

An indispensable blueprint for writing and publishing the travel guidebook.

Crafting the Travel Guidebook: How to Write, Publish & Sell Your Travel Book

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Crafting the Travel Guidebook

*How to Write, Publish &
Sell Your Travel Book*

Barbara Hudgins

The Woodmont Press
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Chapter 1

Introduction



So you've decided to write a travel guidebook! Perhaps you are a travel writer with a sheaf of articles about your trip to Australia and you feel you have a good enough angle to support a full book. Perhaps you're a travel editor who is fed up with the books coming across your desk since you feel none of them have really brought the reality of the place home. Or you could be an outdoor editor who notices there are more and more inquiries about mountain biking in your area but there is no guidebook on the subject.

Of course you may not be a writer at all. You might be a travel agent who became frustrated with the treatment of single parents by travel packagers. You might be the owner of a large Labrador who finds herself out in the cold on Cape Cod because there is not a motel in sight that will accommodate dogs. Maybe you're a volunteer guide on a travel website who is tired of giving away all your valuable insights and descriptions for free. If you've developed an audience, maybe there is a way to cash in on your work.

Travel books cover a wide variety of authors and subjects. What first comes to mind is the traditional guidebook which features a *mélange* of descriptions, basic information and handy tips for the reader. But the travel category also includes the travel essay, which in the hands of an artist can become a meaningful

adventure. The travel memoir is closely related to fiction: both need narrative skills and a point of view. And then there is the vast world of the how-to-do-it guides that ignore destinations altogether to concentrate on one aspect of traveling, such as packing a suitcase or navigating around airports.

When contemplating the creation of the guidebook, the first thing one must consider is its marketability. Ask yourself this question: How many people will read my book? And the second question: Where will I find this audience? Will the audience be found in bookstores, airport gift shops, rugged-wear outfitter retailers, gourmet food shops or at online bookstores? Many guides can be found in more than one venue, since bookstores have a limited amount of space. Local guides are often found in neighborhood shops, while outdoor activity titles thrive at outfitter stores. The Zagat Restaurant Survey got its big start when it appeared on the racks of New York newsstands.

Once you have an inkling of your audience, you then have to think in terms of boundaries and general format. How will you shape your book? How much territory will you cover? How will the chapters flow? What will you consider important enough to include and what will be tossed out? Will you include opinions and observations? Of course any non-fiction book has to be researched, and you may have the beginning of your research already on your laptop. Travel books are a combination of personal observation, interviews with others and basic research. It is the stitching together of all these elements that creates the unique work.

Who Will Publish the Guidebook?

If you are planning to send out proposals to a publisher you have a few more steps to take. For one thing, you will need to peruse a list of publishers that cover your field and there is a full list of such publishers in this book. There is no sense in submitting a proposal about kayaking in Canada to a publisher who specializes in Florida titles. Or if you are trying for certain big New York publishers, you will have to limit your search to literary agents because those publishers will not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

On the other hand, there is the possibility of self-publishing since a large number of travel books belong in that category or started out that way before they blossomed into larger entities. Self-publishing now has a step-child in the form of Print-on-Demand publishers who dominate in size if not in quality. Today the stream of guidebooks comes from various rivulets.

The Accidental Travel Writer

Despite the fact that most publishers expect you to turn cartwheels before they will look at your endeavor, many travel guides were “birthed”, as it were, by accident. The author never set out to be a writer, but came to the field because he found a void that needed to be filled. Many of the names we now associate with big-time series were created by happenstance. Here are some stories:

The 1930s: Duncan Hines. Hines was a traveling salesman who criss-crossed the American hinterland as part of his job. Eating in local restaurants in many small towns was an adventure: sanitary standards were not what they are today. At the time more Americans died of restaurant food poisoning than they did from hit-and-run accidents. He began to keep a notebook of the best places he found. Since Hines’ travels took him all over the country, many other salesmen asked him for recommendations. He finally decided to put all his “discoveries” into a book called *Adventures in Good Eating*.

This self-published book, after national publicity, took off and formed the basis for a publishing “empire”. His other travel books included *Lodging for a Night*, a vacation guide and a cookbook filled with recipes from the restaurants that he recommended. He eventually sold more than 2,000,000 of these volumes from his home over the next 19 years. He was so well-known that when Proctor & Gamble decided to enter the cake mix arena they purchased his name as a trademark. And so, although this early restaurant critic died and his titles went out of print, his name remains enshrined forever in the supermarket aisles.

(Thanks to Louis Hatchett author of *Duncan Hines: the Man Behind the Cake Mix* for this material.)

The 1950s: Arthur Frommer. The Frommer series, now owned by Wiley Publishing, seems to cover every aspect of the travel world. But this stream of books all emanated from a single self-published guide. Arthur Frommer graduated from Yale Law School but entered the army during the Korean War. However, he was posted to Europe. While there, he wrote and self-published a guidebook called *The GI's Guide to Traveling in Europe* which emphasized budget travel. It sold well, and so Frommer restructured it into a book for the layman called *Europe on \$5 a Day*. Published in 1957, it was considered revolutionary since previous guides had been aimed at the well-heeled traveler. Frommer's guide was invaluable to hordes of young Americans who visited Europe in the years when the American dollar really was almighty and could purchase incredible value.

Although Frommer practiced law back in the USA, he also continued to write and self-publish guidebooks. Destinations such as New York, Mexico, Hawaii, Japan and the Caribbean followed the original guide. In 1977, Frommer's trademark was sold to Simon & Schuster. In 2001 the series was bought by Wiley, but the author has kept a strong commitment to low-budget travel and to consumer advocacy. Still going strong, Frommer has his own radio show, a syndicated travel column and a magazine. Arthur's daughter, Pauline Frommer, now writes her own series of travel guidebooks and continues the family legacy. (Adapted from Wikipedia.)

The 1970s: Tony and Maureen Wheeler. In 1973, a young English couple decided to record their lengthy journey across the continent from Turkey, through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The original book, *Across Asia on the Cheap*, was written and published in Sydney with scant money. Written with style and full of strong opinions, it sold well enough in Australia that it allowed the couple to expand it into *South-East Asia on a Shoestring*. And so the Lonely Planet series was born.

The early books catered to young people from Australia and Europe who followed the overland route between those two points via South-East Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. This was becoming something of a rite of passage for young travelers and was known familiarly as the "hippie

route". The new and rapidly growing market of backpackers and a guidebook company that catered heavily to this community meant that Lonely Planet's readers developed a kinship to the company.

The series' voice has changed over the years as it has entered other markets, such as Western Europe, where more competition exists. The series now caters as much to middle-class travelers as to backpackers. As of 2005, the Wheelers no longer control the operation although they still own a majority of the company, and Tony Wheeler still writes a few guidebooks himself. Multiple authors and professional mapmakers now dominate the style of the publishing house. (Adapted from Wikipedia.)

The 1980s: Rick Steves. Steves is another example of an accidental tourist who becomes a beacon of common sense to the traveling public. Rick became enamored of traveling through Europe after his first experience as a teenager, visiting piano factories with his father. By the age of 18, he was traveling on his own, funding his trips by giving piano lessons. In 1976, he started a business called Europe Through the Back Door (ETBD) and conducted guided tours throughout the continent.

He also gave classes in traveling to Europe at a local college. For each class he created extensive itineraries, replete with notes. He soon discovered that people were stealing these itineraries! Why not flesh out the itinerary and create a book?

The first edition of his book, *Europe Through the Back Door*, was self-published in 1980. His later works were put out by a small company in New Mexico. Soon there were a number of country, city and regional guides. In the 1990s Rick's PBS travel series put his guides on the map as it were, and now Rick Steves' name goes above the title. In 2001, his original publisher merged into the Avalon Travel Group.

In addition to his guidebooks, Rick has also penned six phrase books and still runs his tour company which now has a staff of 60 full-time employees. He lives and works in his hometown of Edmonds, Washington and goes off every year for a long European trip. (Adapted from the website: www.ricksteves.com.)

The 1980s: The Zagat Survey. The Zagat Restaurant Survey

entered the scene in 1979 and soon took New York by storm. Up until that time, haughty restaurant critics from a few favored media could make or break a restaurant. The Zagat Survey was started by Tim and Nina Zagat, two Yale-educated lawyers who formed a circle of two hundred respondents to create a dining “club” in New York. The purpose of the club was to give ordinary people a chance to give their opinions on the places they liked to frequent.

At first, the survey was strictly a freebie for members of the club. Whether it was a deli, a watering hole for the famous, or a local eatery, when enough votes were tabbed up the place was rated. The rating system was devised by the Zagats. The tabulations were handed out and later collated and edited by the couple. What started out as a hobby was soon becoming too time-consuming and expensive, yet its popularity was unquestioned.

After several publishers turned down the concept, the Zagats went on to publish the small pocket-size guide themselves. At first they drove around New York personally stocking the newsstands and bookstores. After the guide hit the big-time, they hooked onto more professional distribution. One city led to another and soon there were Zagat Surveys out on all major cities. There are now guides for hotels, resorts and spas around the world plus a very active website. (Adapted from Wikipedia.)

As you can see from these stories, if you are the go-to person for voyagers off to the Andes, or if people keep stealing your list of the restaurants, or if friends ask you how you managed to drive your RV from Maine to Vancouver on a mere \$20,000 for the year, then you are ripe for transforming yourself into a travel guru and writing a book on the subject. And certainly, if the website featuring your trip around the world is garnering multiple hits and queries from strangers, that may be the catalyst for your new book.

You may not end up as the head of a publishing empire. You may not even make a full-time living from your travel guide. What you will discover is a life fulfilled by doing what you love, even if it turns out to be on a part-time basis. (Travel writers who live on royalties and magazine assignments do not reside in fancy houses. They do sometimes linger in fancy hotels but

that's because someone else is picking up the tab.) On the other hand, plenty of people make a very decent living by creating a series or combining their guidebook writing with magazine and newspaper work.

Some neophytes think that only way to enter the field is to be accepted by the big-name series editors and ascend from writing a short piece to becoming the co-author of a book that sells 50,000 copies a year. That is one way, but it is not the only way. There are hundreds of small presses, dozens of university presses and an untold number of self-publishers whose books line the shelves of bookstores, fill the Amazon.com "river" and can be found in gift shops, wineries, RV and sports outfitting stores and museum shops near and far.

Focusing on your travel guide means first and foremost focusing on the projected audience for that book and how you plan to entertain and inform that audience. But it also entails creating a format for your text, placing boundaries on your coverage, finding a voice that mirrors the concept and a style that shows you understand the audience for whom this book was intended.

Travel writing may be an art, but putting a travel guidebook together is a craft. And because creating the guide is only half the battle, this book will also cover the areas of publishing and promotion. Hopefully your new guidebook will become a worthy contender among the many titles on the Travel Shelf.

Chapter 4

Finding Your Audience



Everything you envision, your concept, your category, your boundaries, your format, all circle around one basic question: Who and where is your audience? What can your book offer to that audience that differs from the books currently on the market? Let's say you set out to do a book about Paris. Here are some possible questions from potential customers:

- How do I see Paris cheaply?
- How do I see Paris quickly?
- How do I make my friends envious by staying at the best hotel in Paris?
- How do I stay at a good hotel but pay budget prices?
- How do I meet a guy/girl in Paris?
- How do I meet other people like me (I'm young, or gay, or old, or arty)?
- How do I get into the best restaurants without looking like a rube?
- How do I find a restaurant where the locals eat?
- How do I stay away from other tourists and look like a native?
- How do I see everything with my disability?
- How do I make them understand what I'm saying?
- Should I spend my time going to museums or to shops?

And the “I” person here is not you, the author, but the customer, the final reader. He or she is interested in what you have to say only insofar as it pertains to his or her likes and dislikes. If you are contemplating a book with a specific audience or interest, such as *The Best Wedding Sites* or *The Black Guide to New Orleans*, you know exactly who your audience is — and the publisher’s main job is to find those special outlets, either in brick and mortar stores or online retailers, where that audience can be reached.

But assuming your book is not that specific, there is still an optimum audience that would be interested. Whether you realize it or not, your book is probably aimed at budget travelers (who may be young or old), adventurous travelers (who may be young or middle-aged), well-to-do travelers (or people who like to go First Class when they travel), single women, single men, senior citizens who have time to spare, business people who have no time, families with children, families with senior parents, people who love foreign places, people who like to stay with the familiar, or any combination of the above.

The wider the circle of these potential customers the more possibility you have for higher sales. On the other hand, if you try to please everybody you often end up pleasing nobody. And the next question is: Aren’t most of the reader’s questions already answered by books currently on the market? What does your book bring to the reader?

Defining the audience for your book and positioning your book alongside the competitive titles is all important for your success. You might consider what trends are currently in vogue among publishers. For instance, is there really an appetite among readers for first-hand stories from travelers? From the number of online publishers who are looking for short pieces from traveling vagabonds, one would think so.

On the other hand, if everybody else is doing the short-length traveler’s tale, or the all-inclusive guidebook, maybe you should concentrate on something different. Cultural tours, cooking tours — certainly somebody could do a directory of all those hands-on tours that seem so popular.

Pinpointing your audience: Even within the specific category and general boundaries, every guidebook has some sort of angle that differentiates it from the others in the field. It may cover a wider or smaller geographical area (i.e. there is a book called “Wineries of Long Island” and one called “Wineries of the Tri-State Area” and one called “Wineries along the Northeast Coastline”). And those differences have everything to do with the perceived audience.

Not only is a wider area covered in the last book listed, but also the target audience for that book is specifically people who travel by car (and who like wine of course). Whereas the first book mentioned would appeal primarily to residents of Long Island and New York City, and the second to NYC and suburban residents who like to take trips, the third would appeal to travelers as well as residents. In other words, various travel writers not only cover a smaller or larger parcel of ground, but they can also cover the same ground from different audience viewpoints.

Your hook, your angle, even your voice depends very much on the audience you are writing for, and the amount of expertise you yourself possess. If you are someone who likes to visit wineries, you will notice immediately that there is no guidebook to the wineries of Podunk. There may be a good reason for this. Maybe there are only two wineries in Podunk and perhaps they do not particularly encourage visitors. Then again, Podunk may get an average tourist rate of 2500 a year, which is not enough of an audience to warrant a book on wineries or anything else.

On the other hand, if you see an article in a travel or wine magazine about the growing number of wineries in Podunk, or the number of antique shops and restaurants that have opened in Podunk because of the fabulous wineries there, then you know there is enough interest there to develop tourist traffic. And with enough traffic, a guidebook is feasible.

When I wrote the first edition of *New Jersey Day Trips*, I did not cover half the territory of what I have in the present edition. My scope widened over the years. However, from the very beginning, my perspective was from the point of view of a New Jersey resident family, with children in tow, who were going to drive to most of the attractions. All trips would be within a single day's

time, and that would include getting there and back. Therefore, for out-of-state destinations, I did not want to go beyond a two-hour drive beyond the state border nearest to that attraction. I also included trips that would be interesting to senior citizens and singles, but my primary target was a family with children.

Here is a sample of different NYC guidebooks slanted to different audiences.

1. A popular guide to New York museums includes almost all of the museums in the five boroughs. It gives full write-ups plus all particulars of hours and prices, but gives directions only from NYC busses and subways. There are no driving directions for car owners.

2. Zagat's Restaurant Survey lists selected restaurants alphabetically and then has a geographical, ethnic type, BYOB, and cost category listed in the back index. Its largest audience is the local one.

3. General guidebooks such as Fodor's cover NYC from the point of view of an out-of-towner and try to include as much general information and history as possible and hit all the high spots at the same time. They also give general information on buses, subways and so forth. Because the Fodor series also sells well to foreigners, the books include information on money conversion, passports, airport facilities and menu items. Fodor's also publishes a special NYC edition just for kids.

4. Frommer's guides started out as a budget series, so there is still an emphasis on price. In Frommer's guide to NYC, chapters include "Shopping", "The Club Scene", Outdoors, Accommodations, Food, etc. Hotels are divided by price (High, Medium and Low) and then rated by stars as to accommodations within their own price category. Frommer's also offers a more sophisticated slant in its Irreverent Guide to NYC.

5. The D&K series emphasizes graphics, maps and interiors, so a fully sectioned interior of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is part of the book. While there is a more limited selection of attractions, those that are included (the top spots) are given a thorough going over with excellent illustrations.

6. There are many guidebooks for hikers, runners, joggers and/or bikers that concentrate only on the parks and trails within New York City. These “green” guides may leave out the major tourist attractions altogether but will give minute details on directions to finding the parks and green oases, and often include simply drawn maps.

7. Guide books for city walkers tend to keep to the streets and point out the museums, historic buildings and other sights that include both well-known and out-of-the-way places. It is assumed that the reader is walking for pleasure and a desire to see the city up close.

8. Any number of small and large publishers now put out guides for specific cultural or age groups such as the “20&30-something” crowd, gay and lesbian travelers, pet lovers, shopaholics, theater lovers, art lovers and so forth. There are several NYC guides slanted to one or the other of these special interest groups.

One’s audience is always part of one’s slant. So a book called “Chicago for Kids”, for instance, would cover such things as how many bathrooms there are and where kid-style food is available. It would answer questions about stroller rentals, the length of the waiting line, and anything else of interest to parents. In fact, such books are often written by parents or grandparents because such folk realized that the other books that cover Chicago were deficient in exactly that area.

I picked up a travel guide to weekend excursions in northern California recently. It turned out to be written by a hearty, healthy backpacker type who assumed everyone’s idea of fun was to trek to the rim of a volcano. Although the book included a few restful weekends, it was written with a very active audience in mind, a group that would be in tune with this particular author’s interests.

Now if I had written a weekend book for that region, I would have concentrated on the winery tours, visiting the beautiful college campuses in the area, eating at romantic inns, checking out the architectural gems in the neighboring town, hanging out at the beach, antiquing, and that sort of thing. Of course I would

throw in a mild hike or two for the active bunch, but mine would be a completely different book, and it would appeal to a different audience.

This is where subtitles come in. It is always a good idea to add a subtitle: not only does this increase your visibility for Google searches and Amazon links, but it helps the potential customer find exactly the right fit for his tastes. Here are a few possible subtitles for a potential book:

- Vacation Weekends: 52 exciting activities for the outdoors lover
- Vacation Weekends: 52 leisurely trips through the beautiful countryside
- Vacation Weekends: 52 romantic spots for you and your lover

What's Your Competition?

Obviously many travel books were born when a traveler saw that there was a gaping hole in coverage for a particular place or interest. The first person to write a book about Costa Rica, the first person to collect the names of motels that accepted pets, the first person to follow in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, all fall into this category. They had no competition — they only had to worry about finding their audience. However, the majority of travel books have some competition. This is where your slant, your angle, your voice, your format and organization can make the key difference.

How-To-Do-It books often have little competition because the subject is something that the author feels has not been treated adequately by other guides. A parent traveling with children may feel frustrated that books geared to traveling with kids are aimed at a particular destination, or perhaps aimed at parents with school-age children. Come up with a book entitled “Traveling the World with Preschoolers,” and maybe you’ve created a how-to-do-it book with an untapped audience.

On the other hand, what happens when you take on a really popular subject? For instance, how were *Oahu Revealed* and other books in the “Hawaii Revealed” series able to capture a

strong audience when they had to battle against a veritable army of heavy-hitting competition? The two authors kept pointing out how they were different in their approach and their coverage. They covered each island separately so that they had more space for individual site descriptions.

The authors tell you over and over again that they experience everything. They eat in every restaurant, they sleep in every hotel and they snorkel in every dive site! They also point out that they go to out-of-the-way places that other travel writers ignore and they don't take freebies. In this way they give the reader the feeling that they are insiders who really know the score, while the visiting travel writer is just a hack grinding out material to be fitted into an already established framework. And it works!

Finding the competition: How do you discover what books are out there that cover or even approach your subject? The most comprehensive listing of books in the United States is *Books In Print*. Most libraries have a copy. But what you really want is the *Subject Guide to Books in Print*, one of the volumes in the set. This is the one that lists books by subject so you only have to turn to the pages with the heading Travel and then peruse down the subheadings until you hit your subject area.

Look under all variations of a heading. You will find listings under the name of the country — e.g.: Ireland: Description and Travel. But this list will include not only travel guides but pictorials and histories that cover travel destinations, so you should also search under “Travel Guides” “Restaurant Guides” “Outdoor Guides” and any other heading you can imagine.

Of course what many people do is simply log onto Amazon.com and check through certain key words. Down at the bottom of the page you will notice categories such as Travel > United States > Southwest > Arizona as a guide to find other books on this particular topic. However, many books fall through the Amazon net, either because the publisher didn't put it into the right category or the title keywords didn't match Amazon's, so I would check the Subject Guide to BIP anyway. What you get from Amazon.com is the competitor's cover, the write-up from the publisher (called the editorial review) and any other reviews the book received. If the book has a “Search Inside” feature you

can also check out the table of contents, the index, and a few pages of text to get an idea what the book is really about.

Certainly you should also visit your local library and bookstore. There you will find the guidebooks that are popular enough to be shelved. (Listings in BIP cover practically any book currently in print, so there are voluminous entries). Look at all the travel titles and notice if any come near your subject and in what manner or style they cover it.

How many competitive titles are there? There may be plenty of books on your subject, but are they competitive? Are there one, two, ten, or twenty? Are they all direct competition? If you want to do a nuts-and-bolts book about traveling cross-country in an RV, is a hilarious memoir of a couple's adventures on the road really a rival for your audience? Is a directory of Trailer Parks and RV stations competition? Not really, although that book also might include some handy RV tips. These titles are actually complementary to your guide. As Carol White discovered when she returned from a very long trip with her husband in an RV, friends were more interested in how the two got along in close quarters and how they managed their household affairs from afar than in the actual trip destinations. And so *Live Your Road Trip Dream* was born — because other RV road trip books did not cover that aspect of the journey.

On other hand, if you find a book entitled “Mexico: Everything the Traveler Has to Know” you'd better check it out if you had your sights set on Mexico. If this is one of those volumes that tries to cover everything, and does a decent job of it, you'd better start looking for chinks in the armor. Is the book too big to be carried around? Is the type too small to read easily? You can research travel trends and discover that most travelers visit only certain parts of Mexico. Therefore, you could change your concept from the whole country to the following title: “From Cancun to Acapulco: The Ten Best Vacation Spots in Mexico”.

By narrowing your focus, you can concentrate on a fuller exploration of the destinations that most tourists visit. That way you'll have more space for Acapulco and Cabo San Lucas, with a little history and lots of descriptions of hotels, eating places and attractions for each town. Or you might try approaching Mexico

from the other angle: the least touristy spots. You could begin to assess the best arty towns, the healthiest places, the undeveloped beach areas, and the single fancy resort in the middle of nowhere until you have a compendium called “The Hidden Gems of Mexico”. Either book would commence with a chapter or two on history, a glossary for language and an explanation of the money exchange and then go on to explore a particular approach.

In analyzing the competition, you have to figure out what you can do that is different from the other titles on the shelf. Sometimes, this is easy. You may have entered the travel guide field because there was so little on the subject — or what there was is so badly done — that you felt absolutely compelled to write a better book!

More frequently, it’s a case where the competition is geared to a different audience than the one you contemplate. You may notice that all the books about destination X are targeted toward families with kids, and you feel there are plenty of singles and couples in the 18-to-35-age group who could use a guide created with them in mind. Or you see that there are plenty of books about biking and hiking in a certain foliaged state, but there’s nothing for the walking and browsing crowd that actually comprises the majority of tourists there.

There is always some corner of the map, some activity, some angle, or some group that has not been covered by the competition. That is where you have your best chance of creating a book that has a solid audience.

What if there is hardly any competition? It may be that the book you contemplate involves an activity or a destination that simply has a very limited audience. Perhaps, then, you should consider a Print-on-Demand edition to sell to a select audience through the Internet. Sometimes there is a topic that is of great importance to a small number of people (such as traveling with a specific disability or accompanying a disabled person) and the best way to approach this niche market is through an e-book or a POD volume. There are also small, unique destinations that appeal to a limited audience. The book may sell less than 1000 copies a year but it will sell to interested readers. So you can

either self-publish a POD book or look for a niche publisher that services a small, particular audience.

How current are the competing books? This is another facet you should research. If the last book about traveling with children was written in 1986, it means that either there isn't much of a market for a book of this kind or that nobody has tried it recently. Maybe the field has been superseded by specific destination guides for families with children.

Remember that series like Frommer's and Fodor's expect to sell several thousands of copies per year and if a particular title falls short of that expectation, they will not do another edition. So while a big brand name publisher may not choose to pursue a title that will sell only 3000 copies for the year, a small or regional house might be happy to take on such a book.

For whatever reason, just because a large publisher has let a certain title lapse doesn't mean that you cannot enter the field. There are many books that never sell out their original print run of 5000 copies. There are a number of factors such as timing, book promotion (or the lack of it) and a change in public taste that can affect sales.

So if you see that books on your topic came out twenty years ago and then disappeared, check out the reason. Call the publisher and ask. Because publishing companies merge all the time and editors play musical chairs with all the houses, it is not uncommon that a book simply falls between the cracks. If a whole generation has passed since the last book came out on this particular subject, you may have a best seller on your hands.

Is the competitor's slant different from yours? Take, for instance, a book called *Amusement Parks of New Jersey*. The book was written by a real aficionado of such places. The man is a historian and the book teems with information on the background of each and every park. There is the history of the family that started the place, the rise and fall of their fortunes and changes in the landscape. There are also a full descriptions of the fourteen or so parks covered, listing each and every attraction. This is a great book for amusement park and roller coaster buffs and a wonderful historical resource guide for anyone doing an article

on theme parks and smaller amusement parks. But it did not tell me what I wanted to know!

The descriptions of the rides were clinical and there was nothing on such details as the length of the lines for the major attractions, whether food was allowed to be brought in, the cleanliness of the restrooms, the comparative rudeness (or courtesy) of the crowds that frequent the park, how to reduce the customer's overall cost and a million other things that most theme park patrons want to know.

This is not how I would have written a book about amusement parks, and so it is not really a direct competitor. My book would have had much less history and more hands-on opinions on everything from the quality of the hot dogs (and whether they are hot enough) to the length of time it takes to schlep from one roller coaster to another. I would note the high cost of parking and locker rentals. I also might consider widening the borders of the book to include both New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

When checking out competitive titles of theme parks or anything else, the first thing you should ask yourself is: Does this book cover the subject in the way I would cover it? What does it leave out that I would put in? Would I use the same tone or slant? Would I change the perimeters? How would my format differ from this author's format? What section of the audience has been ignored — and how would I include them?

Once you know your boundaries and format, once you have established a primary audience and the slant and tone you will use to address that audience, you know exactly how your book would differ from others in the field and whether it has a chance to succeed.

Non-Bookstore Outlets

And now a question all publishers ask, but very few writers think about: Where will your audience be able to buy your book? Your immediate answer might be bookstores, but there are many other venues out there.

In setting up your book proposal or your sales plan if you are self-publishing, you should always consider where the audience

for your book may be found. The category of your guide is all important when targeting a particular audience! Here are some of the retail outlets where certain titles sell far better than in bookstores:

Outdoor outfitters stores: Along with the backpacks, canvas vests and rugged shoes, these stores regularly stock books about hiking, biking, fishing and general regional recreation. Don't forget the Nature Centers found inside public parks and forests and Audubon bookstores — they also buy the outdoor category.

Wineries: Most books about winery tours (or those dedicated to regions such as the Napa Valley where wineries predominate) sell more copies through the gift shop at these venues than they do in bookstores.

Gourmet food shops: Along with traditional cookbooks, these shops will feature restaurant guides to their local city or area.

Newsstands and drug stores: These carry standard directories like the Mobil Travel Guide and The Zagat Survey as well as local guides and maps to the area.

Airport book stores: They are more likely to take traveler's aids such as money converters and phrase books, but they may take one or two destination guides.

Religious book stores: Did you know there are over a thousand Christian Book Stores? And there are many bookstores that concentrate on Judaica as well. Whether your title is *Walking the Bible* or *A Guide to Kosher New York* don't forget these outlets. General travel titles that appeal to wholesome family values might also be accepted by these stores.

Museum stores: Art museums will take a limited number of guides they consider worthy. Science and nature museums are pretty liberal in picking up both general guides to their area and specific guides to rain forests, exploration titles and field guides to practically anything.

Historic site gift and book shops: Along with historic titles (often geared toward children), guides to battlefields, restored

villages and other historic attractions as well as regional guides will show up here.

Specialized stores: A children's toy shop might take a book on trips with kids. There are gay and lesbian bookstores and New Age bookstores (where anything about spiritual renewal through travel might sell) among other specialized bookstores. A guide to destination weddings will do better in a bridal shop than in a traditional bookstore. RV books (both road guides and road trip stories) sell at RV provision stores. And then there are the gift shops that cater to railroad buffs, theater aficionados, gardeners and any other interest or taste that might possibly be translated into a travel guide.

Travel book stores: There aren't too many of these around — the one that Julia Roberts slipped into in the movie *Notting Hill* was a rarity even in London, but it does make the author's heart swell with pride to have a book in such a store. The Rand McNally store in the posh Short Hills Mall in New Jersey sold my title for many years.

Bulk sales to corporations: Restaurant guides like Zagat's feature a custom-made cover for corporate clients so that the company can hand out free copies to employees and clients with their name on the cover. But even small presses can sell to companies who transfer employees around the world. Whether it's a how-to book on foreign etiquette, a general guide to the new city or country or just a relocation book, certain titles entice corporations to buy direct from the publisher and usually at a better discount than they would get at a bookstore.

Wal-Mart, K-Mart and Costco: They will only take big sellers and the return rate is said to be horrendous. Many publishers avoid them, but it is a path to volume sales.

Book clubs: The History Book Club, the Travel Book Club (if there is one), The Gourmet Book — there are a host of book clubs that might be prime targets for your title. Book clubs pay a set price which is far lower than the usual discount price to retailers and wholesalers. However, book clubs give you free publicity and bragging rights. For authors with a royalty agree-

ment there is usually a clause in the contract which gives them a lower percentage on book club sales.

Re-sales through associations: Can you get your local Chamber of Commerce to buy your area guide and resell it customers? It's been done. Think about your angle and your audience and consider which organizations might be interested in your particular slant. Newcomers Clubs, ski clubs, bicycle clubs, garden clubs — there are many organizations that might take 40 or 50 books to re-sell to their members. And then there are the ethnic organizations — the Polish American club in your neighborhood, the Chinese American school and so forth — who might be interested in selling your related guide at their annual fall festival.

Direct sales to audience: If you are someone who regularly gives talks or slide lectures on your travels to Borneo or your trip across Canada on your motorcycle, back-of-the-room sales might account for a good portion of your income. Sales may not be large as they are in bookstores, but you make much more per book. If you are a self-publisher you can garner a hefty profit this way. If you are an author who buys back his book from the publisher at 50% discount, you make more selling direct than you do from royalties. And in most cases, speakers do get paid, so there's a double income here.

Premium sales: These sales are made when a bank or a newspaper offers a free book to any customer who signs up for an account or subscription. If you can negotiate a discount with the company, this is a wonderful way to get free advertising while someone else is selling your book for you!

The Internet: The great equalizer — here any book can find an audience! Online stores such as Amazon and bn.com afford limitless space so that any title has a chance. But the Internet also offers the opportunity to sell direct from your own website. Many authors, particularly self-publishers, do just that, and it is the prime way that How-to-Do-It travel books are sold.

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