book's advocates? Reviewers, librarians, people in the field,

teachers, and—that special class—the ardent Common Reader. People in this last group are a book's truest friends and perhaps, as true friends, the hardest to come by. A book's success depends on publicity, advertising (on occasion), and word of mouth. Because good books are different from each other—because they are not fungible—to market them requires thinking about the book's unique combination of readers. You'll need imagination, enthusiasm, and persuasiveness to get the book into the hands of the book's likely readers and, then, if you are lucky, into the hands of an even wider group of readers.

9. *Describe the book knowingly and truthfully.*

When writing copy, or pitching the book to reviewers or bookstores, be succinct in your description of the book, and honest in your appraisal. Describe the book's action; give your sense of the effect of the book on a reader. Use blurbs and quotes from reviews. Avoid superlatives or intensifiers; they soon lose force. As examples of good book copy, take a look at the catalogs called *Bas Bleu* and the *Common Reader*. Both do an excellent job describing in few words the books they sell. The titles they pitch interest me.

10. *Your enthusiasm is the engine that drives a book's success.*

When you think about the books you have chosen to read (not those required for school or for your work), ask yourself how you learned about them. Why did you read them? I expect you chose to read a book because a friend suggested it. A friend's articulate enthusiasm about a book is one of the best advertisements for it. Imagine yourself as a publisher. First, you felt enthusiasm for the writing; then you fashioned the manuscript to make the book as attractive and engaging as possible. Now, you need to communicate your enthusiasm. As you bring the book to market, you have to inspire others to appreciate it as you did and so to go buy it and read it—and then urge their friends to do the same.

These are my TEN ENGAGEMENTS for publishing. There are many more, of course, but I'm a beginner and may not be ready for the fancier twenty-one gear model.