

Keeping Editors Happy

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(Do you know your editors' preferences? Here are some suggestions that will help you keep those hard-earned clients. Sylvia interviewed several editors to learn about their problems with indexes and indexers. Here she presents the results of her research: How to Avoid Becoming Your Clients' Pet Peeve.)

Indexing is a profession which seems to have an enormous turnover. Is this because many beginning indexers are simply not able to secure enough work? Assuming that the same level of competency exists, why is one indexer more successful in securing work than another?

In order to answer these questions I decided to take an informal survey of several editors. Who better, I thought, to tell us why a particular indexer will receive work from them over others? In posing my inquiries to these editors, I asked them to assume that the indexers in question all had the same level of competency. The majority were very eager to express themselves regarding this issue, and their answers were quite revealing.

Speak to Me!

Communication between an editor and the indexer is a crucial requirement in the working relationship. Many spoke at length regarding maintaining contact during the project. One editor specifically looks for a high level of involvement in the project. All stated that they appreciate the indexer flagging problems in advance rather than waiting until the last minute.

Late?! What Do You Mean, Late?

A particular pet peeve they shared concerned learning at the last minute that the index will be late. Several said that having the index come in a few days late was generally not a problem but *only* if arranged in advance. In others words, don't call the morning of the due date and expect the editor to be delighted with your announcement. And while many projects have some time flexibility, there will be others which have absolutely no slip time available. One editor shared with me her worst experience with a late index: the indexer had failed to make a back-up disk of the work in progress. A hard drive failure, resulting in losing the entire project, caused the index to be turned in over two weeks late.

Causing the editor to miss a typesetting schedule can be fatal to your relationship. It shows a lack of professionalism that can cost you any future work.

Can You Follow Instructions?

Good communication also includes listening to the editor's needs. Several editors mentioned that they do not appreciate making specific indexing requests only to have them ignored. Also, once they have worked with an indexer, editors found it annoying to have to repeat their standard format requirements. They expect the indexer to have retained this information.

The surveyed editors were united regarding the importance of following instructions. Another editor related her latest indexing nightmare: an indexer was asked to update an index to accommodate several articles which were either being added to or deleted from an already existing collection. The indexer was given a file containing the existing index and asked to add in the new entries. Instead, the indexer began to reconstruct the existing document and turned in an index which contained entries to text which didn't exist and neglected much of the new text. The entire job had to be redone.

One can speculate that perhaps the original index was inadequate and required a new construction. Or perhaps the original index was well done and the indexer simply made a mess of what should have been a simple revision. But even without knowing such details of this nightmare, it is clear that the indexer not only failed to follow the given instructions but did not maintain communication with the editor.

How About the Content?

Another editor shared with me a content issue. Her press no longer uses an indexer who began turning in long indexes which contained entries for inappropriate, superficial mentions of topics. The editors at this press didn't like having to edit out the superficial entries. They all felt that the indexer should be sending indexes with more complete editing. Eventually, even though this indexer had been used by this press for a number of years, they quit calling her. Again, causing the editor extra work is a sure way to end the business relationship.

Several editors mentioned the importance of the author's input. The author reviews the index, and, while some may be rather indifferent, there will be some who have either very positive or negative responses. Naturally, editors are always pleased to deal with happy authors, but an unhappy author is another matter. One editor said that she felt uncomfortable having to defend an indexer's work, even when she considered the index to be acceptable. Another editor suggested a strong offense is the best defense. She makes it a point to hand the indexer a list of entries which the author wants included. Unfortunately, this issue is one over which an indexer may have very little control. Many authors do not have the training to accurately access an index, and indexers are at the mercy of what is often an unfair and subjective judgment.

What authors *are* able to accurately judge is the subject expertise apparent—or lacking—in the index. The editor who has to explain to the author why the indexer omitted crucial entries is going to be upset with the

indexer. Subject expertise is something which editors feel justified in considering when hiring, since familiarity with the topic can have a serious impact on the usability of the index. Editors were very verbal in their reactions to indexers who pretend to be knowledgeable on a subject and then produce incomplete indexes.

Clean Up Your Act!

Presentation is another issue with editors. The main message from all of the editors was: don't make extra work for them. Editors, without exception, want a final product to be as clean as possible. Though they do expect to have to review the index, there is generally a high level of competency expected from professional indexers. Expectations include consistency in the indexing, a professional appearance, and a level of indexing appropriate to the text.

Then there is the essential matter of preparing electronic files which assist rather than impede compositors with the typesetting process. For example, diacritics (or international accent marks) have become an increasingly important issue in scholarly indexing and require using the Unicode standard to ensure accurate conversion by the compositor. Another example is embedded indexing, a growing niche of specialized indexing practice, which requires tagging Word or InDesign document files. Fortunately, indexers now have access to multiple software tools allowing them to competently prepare electronic files. The professional indexer is one who provides their client with a well-done and useful index as well as with an electronic file that facilitates the typesetting process.

Locations and Relations

Only one editor mentioned that the indexer's location made a difference. While admitting that geography, due to the Internet, shouldn't be an issue, he simply felt more comfortable hiring local indexers. However, location does not generally seem to be a problem with most editors.

A good personal relationship with the editor is also helpful in securing additional work. An indexer's behavior toward an editor can determine whether the relationship runs smoothly or becomes strained. While this may not affect the quality of your work, it may have a direct impact on repeat work. Again, this may place an unfair burden on an indexer who has to deal with unreasonable demands or an editor's abrasive manner. In that case, an indexer has to decide on the value of maintaining the working relationship.

Helpful Résumés

The managing editor of a prestigious academic press made some interesting comments regarding marketing

by indexers. She currently has a large pile of indexer résumés on her desk but not one includes a sample index. This editor said that a résumé impresses her more and will more likely receive her attention when it is accompanied with a sample of the indexer's work. A résumé alone seldom gives enough for an editor to make an accurate assessment of the indexer's capabilities. She also preferred an indexer to list references, including phone numbers and e-mail addresses, rather than simply stating that references can be provided if requested. A professional looking Web site is an excellent way to present a résumé, references, and sample indexes in a non-threatening and easily accessible forum which a prospective client can look over at their leisure. A well-done Web site can be a very effective marketing tool for connecting with prospective clients as well as providing current clients with up-to-date information on any expanded services you may be offering.

To sum up, editors expect a high level of professionalism from freelance indexers. They want good communication, a high-quality final product, and timely delivery. They want to avoid trouble, work, and expense. Especially, keeping costs down is appreciated. If an indexer causes the press extra expense due to lateness, incomplete work, problem electronic files, or other mistakes, the editor is not likely to rehire that individual.

In other words, make life easy for an editor and you are likely to remain at the top of the hiring list.