

# Nonfiction book Proposals in the Digital Age

To sell an agent or publisher on your nonfiction idea, it's more important than ever to show where your book will fit in—and what will make it stand out—both in print and online. Here's how to do it.

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If you wrote a nonfiction\* book 20 years ago, your greatest competition was probably other books on the same topic.

If you're writing a nonfiction book today, your greatest competition is probably the immediate gratification of websites and online communities that offer diverse information and services.

Your first step, of course, in pursuing the publication of a nonfiction book is not to write the manuscript, but to create a proposal you'll use to pitch the book to agents or publishers before you write it. The writer's goal in crafting the proposal has always been to comprehensively address these three key questions:

- **SO WHAT?** What evidence can you offer that your book is needed? How does it fill a gap in the market? What's unique about it?
- **WHO CARES?** Who's the target audience? What size is the market for this book? What do we know about those readers?
- **WHO ARE YOU?** What combination of expertise, credentials and platform makes you the absolute perfect person to write this book?

In today's digital world, though, you have to take your proposal a step further. You must show how you will compete effectively in book form. Because a book, even a book on a marketable topic, can now sometimes be seen as a less desirable way to deliver information—especially information that goes out of date quickly, is effectively found online, or offers more value when personalized.

Think of your book proposal as a business plan that must make a

strong case that your book will sell. As such, there are key elements you must include (see the sidebar on the opposite page for a complete list). But to make that case most effectively in today's world, you'll need to give three primary areas extra consideration up front, before you even begin crafting the proposal itself: 1) the competitive analysis, 2) the evidence of need for the book (which you'll reflect in your market overview) and 3) your online content strategy (which will become part of your platform and marketing plan).

## 1. Competitive Analysis

An essential part of every book proposal has always been the analysis of competitive book titles. But today, you can't stop there; you have to go far beyond addressing your competition on the shelves. Here are the different aspects to assess.

### PRINT BOOK TITLES

Visit at least one major chain bookstore, and study what's on the shelves where your book would belong. You need to see specifically what's being distributed to stores, and which books have multiple copies on the shelf (which indicates popularity and a faster pace of sale). You can't find this in an online search.

Then, in your proposal, list at least three to five (if not more) of the most relevant or popular competing titles, with specs (price, page count, format, ISBN) and a 100–200 word description of what makes each book distinctive as a competitor. Don't overlook the need to assess each author's platform, too.

### E-BOOK TITLES

Repeat the process, studying e-book offerings through sites like Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Search by category (the same category that applies to your book) and by keyword. Look for the most highly ranked titles and the most reviewed. Determine if the titles are e-book originals or also available in print, and indicate available formats in your analysis. Again, don't forget to analyze the authors.

### TOP BLOGS

There are millions of blogs out there, but not all blogs are created equal. Identify major blogs associated with your topic that target your audience. If you're active online and savvy about your subject, you should already know what these blogs are. (If you don't, popular tech blog ReadWriteWeb offers advice for uncovering highly ranked blogs: [readwriteweb.com](http://readwriteweb.com).)

com/archives/identify\_top\_blogs\_redux.php.)

## WEBSITES, MULTIMEDIA & APPS

When you have a question or problem, what's the first thing you do? You probably type it into a search engine. Go through this process for your competitive analysis. What will potential readers of your book find if they turn to Google first? Or an app store on their smartphones? Or YouTube?

Determine how easy it is to find online information on your topic, and whether that information is trustworthy. Also note: Is it free, or do you need to pay for it? Is it customized or personalized? How well known are the authors or organizations behind the information? Consider all of the following mediums:

- Websites
- Community sites, forums and message boards
- Online classes, webinars and self-study courses
- Mobile and tablet applications
- Podcasts and videocasts
- Electronic newsletters or downloads
- Presentations and slides (e.g., SlideShare).

As a final step, ask a few librarians (or other experts on your topic) what online resources they use or recommend.

When you're ready to write your proposal, the most visible and competitive online and multimedia offerings should be described in the competitive analysis section, right alongside the books. Discuss how your book compares and why it is needed. Later, your research into online competitors can also be used to spark and develop marketing and promotional ideas for your book.

## 2. Evidence of Need For the Book

The availability of online information can kill the potential for some types of print books. Publishers of reference, cooking and travel books especially are transforming their products to stay relevant. (You may even realize, in the process of researching the online competition, that what you should do isn't write a book, but get started with a blog or community site instead—more on this later.)

However, there are still ways you can make a case for a print book as you compile the market overview and/or platform statement in your proposal. Here are three of the best:

## PROVE THAT YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE PREFERS BOOKS.

This is tough to do, but it's good research to conduct in any case. Begin educating yourself by talking to booksellers and librarians about books in your category. Have they seen shelf space stay the same, expand or shrink? Are they seeing a move to digital information, or not? Then, try these strategies to seek out more concrete positive indicators:

- Locate major bloggers or web-sites that are selling books that offer even more in-depth or valuable information.
- Find industry articles (e.g., in Publishers Weekly or on publishers marketplace.com) that discuss the health/growth of book publishing in your particular category.
- Identify recent successful publication of books in your category, especially those authored by noncelebrities.

Reference your most positive findings in your proposal. Keep in mind that any good editor or agent will probably already know—or at least have preconceived ideas—about market trends in each category. Still, the more you can reflect your own market savvy, the better.

Demonstrate you're writing something that isn't more effectively delivered through online media.

Not all information or content is appropriate for online consumption or multimedia adaptation. For example, when it comes to certain types of college textbooks, complex formatting and design issues (as well as student preferences) still drive demand for print editions.

This is an area where you need to be honest with yourself and your analysis of where your category/topic seems to be flourishing. You also need to pay attention to trends and new tech developments, because things are moving fast. That said, as far as your proposal is concerned, don't discuss format (mass-market, paperback, hardcover, electronic, etc.) unless it's one of the unique selling points of your proposed book. If you have ideas and material for multi-media features—either as marketing and promotional tools, or for an enhanced e-book edition or app—create a section in your proposal that addresses those opportunities. Otherwise, formats shouldn't affect your proposal, because the same concerns apply to them all: Books, whether print or digital, still have to compete against other types of online and informational media. Let your publisher lead the discussion on the best format for your book when the time comes.

## SHOW THAT YOU ALREADY REACH AN ONLINE MARKET OF READERS WHO ARE CLAMORING FOR A BOOK.

If you have a platform—or visibility to readers—you can argue that you have a captive audience for books you author. People with social

media impact, influence through popular online tools and services, or proven track records of self-published

e-book sales all have online platforms that can lead to the successful launch of a print book. This is how most popular bloggers land book deals. But your captive audience probably needs to be at least 50,000 visitors per month to merit the interest of a commercial publisher.

If you have an online platform worth discussing, include the following in your proposal's platform section:

- Detail your stats across all channels: visitors/month, followers, subscribers, sales numbers, etc., and how long you've been active on each channel.
- Describe your growth trajectory. Do you gain 1,000 blog readers every two months? Do you attract 100 new Twitter followers every day?
- Quantify the impact your online activity has, or what your influence is. A good starting point for doing this is klout.com, a free tool for anyone using Facebook and Twitter. If you blog, consider how many comments you average per post, or how many people subscribe to your blog via e-mail or RSS feeds.
- If you offer free or paid downloads, share those essential numbers—they show how many of your followers are really listening, and how many you can spark to action.

Here is an example of an effective statement about the impact of your online activity:

I have 60,000 followers on Twitter, and Twitter is the No. 2 source of traffic to my blog (2,000 visits per month). More than half the links that I share on Twitter get at least 100 clicks each.

This shows a highly engaged audience, rather than one of superficial followings that hold little meaning for marketing purposes.

### **3. Your Online Content Strategy**

Many book ideas I see shopped at conferences should really have started out as blogs or interactive websites, even if only to test-market the ideas, learn more about the target audiences, and ultimately produce more successful print products—ones that have significant value because they were created with awareness of and in collaboration with what exists online.

The book cannot be the be-all, end-all of what you do in today's non-fiction market. Agents and editors want to see that your book is not the beginning or the end of the road—that it is merely one aspect of your much larger purpose and strategy for developing content and serving a readership, online and off.

So, think creatively about what can be done outside the book format. What are you already doing that can support the book and give it a presence or companion online? How can the content in your book be divided or reworked? Could it be customized or personalized? Have you thought about audio or video versions or supplements? Could you create an online class? How about an e-newsletter?

An effective and holistic content strategy combines print, online and multimedia channels to:

- **MARKET AND PROMOTE YOURSELF AND YOUR WORK.** You can lure new audiences with free bits of information and eventually interest them in paying for the most valuable content—which may or may not be in book form.

- **KEEP YOUR READERS ENGAGED AND YOUR BRAND VISIBLE.** What happens when people finish your book? They should have a place where they can continue the conversation online—with you and other readers—and receive updates. The people who are most talented at content strategy know how to build scarcity into their most valuable offerings. Usually this means customizing content for your most loyal fans, or offering gated or one-time experiences or products. Your time and attention is a limited resource, and can be turned into premium content.

Reflect your ability to do all of this in the platform and marketing plan elements of your book proposal, and agents and publishers will have a clear picture of your value both on and off the page.

We're still experiencing a revolution in how we find, use and share information—and authors who recognize the increasing need to demonstrate why their books will be the most viable ways to deliver information will already have a leg up on the competition. Incorporate this knowledge into your proposal, and you'll increase its chances of hitting your mark. WD