Publishing programmes are often described in sweeping terms – ‘the humanities and social sciences’, for example; or ‘academic and general books’; or even ‘the best books in all fields of inquiry’. Yet most of us, by accident or design, end up filling a somewhat more specialised niche – a disciplinary emphasis, perhaps, or an area-studies focus. At University of Hawai‘i Press our location in the middle of the Pacific coincides (not accidentally) with our academic specialisation in Asian and Pacific studies. But for us, as for any publisher, that’s just a starting point. Within the broad framework of a publishing programme, the many choices, both routine and transformational, made by editors and directors determine which manuscripts actually get published and how the list develops.

Pamela Kelley

MANY SCHOLARS TRY TO GAUGE the level of interest in their topic by submitting inquiries and proposals to multiple publishers. Publishers benefit, of course, because these early proposals – whether a full prospectus via e-mail, a conversation at a conference, or some other encounter – offer the chance to consider and weigh in on a wide range of topics and approaches. An editor holding a proposal will initially try to determine the following: Who is the audience? Which of our existing titles does it connect to? Does it take our list in a direction we want to go (if somewhat tangential)? What will it contribute to the prestige of our list or to our bottom line? Is it financially viable?

A question of discipline

Editors see a lot of proposals and are likely to gravitate to those that are in core disciplines or methodologies reflected in the publisher’s current list. But they are also attracted by proposals that stand out: perhaps the subject or approach seems unusual or especially topical, or the author comes across as particularly well informed and able to present her work in an appealing way. One prospect may cross disciplinary or regional boundaries in a way that seems more marketable than others. Whether to respond to a book proposal with a noncommittal note, or a form-letter decline can be a surprisingly difficult choice and one influenced by many factors.

Publishers differ in their assessments of the market for a given project, of course, but they also tend to target different sectors of that market – even though they may share a roughly similar Asian studies profile. One might have a strong list in policy-oriented studies, while another will favour development-oriented studies, while another will favour none. Sometimes changes are a simple matter of numbers: how many titles are in core disciplines or simply being choosier; sometimes they are simply books the editors actively seek.

Editors’ choices are influenced, too, by the publisher’s resources – issues of staffing and funding, for example. A publisher large enough to field a rights department may compete with confidence for mainstream fiction or a lengthy anthology whose editor needs assistance with permissions. The publisher with a grants officer may be in a position to consider prestigious projects that need major support. A publisher able to fund author advances or expensive up-front costs like color illustrations is more likely to commission a monograph than essays or an encyclopedia. Economic hard times and industry downturns can force publishers to reevaluate their lists and reposition themselves. Sometimes changes are a simple matter of numbers: how many books to publish. Acquiring editors can either open up the flow of manuscripts by considering a wider range of projects or tighten it by focusing on core areas or simply being choosier: sometimes the same evaluator’s report can seem positive or negative depending on what the press is looking for and what standard is set.

Timing plays a role, too. Perhaps Publisher A already has a related book in press and doesn’t feel there is sufficient market for a similar title. Or Publisher B strives for balance and thus doesn’t have a place for yet another fiction title. However, Publisher C had been considering a push into your area when your proposal arrived. Editors have different ways of working, too. One may lean heavily on an advisor’s personal recommendation (even though your chapter seemed a bit... technical), while another will place more weight on the appeal of the manuscript samples themselves.

Making business sense

A willingness to offer an advance contract when there is little more than a proposal to go on may hinge on an author’s track record of previous publications, the editor’s degree of interest in the topic, or her sense of whether the manuscript will come in with a minimum of supervision on her part. The editor’s investment of time is a major consideration. Many publishers grow their lists by commissioning series whose editors bring both name recognition and specialist expertise to the acquisitions process. Series and their editors differ in their degree of autonomy: some function almost independently with their own editorial boards and funding, while others work closely with their press’ acquisitions editor. In both cases the preferences and interests of the series editors are reflected in the books ultimately published by the press.

Whether to respond to a book proposal with an expression of interest, an encouraging but noncommittal note, or a form-letter decline can be a surprisingly difficult choice and one influenced by many factors.