

How to Make Your Voice Heard in the Publishing Industry

by **Stephanie Bond**

Booksellers, how many times have you rolled your eyes over a hideous book jacket? An unfortunate release date? Lack of advance reading copies? Recycled covers? A dropped series? Disguised reprints?

Every day, you say? You frown and sigh and groan in frustration. “If they’d only ask me,” you lament, “I could tell them a thing or two about life in the bookselling trenches.”

The bad news is that despite your vital role in the book industry, you’re probably not going to be asked, at least not directly. But the good news is that if you feel strongly enough about a practice within the publishing industry in general, or within one publishing house in particular, your voice can count and even make a difference in future policy-making. If you’re most concerned about a general direction of the industry, there are several ways to make your opinion known:

- Join a bookseller association and become involved in advocacy committees.
- Engage your publisher sales representatives in constructive dialogue.
- Write opinion pieces for industry trade journals.

If, on the other hand, you’re most concerned about a specific publisher’s practices, you should consider contacting the publisher directly. How?

- First, find out to whom you should address your concern. Ask the publisher’s sales rep for a name, title, and address, or simply contact the publishing house and ask the operator. If all else fails, address the letter to the marketing or sales department. And although it’s tempting to write to the author, the author seldom has input into the publisher’s business practices. However, if your concern affects a particular author(s), it’s good form to copy the author(s) on your note to the publisher.
- Express your comments in a brief, friendly tone. Don’t register a complaint unless you have a constructive suggestion for improvement. For instance, if your readers complain about disguised reprints, suggest the method you’d like to see the publisher utilize to distinguish the book as a reprint.
- Give your qualifications for the opinion you’re offering—have you been a bookseller for years? Coordinated reader groups? Do you belong to a bookseller association? Are your sales records impressive?

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- Explain how the policy to which you object directly affects your business, and back up your complaint with numbers, if possible. In my store, sales for the third book in the “Love Cove” series have been half of the sales for the previous two books because the previous titles are out of print—readers want all or none. I ask that you consider another printing of the first two titles. The more specific you are, the easier it is for the recipient to extrapolate your concern as being widespread.
- Offer to be part of the solution by volunteering to serve in focus groups the publisher might form and consult in order to affect change. Make sure you include your contact information and store hours.
- If possible, obtain the endorsement of your store manager, regional manager, etc. If you’re the manager or if you own an independent store, solicit support from your peers—remember, though, that multiple letters will garner more attention and response than one letter with several signatures.
- Mail or fax a letter instead of calling. A piece of paper gives the recipient something to respond to and to route around the staff as needed. Email is fine, too, though less formal. Still, you’re more likely to get a response if you communicate via email, and your suggestion will be easier to route through the proper channels.
- Be persistent. No one likes an unreasonable squeaky wheel, but if a practice continues to hinder your ability to be an effective bookseller, send a letter every six months until you receive a satisfactory response. ~**SBond**