

Pitching Manuscripts: the experience and success gauge

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<http://greatstorybook.com/pitching-manuscripts/>

This entry is part 2 of 5 in the series [Buchmesse Experience 2015](#)

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Every book fair has its own style and flair, its own ebb and flow. Some fairs focus on selling books to the general public. Some are about a particular type of book, like storybooks, romance novels, or mysteries.

At any of these book events, a writer can do the business of pitching manuscripts to industry professionals. It's just important that you know who, how and when to do it - and what certain signals mean.

[The Frankfurter Buchmesse](#) (The Book Fair in Frankfurt, Germany) has a focus on industry professionals across all forms of books. It is a smorgasbord for anyone who loves books - including rare antiquities, which have their own section.

At this particular book fair, in addition to all the exhibitors and agents, there were nearly 4,000 special events – meaning interviews (many of them televised), Q & A Panels, author interviews, demonstrations and presentations and even a few live concerts. With all of this happening in only a week's time, it isn't even possible to experience a one-hundredth of what's happening.

What Draws the Professionals

It isn't the writers. Not at this book fair, anyway. The pros are all there for these primary tasks:

- To refresh existing client relationships.
- To make new contacts.
- Raise the company profile, image-building.
- Rights and license trade. (Seriously, a lot of this was going on!)
- Increase product awareness. (They were all showcasing books that will be appearing in stores over the next several months.)
- Win over new clients.

There are a good number of writers at the Buchmesse, but we are the whipped cream, not the cake. Most of the people there specialize in contracts. International deals. Distribution and Sales. At this particular event, they're not really looking for new material. They're looking to sell more rights of whatever material they already have.

Does this stop me? No! Of course not.

My attitude is this: I'm there to learn, and if possible, to help. That's my primary goal.

After that, I have an internal success-scale for all of my pitches and pitch-attempts.

It's important, because in the end I want everyone to love me and my stories. This list tells me how well I'm doing:

- *If I get the chance to pitch* one or two manuscripts, fantastic.
- *If someone gives me their personal business card* and asks me to email them, super-fantastic.
- *If someone actually asks for my business card*, I'm thrilled.
- *If someone asks for my manuscript*, I'm over the moon.
- *If I don't even get the chance to pitch a manuscript at all?* It's ok, move on.

So what does this scale really mean and how does this translate to information that helps you? I'll break it down, right here.

If I get an opportunity to pitch one or two manuscripts, fantastic.

That means I didn't scare them and the deodorant is working. This is my foot in the door moment. I try not to get too excited. Be cool. Like a secret agent.

If someone gives me their business card and asks me to email them, super-fantastic.

It means that even though they are incredibly busy and would love to be at the sauna or getting a massage - and they probably have another meeting in less than 10 minutes - they're at least intrigued by something

I've said. I haven't gotten the boot yet.

This is the reality at many book events, *even those targeted specifically to writers* looking for agents and/or publishers. Many times, you have less than 10 minutes to say anything at all to them. You cannot waste any seconds. The first impression is over in less than 3 seconds, so if you blow that, it's almost impossible to overcome it.

It also means you have to know that company and what they do before you approach their exhibit/table. You need to know who it is you should pitch. You can't just pitch your manuscript(s) to anyone from the firm. It has to be an Acquisitions Editor or Editorial Director or Editor. Sometimes a Publisher will be interested; it depends.

So how do you know who to ask for at the fair?

For the Buchmesse, there is a Who's Who list of attendees, so researching this is no problem. Any well-organized (some aren't!) book event will be able to provide information about who will be attending, or at least who is expected to attend. This is really important information – for *everyone* there!

I did find though that a couple of people I expected to see were not able to attend. It was disappointing, really, because I was really excited about meeting them in particular. (I'll write more about that in coming weeks.)

There were a few occasions where I happened upon an exhibit where I didn't know a thing about the publisher, but was drawn in. It's really nice when this happens, and I was able to make some well-received pitches spontaneously. But I do like to be prepared, because I know I've only got a few minutes to build a bridge or crack it.

Building Bridges with More Than 10 Minutes

The only time this extreme lack-of-time doesn't influence your pitch is when you are able to also attend an after-event mix-and-mingle type of dinner. These are rarely spontaneous events. You usually need to be invited or have to have paid for your invitation in advance.

It's during this type of social event that a writer can really talk with someone, but it's also when you plan to talk about almost everything except your manuscripts. Always wait for the other person to ask about your work. (If they like you, they ask.)

If someone actually asks for my business card, I'm thrilled.

Most often, people do not want to accept anything from you (the writer) because they are swamped and they already have a lot to carry back home: many contracts, and any books they don't manage to sell on Sunday (the only day they are allowed to sell the books they're displaying).

If they actually ask for my card, this is a very good sign indeed. It means they will contact me if I haven't contacted them.

If someone asks for my manuscript, I'm over the moon (but still, all bets are off).

This time, one person was so impressed with the project I pitched to her, she asked if she could please hold onto the manuscript and have my card. Right then and there and printed on paper, not by email. I've never before experienced someone wanting to physically carry my manuscript home.

What's much more the norm is that they ask you to email the manuscript. In some cases, they will even request that you email it *only after X-date*, because they know they will not have time to read any manuscripts before that time.

Several people asked me to email one of my manuscripts to them. It felt really good. Of course, not everyone did. Most ask for a summary first. This isn't a rejection. Still: the foot is well lodged in the door. There is intrigue.

Why Writers Aren't Considered Industry Professionals

As a writer, it was really interesting for me to watch the way people interacted with each other and also to watch (as a writer does: observe, as if an outsider, what is happening to me directly) how different people treated me once they knew I was a writer and teacher.

I was amazed at how nice everyone was to me! Really. It's been my experience that most often professional people in the biz generally look down on writers. I don't know why. *Well, I sort of know why.*

Writers, for the most part, aren't really... professional. Most writers have no concept of money, and even less understanding of contracts and what they are really meant to do besides confuse everyone.

We are people who can be at play without moving any muscles and we can express that playtime without moving more than our fingers. It makes us a little peculiar, very imaginative, and a bit impractical as our passions drive many of our decisions.

People who work in publishing companies in any capacity do love books. They might not love writers though. We are an impractical source of what for them needs to be a practical product that pays their bills and allows them to eat. It's no wonder that we might annoy them, especially if we're packaged with an enormous ego. So hard to get through the door!

Much to my happy surprise, I found that most of the people at the fair were really quite pleasant. There was one moment that struck me as... odd.

The Odd Walker Books Experience

In only one instance was I told there was no one who would talk to me. It wasn't really a surprise,

though. It was Walker Books, and while their bear with candle logo is cute, their stand was (actually, it always is) walled-off all around with two young women guarding the entrance. (The walls come down for the days that are open to the public.)

An older man sitting inside the wall and to my right heard me introduce myself and ask if I might have a couple of minutes to speak with someone. The two women glanced at the man and he signaled a “No” to them, so I was politely asked to visit their website. As if I hadn’t already done that.

The invitation to visit their website was code for “please leave.” So I smiled, thanked them for their time and left.

I walked away with my secret manuscripts feeling like a secret agent. I was a little disappointed that the man didn’t want to talk to me at all, not even for two minutes. But he rather looked like he had himself been disappointed many times, and was maybe wary of being put-off by yet another crazy writer. I get it, I really do.

So if I don’t even get the chance to pitch a manuscript at all? It’s ok, move on.

That’s what I did and when it happens to you, just do the same.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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