Five Proven Strategies for Finding and Retaining Authors

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Sharon Sandle joined the State Bar of Texas in 2001 after working in private practice in New Mexico for several years. She is currently the Director of TexasBarBooks and the Director of Practice Technology for the Bar. She also manages the Bar's Law Practice Management program. Sharon holds a law degree from the University of Texas Law School and a master's degree in English literature from Texas A&M University.
You can’t publish if you don’t have any material, and while it’s sometimes tempting, you can’t just write it all yourself. Where can you go to find that perfect author who will deliver a well-researched, well-written manuscript on time and who will cheerfully answer your editors’ queries and accept their suggestions?

Frankly, you’re not going to find the perfect author. Good authors have the same assortment of biases, quirks, and foibles as the rest of us, and, as legal publishers, we are usually dealing with authors who have many other claims on their time and often little experience with what it takes to put together a book. Don’t panic, though. Following are some time-tested strategies that you can use to find authors you can work with and that make the process go more smoothly.

1. **Use your connections.**

Recruiting good authors is easiest when you nurture a network of relationships with attorneys who are experts in their fields and have been good volunteers in the past.

- **Recruit good speakers.** Be on the lookout for talented CLE speakers who have turned in good papers. Reliable speakers are often reliable authors, and you may also be able to repurpose a good paper as the starting point for a book or a chapter.
- **Let your authors recruit for you.** Consult your best authors on who they might know who would make a good author on a particular topic. This is often the best way to find newer attorneys who would make good authors but who aren’t widely known. It’s also easier to recruit a new author if a colleague she knows makes the first contact.
- **Let new authors work their way up.** Be on the lookout for opportunities to assign minor roles to new authors. If there is a small task needed for an existing book, for example, a new form or a summary of a new case, that task might be carved out and given to an untried author that you’re trying to recruit for larger projects later.

2. **Use a carrot.**

Incentives can be very powerful. Providing incentives to authors can make them feel that they are valued and appreciated. Also, once an author is receiving an incentive, he may feel a heightened responsibility to complete the work. Money is an obvious incentive, but it isn’t the only one.

- **Monetary incentives.** The most obvious incentive is to pay a royalty. Sometimes this just isn’t possible. The expected income from the book may not justify the expense of paying a royalty. Also, for many attorney authors, the royalty that
they can expect to receive is insignificant in comparison with what they can make practicing law. But when you’re analyzing the expected return on a book, it’s worth taking a look at whether you can afford to pay a royalty. Sometimes paying a single author a royalty on a book is less expensive than assembling a group of volunteers who will have fairly costly expenses. If you are going to pay an author, consider providing a monetary incentive for delivering the manuscript by a particular date. There is a cost in terms of your staff’s productivity when authors don’t submit their material when expected. If you can quantify that cost, it might be worth it to pay the author to be on time.

- **Perks.** Is there something you have that you can provide gratis to your authors? Complimentary copies of your publications are a possibility. For example, send new authors sample copies of some of your books to use as a guide for their work. If you have digital versions of your publications, this can be a very low-cost way to provide some free material to your authors. In Texas, authors are given free access to the Online Library of course materials, free access to online CLE courses, and complimentary copies of any books that would help them in their task. In addition to making authors feel appreciated, these materials really do help them get their work done by providing research tools and by giving them some good examples to emulate.

- **Fame.** Providing your authors with recognition can be a strong incentive for recruiting new authors and making existing authors feel appreciated. Give some thought to how you recognize the authors in the book. Make their names prominent, and get input from your authors on how they’d like their names to appear. In some books, it may be appropriate to include a short biography of each author. Recognize authors on your website, too. For one of our books that had multiple authors, we created a webpage that lists each author and includes a picture, a short biography, and a link to the firm website. You might also consider organizing a book signing at a CLE event.

- **Food.** This is often overlooked, but it is a powerful way to foster a good working relationship with authors. Take your authors to lunch. Provide meals at their working meetings. Give them a nice dinner at the end of the project to say “thank you.”

- **Tokens of appreciation.** Something as seemingly insignificant as a paperweight or plaque inscribed in recognition of the authors’ work can provide motivation. It can be difficult to keep the cost down on these items, but they are appreciated by authors.
3. Sometimes, use a stick.

Incentives are powerful, but occasionally you also need to be firm. It’s natural to want to bend over backward to be appreciative to authors, particularly when they are volunteering their time. But as you treat authors with respect, make it clear that you also expect to be treated with respect. You’re a professional as well, and your time is valuable.

- **Set clear deadlines.** Make a realistic deadline for the authors, and discuss the deadline up front. It’s sometimes tempting when you’re recruiting an author to be a little vague about how soon you need the work completed or to imply that the deadline is negotiable. But it’s better to have a plan for when you need the material and make sure at the outset of the project that the author will be able to work within those parameters. If not, it’s better to thank the author for being honest and continue to search for someone who can meet the deadline.

- **Keep in touch with your author.** Keep in contact with the authors and set intermediate deadlines so you can tell whether things are on track. If, early on, it looks like an author is not likely to get this project completed on time, find another author or a second author to help out.

- **Don’t give extensions.** Make a realistic deadline, and then stick to it. Your staff needs to be able to plan for when they will receive a manuscript, and if they receive it late, they are not going to finish their work on time. It’s unrealistic to expect editorial and production staff to work faster. This situation can easily snowball, and it has a very real financial impact. There is almost always a good justification for an extension, but it also always comes at a cost. Be up front with authors about the impact of granting an extension, and then say “no.” Most authors will understand if you explain your reasons. Even if they don’t understand, they’ll probably forgive you eventually. One committee chair held a grudge against me for two years because I would not grant an extension on a new chapter to the committee’s book. The consequence for the book was that the new chapter didn’t make it into that edition, but the book came out on time. Although the committee chair was initially angry, the chapter was included in the following edition, and he and I are still good friends. A second advantage to this approach was that the committee developed a culture of taking deadlines seriously.

4. Delegate.

Matching the right staff to the author and the right author to the project makes a big difference in the project’s success.
• Find the right staff member to work with each author. All professionals have to work with difficult people sometimes, but each of us has certain behavior or personality types that we understand and can manage while other behavior makes us want to tear our hair out. In TexasBarBooks, we often find that one member of the staff gets along really well with an author that everyone else finds particularly difficult. If so, that staff person becomes the point person for dealing with that author. This has proven successful even when the point person has a position that usually doesn’t interact much with authors. It doesn’t matter as long as they have a good working relationship with the author.

• Delegate the work of keeping authors on track to their colleagues. Sometimes it’s easy for an attorney to make excuses to an editor when she wouldn’t be as comfortable making the same excuses to a fellow lawyer. If you have several authors for a project, each author will feel a responsibility to her colleagues. Designate one attorney as the chair of the committee or the editor for the book and give that attorney the authority to recruit new authors, pressure authors for their contributions, and even dismiss authors who don’t contribute.

5. **Make it easy.**

Set your authors up to succeed at their task. Many attorneys are good writers but have little or no experience working on a book. The more you can break the task down into manageable pieces and focus the authors’ efforts, the more willing attorneys will be to work with you and the better their contributions will be.

• Give authors a head start. Use existing material as a starting point if you can. If an author is supplementing an existing chapter in a book, send him a digital file of the chapter in the format that you’d like him to use for revisions so that you don’t receive material in multiple formats from multiple authors or, worse, receive revisions to the wrong version of the chapter.

• Make small, narrowly focused assignments. Break down a large project into small pieces and find many authors who are willing to work on just a small piece of the puzzle. For one of TexasBarBooks’ publications, we gave each author a question that required a one-page answer. Most authors were able to return their assignment in a week or so, and we had very little trouble recruiting authors for the project.

• Keep authors focused on what’s important. Make it clear at the outset of the project what the authors should focus their time on and what they don’t need to worry about. We had a committee that once spent several meetings considering the right font to use for the book instead of discussing the substantive content.
Make it clear to authors that decisions such as the font, formatting, and design will be handled by staff and that there will be editors reviewing their work. An initial letter that gives authors instructions on how to submit their work and makes some of these issues clear can help head off problems. A sample letter to authors is included with this paper.

These suggestions are based on my experience, both successes and failures, and the contributions of my colleagues at TexasBarBooks, and this paper basically contains the advice I would give to someone starting out in legal publishing. During the workshop, we’ll add to these ideas with the collective wisdom of our ACLEA colleagues and use that wisdom to address specific issues and questions that workshop attendees face.
Appendix
Sample Letter to Authors

[Date]

Name
Firm
Address
City, State Zip

Re: [Project Name]

Dear [Name]:

Thank you for agreeing to serve on the [Book Title] committee. The Bar is very grateful for your willingness to contribute. The committee’s purpose is to maintain the accuracy and usefulness of the [Book Title]. Please let me know if you need your own copy of the [Book Title] and one will be sent to you.

I am the publications attorney liaison and [Name] is our meeting coordinator. If you have any questions please tell me or [Name].

E-mail. Most of the committee’s business is conducted by e-mail. The e-mail address I have for you is [e-mail address]. Please verify and let [Name] know if this is incorrect or changes.

Purpose and scope of work: The committee's task this year is to organize the new edition, as well as make any updates required by changes in the law.

Meetings: Most of our meetings are usually held on [include meeting details]. Lunch is served at meetings and dress is casual. More details on the upcoming meeting will follow by email.

Materials that will be discussed at meetings will be forwarded to [Name] no later than five days before the meeting so that we can provide hard copies for everyone at the meeting. This policy allows time for reproduction, and distributing the materials to the members to review before the meeting.

PLEASE REVIEW THE MATERIALS BEFORE THE MEETING.
Use of work product, originality: As you may know, we publish an electronic version of the manual in addition to the printed manual. We also license other vendors to use the form language in document-assembly products, which are too complex for us to create and support at this time. Your continued participation in the project will constitute the grant of a nonexclusive license to the Bar to use your contribution in these ways. To that end, we ask you to sign and return to us the enclosed grant of literary property rights to formalize this understanding; that paperwork allows us to register the copyright with the Library of Congress to best protect the work from infringement. We must also ensure that we don't infringe anyone else's copyright, so let's discuss any material you may want to incorporate from another source; if it's not public domain material, we need to get formal permission to include it in the manual.

Expense reimbursements: I've enclosed a copy of the expense reimbursement request form for your review, but they will be emailed for each meeting with specific dates so you may fill them out prior to printing. Please read the policy on the back of the reimbursement form. These are the rules by which our office is bound in approving reimbursements. Note that requests without itemized receipts cannot be processed. If you seek reimbursement for a bill covering expenses for other members, be sure to list their names with the charge. Your completing the reimbursement request form with the policies in mind will allow us to handle your reimbursement more expeditiously and will help keep the auditors happy. Please submit forms, with detailed receipts and all necessary information attached, within 30 days of the meeting. They can be scanned and emailed to [Name], or faxed directly to her at [fax number].

I am looking forward to seeing you at the next meeting. Please let me or [Name] know if you need anything before then.

Very truly yours,