

# Against the Grain

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## Building a List

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## Building a List

by **Richard Carlin** (Executive Editor, OUP) <richard.carlin@oup.org>

One of an editor's most important jobs — and one that is perhaps the least easy to describe — is to “build” a list of titles that will form a coherent publishing program. This goes well beyond evaluating proposals on an individual basis to having an overall vision of where you as an editor want to take the list. It also means that the editor doesn't merely sit at his/her desk waiting for proposals to arrive; instead, he or she actively solicits titles that will fit into the publishing program.

Editors rarely get the opportunity to build a list from scratch, although occasionally a publisher will determine that it needs to expand into a new area where it has never been before. In most cases, however, an editor is hired to carry on a vision that was established by sometimes several generations of previous editors. Over time, of course, the vision changes as the market matures as well as new topics are addressed in the field; so there is usually a mix of continuity and change that occurs in any list. And a new editor may be hired specifically because he or she brings to

the list contacts in areas that have not been previously explored but that the publisher feels should be a part of its list.

Defining the parameters of a list usually involves a combination of editorial and marketing considerations. A publisher that has a long tradition in publishing books on jazz or molecular physics or animal behavior is more apt to continue publishing in those areas to build on its reputation. Plus, it makes marketing's job easier because a number of titles can be promoted to the same readership. Potential authors — seeing that a publisher has a strong reputation in their field — are more likely to be attracted to working with that

publisher rather than another that doesn't have as long a tradition in the area. The argument that a publisher with a smaller list might make to a potential author is that their book might

get more attention from them; my experience, however, as an author and editor, is that if a publisher doesn't have experience selling to a particular market or readership, they are less likely to be successful in promoting a new title.



This brings up another common misunderstanding among potential authors: many feel that the “bigger” the publisher, the better the job they will do selling a book. My experience as an author is almost the exact opposite, or at least I've found that publisher size does not correlate to success. A one-man operation that really knows how to sell to, let's say, specialists in dance notation or nuclear physics, might do a far better job than a larger university or commercial press that has no experience in these areas. For example, **Simon & Schuster** published a book on the early country music group **The Carter Family**, and it was quickly remaindered after selling far fewer copies than the commercial press hoped; whereas the **University of Illinois** press has had decades of success publishing titles in their “Music in American Life” series, with some titles remaining in print for years.

In building a list, an editor has to consider several factors. Of course, trends in academic study are important to follow. Queer Studies has been a growing area of interest since the 1970s, but it took most publishers a while to catch on and begin publishing in this area. And ideas about and approaches to Queer Studies

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have changed over time, so that those publishing in this area have had to adjust their lists accordingly. Often, a large area will open — such as Popular Music or Visual Culture — and then publishers will identify smaller subsections in which to specialize. So, for example, **MIT Press** takes a rather technical approach to its books on art and visual culture, whereas a press like **Routledge** takes a more social-cultural one. Some presses become known for their particular approach; one joke I made when I was working at **Routledge** was that every proposal had to “problematize” something before we would consider publishing it. Note that some commercial and university academic presses play a role themselves in building disciplines; thus many academics will recognize that a field is growing or changing by reviewing the latest publications from a major university press. Although many academics may not recognize this, an editor with deep knowledge of a field, in building his or her list, is actually contributing to the field’s survival, growth, and change.

Financial considerations play a different role in publishing houses depending on their size and mission. A one-man (or small) press that is guided by an interest in spreading knowledge in a specific area — such as how to play the recorder or the history of baseball — will tend to give more weight to the importance of the work to the field than to whether its financially going to be successful. Of course, if they publish enough titles that don’t cover their costs they will soon go out of business; but every editor and publishing house will try to balance these two needs, the quality and importance of the work versus the cost of producing it and its potential sales. University presses used to be more apt to publish “important” works to serve their communities and many still have a “mission statement” that explicitly addresses the need to publish works that may have a limited audience, no matter what the financial implication. However, in these bottom-line days when most universities look to their presses to at least break even — and hopefully generate a consistent and growing profit — there’s more emphasis on sales potential or at least carefully controlling costs. This is one reason that many presses have turned to using standard designs for the covers and interiors of their titles, along with cutting back on marketing costs and other expenses.

Some lists are based simply on the idea of volume; this is particularly true of those focusing on scholarly monographs. Because each individual monograph is likely to only generate a small amount of revenue, the idea is that in publishing a greater number — sometimes as many as 60 or more books in one area in a year — the overall revenue stream will increase. Of course, this also means that less attention can be paid to each individual volume, from everyone from the editor to the marketer and sales folks. The overall costs of producing the book have to be kept to an absolute minimum. **Moses Asch**, the pioneering founder of **Folkways**

**Records**, ran his label very much in this way; he released about 80 recordings each year, and each was given the same amount of attention (or lack thereof) by **Asch** and his small staff. The idea was to make these recordings — many of which were from areas of the world rarely heard on other labels — available to what was at least at first a very small audience (typically, **Asch** would press as few as 200 copies of a new record). Always a shoestring operation, **Asch** had to keep his costs to a minimum to survive. And his motivation was never to make a large profit; he was on a mission to preserve the entire sound world, and profitability was secondary to that goal. His operation was “editorially” or content driven, as opposed to bottom-line oriented.

Nonetheless, most publishers — whether commercially owned or university operated — have to keep an eye on profitability. Editors — who often have very little training in mathematics, let alone business accounting — are required to create plans, including sales and revenue projections, to justify their list’s direction. These spreadsheets get distributed to various managers at a press, who will massage the numbers in order to be able to show to their bosses that they are generating sufficient revenue to keep the press in the black. Ideally, they would like to show not only profitability in one year, but a projection of growth over a period of years. It’s all very well to say you believe in publishing more titles in a specific area, but if it’s not sustainable to do so your list won’t survive.

The advantage of editorially focusing a list is that you can develop a team of authors. It takes a lot of time to identify authors who are good writers, can meet deadlines (or at least come close), and share your vision. I always view the editor-author relationship as ideally being a collaboration; I will sometimes suggest topics to my better authors, knowing of their interests, and hoping that they will share my view that there’s a need for a new book in that area. I rarely publish a manuscript as it’s received. Most authors benefit from editorial guidance, going well beyond just correcting grammar and usage to helping them shape the flow of the material, knowing how much detail is needed (and when there’s simply too much for the reader to absorb), to issues of interpretation and analysis. Some authors thrive in this kind of relationship; others bristle at the idea of giving up some control over their work. On the other hand, if an author is known for a particular approach, the editor is best advised to step back and let them follow their own muse. Knowing when to intervene and when to step aside is key to a sensitive editor’s success. I once published a book by a well-known **Cambridge University** professor and I didn’t touch a word; but this was an anomaly for me, although I’m sure other editors could tell similar stories.

Once you’ve built a list in an area and have come to have your pool of authors, the momentum is such that you should ideally become the “first choice” for anyone writing in that area. Your happy authors will recommend other colleagues who are working on interesting projects; and so your family of writers grows.

I have yet to address either ebooks or open access materials, as each represents new challenges to the industry. Etexts are really just another “format,” like print or recorded books. The content still has to be developed and the list carefully built; the delivery is all that is different. And although many think etexts are cheaper to produce, the real “cost” of a book is not in the paper and printing; it is in the process of its development and authoring. The problem for the academic press and editor is that the savings in cost (if any) from producing etexts is more than offset by the loss in revenue from the price that is acceptable to buyers to pay. Most expect etexts to cost half or more the cost of a print book. Cutting revenues in half would mean that many lists would be impossible to maintain.

While open access is a laudable goal — why shouldn’t all knowledge be free? — it begs the question of what “free” really means. If by free you mean that no creator or producer should be paid anything for their work, then obviously the model is not sustainable. Nor can a list be built if no one is paid to build it; the investment of time, energy, and intelligence has to be recompensed. Maybe what “open access” means is that someone *else* — besides the reader/consumer — pays for it; entities like the government (through grants), businesses, or even presses themselves (presuming they can raise the capital to do so) could provide enough money to support publishing operations. But of course this would skew publishing towards the more “valued” subjects (such as the STEM or so-called professional disciplines), which — because practitioners in these areas tend to do best in our economy — are the least in need of “free” materials. And of course most universities — as we have noted — are no longer supporting their presses financially but rather expect the presses to carry their own weight if not throw off a profit.

In the end, there is no way to have quality in a publishing house without investing in the people — the authors, editors, marketers, and yes sales people — who ultimately make a list successful. Building a list is something that takes time and vision; it involves balancing personal enthusiasm, knowledge of the field, and sensitivity to the need to be able to sustain a list financially so that it can continue to grow. No one gets rich in this process, or at least no one I know; for most, it is the pride in creating works that offer something new and important in the field in a text that can be understood by the widest possible audience that is the foremost concern. The success of academic publishing depends on every part of the community — beginning with scholars and authors and including editors, marketers, sales people, and publishers — supporting the work. This again is both a financial and an intellectual challenge, but I believe that — acknowledging our common goals — we can work together to maintain and grow special interest publishing for the next generation of readers. 🍷