INDEXER-PUBLISHER RELATIONS: A TWO-WAY STREET

DEE ATKINSON

Practitioners of the indexing profession hear a lot about what their publisher clients expect of them. In the case of freelancers, these requirements may be widely divergent, varying greatly from house to house. While the "customer is always right" philosophy is probably a good general principle to follow, it does seem only fair that publishers might be asked to meet a few requirements, too.

As indicated in my title, I have found it most rewarding to try to remember that one's relations with publishers are a two-way street, and since I have spent a good many years in the publishing business, and thus have travelled on both sides of the street, I have a great deal of empathy with the editors with whom I work—with one or two exceptions of course.

But what, specifically, should indexers expect from publishers?

1. First and foremost—more indexes. Although I would not go so far as to say every book should have an index (like a chicken in every pot), I certainly feel that too many books are still being published without indexes. Those of you who are reference librarians must surely have had the frustrating experience of finding just the book to answer that tricky reference question, and, with the library patron breathing down your neck, discovering that this valuable book has no index! What can you do? You can't very well stand at the shelf and read the whole book right then and there! So whatever answers that book might have contained—at least so far as that particular problem is concerned—must remain lost, perhaps for ever. One area where there seems to be a great lack—and a great need—is in the field of children's non-fiction.

I think that publishers should start regarding the index as an indispensable part of almost every book and a good selling point—not just something thrown in to round out a signature.

2. Schedules. In assigning work, the publisher should remember that the freelancers also have schedules too. He should try to be reasonably specific at the very outset as to how many pages there will be, when they will be sent to the indexer (and by what means—slow freight or pony express), and when the index is due to go to the printer.

If for some reason the publisher has to fall behind in supplying the pages to the indexer—and all of us who have dealt with printers know only too well that this can and does happen—he should ask for the indexer's cooperation. But this can work both ways. There may be a time when the indexer will need to ask the publisher for understanding indulgence.

One thing, however, the publisher should never do. When the printer falls behind and page proofs are not delivered to the indexer when promised, he should not be asked to pick up the pieces and make up for the printer's loss of time by meeting the original schedule date.

If possible, a little leeway should be allowed in scheduling. A built-in condition of back-of-the-book indexing is that it is work that must always be performed in a hurry. One realizes that when a book gets to this stage of production, everything is waiting for the index before the finished product can be wrapped up.

Nevertheless, it does seem that editors sometimes buy office time at the indexer's expense, demanding that the index be placed in their hands on a certain day, only to let it sit until they find time to look at it. One experienced indexer I know has told me that it is not unusual for him to receive a call on a Thursday telling him that an index is
wanted by Monday. All of us know what it's like to work a whole weekend to meet a deadline, and I for one don't mind doing this once in a while. However, it isn't something to make a habit of—most of my friends think I'm in a peculiar line of work anyway—and a little more careful planning could obviate much of this.

Also, it might be borne in mind that the indexer does not particularly want to keep the job going any longer than necessary to produce a good index. He'd just as soon finish it and get paid!

3. Authors and indexes. The publisher should try to stop thinking of the free-lance indexer as second best. For reasons that are not quite clear to me, many publishers make a policy of requiring an author to index his own book. I disagree heartily—if not vehemently—with the publisher who states: 'There is little doubt that the person best qualified for the job is the author himself'. It is by no means a fact that because someone writes a book he is a competent indexer. If he is, it is probably purely coincidental.

If the author refuses to do the index, the publisher (often when time is running out) looks for a free-lancer to do the job. This is unfair both to the indexer (especially if the schedule is tight) and to the book, which probably deserves better treatment. How much more efficient it would be if the plan at the very beginning of the production process were to have a free-lance indexer, competent in the subject area, agree in advance to do the index, and schedule his work accordingly.

I should also like to recommend that publishers avoid giving botched-up author indexes to professional indexers to 'doctor'. Even if it takes a little more time, it is usually worthwhile in these cases to let the indexer do the job from scratch.

Another problem author is the one who disapproves of the indexer's work and proceeds to do it over again. Not only is this time-consuming (it usually makes a great deal of mopping-up work for the editor) but it tends to undermine the publisher-indexer relationship. I feel that if the indexer is someone who works for you regularly, there is some obligation on your part to stand by his work and, while preserving author relations (nobody ever said that the publishing business was one big rose garden) restrain the author's attempts to mess up a perfectly good index.

Also, if at all possible, the indexer should be spared the usually unhappy experience of having to do an index under the author's direction.

4. Specifications. It is seldom that unlimited space is allowed for the index; much more frequently the size of the index is severely limited by the hard facts of life in the production department.

If it happens that because of limited space the indexer must hold down the size of the index, it is extremely helpful if the publisher can tell the indexer how many lines he should have in the finished job, and how many characters to the line. Don't expect the indexer to be a book designer and figure this out for himself. This is another area of competence and it is inefficient to waste indexing time on it.

It would also make for better feelings all round if publishers would refrain from equating brevity with economy. Holding down the size of an index can be a time-consuming rather than a time-saving proposition. Thinking time is just as valuable as writing time or reading time, and to create a brief index that still retains its value as an index is an art in itself, one for which the artist should be properly compensated.

5. And speaking of compensation—the publisher should be willing to pay a fair price for indexing. Most publishers seem to have a clear-cut idea of what they should pay copy editors and proof-readers, but no one—including the indexers themselves—seems to know what indexers should be paid.
I have sometimes encountered the attitude that indexers should be paid at the same rate as proof-readers, but with all due respect to the proof-reader (and I like to do a little proof-reading myself once in a while), I do think that indexing is the more creative of the two activities and consequently should be paid for at a higher rate. We need more open information in this area. Indexers, for their own good as well as that of the profession, should be more responsive when asked to fill in questionnaires on this subject. But to get back to the publisher—since it is so often necessary to put pressure on the indexer, it would be helpful if the same pressure might be applied to the publisher's accounting department when it comes to paying the indexer's bill!

6. Style and structure. Indexers are bright people, but so far as I know not many of them are mind-readers. If you have a set house style (preferably in printed form); special requirements as to the handling of such items as illustrations and footnotes; or definite ideas about structure, be sure to let the indexer in on the secret, particularly if he is someone who has not worked for you before. Don't wait until the job is done and then complain that it doesn't meet your requirements. Actually, indexers are creative people who would rather do a good job than a poor one. Anything you as the publisher can do to help will usually be appreciated.

Editors should try to understand what the indexer's job involves before making demands or evaluating the finished product. I am firmly convinced that every editor should have to try his hand at at least one index before being placed in a position to pass judgment on the indexer's work. I think I would even extend this requirement to the production man—it might result, if not in a usable index, in the easing of pressure from that direction.

7. Recognition. Most of all, it should be remembered that indexers are human beings. This is just as true in this computer-oriented time as it ever was. Even in machine-based systems the human being is an indispensable element. And because they are human, indexers like to receive recognition for the hours of work they put in—much of it tedious and performed under a great deal of pressure. A byline or a mention in the acknowledgments and above all, copies of reviews, would go far to convey this recognition, as well as to fix responsibility. Knowing that his work will appear under a byline is an added incentive to the indexer to do a good job.

Standard Presentation of Translations

Requirements for presentation of translations which are given in a new British Standard should help translators, editors and publishers to produce translations in a consistent and informative way—this news will be of special interest to librarians and bibliographers.

BS 4755 Presentation of translations lists essential information which should be given on the title leaves about the original as well as the translation, and optional information which may be useful in certain cases. It makes recommendations for this arrangement of headings, tables and illustrations and for ways of dealing with particular features of the original text.

The standard is not designed to deal with matters of translation technique, though some aspects of presentation depend in part upon this—for example the occurrence of translators' notes.

This standard is based on a proposal for a Recommendation by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). Price by post 95p.