

Taking the Ghost Out of Ghostwriting

When you think of a ghost writer, you think of some anonymous writer lurking behind the scenes. But that's not always the case. Ghostwriting doesn't have to be writing without credit. There are many ways you can be a proactive ghostwriter so that you can become a co-author rather than a ghostwriter. With the help of some NWU resources, that's how I landed my first book deal for *The World's Fittest You: Four Weeks to Total Fitness* (www.Joe-Decker.com).

Here's how it all started. A few years ago, as a producer with *ABC News 20/20*, I was assigned a story on Joe Decker, "The World's Fittest Man." Joe earned that title by breaking a world fitness record set by the *Guinness Book of World Records*. His story made news and he was featured on the cover of the *Washington Post Health Magazine*. The most compelling part of Joe's story was that he was once fat and out of shape. He turned out to be more of an "average Joe" from Washington, D.C. than a fitness freak from California. He had a great personal story that made him more than just another fitness guy.

Joe and I had breakfast at the Plaza Hotel in New York City then he was off to the *Early Show*, *Today Show* and countless other media appearances. Unfortunately, my editors passed on Joe's story, but that wasn't the end of my story. It had just begun.

That year, I left *ABC News* to pursue other opportunities. I came across an e-mail from Joe giving me an update on his career. Since my background was in television, I called him to see if he wanted to develop a fitness-based reality show. He agreed and I wrote a treatment.

Unfortunately, my reality show pitches fell on deaf ears until I approached Al Roker Productions. They optioned the idea. Then, I thought if there's any chance of a television show, there has to be a book in there too. Think cross-promotion: videos, books, products, and magazines. Why not

aim as high as possible?

I didn't know the first thing about writing a book, so I did some research. I went to Barnes & Noble and bought a how-to book on writing a query letter with a listing of literary agents. A few days later, I sent out 20 query letters to the top literary agents in New York City. A few days after that, my phone starting ringing off the hook.

After interviewing agents, I decided to go with Joelle Delbourgo. She was enthusiastic about the project and had some great ideas for shaping the proposal. Now that things were getting off the ground, it was time to deal with the issue of my

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role as a writer for this project and formalize my relationship with the author, Joe Decker. I asked Joelle to provide some sample collaboration agreements, which is an agreement just between the authors and doesn't involve an agent or publisher.

I also contacted the NWU to find out about different scenarios for structuring such an agreement. I referred to model ghostwriting and collaboration contracts available to members on the NWU Web site (www.nwu.org). From those models, I learned that there are three crucial points to negotiate as far as how visible a "ghostwriter" you'll be:

- **Credit.** This is a big one for the writer. Where will your name appear on the book, if at all? In some cases, ghostwriters get no visible credit except for a thank you in the acknowledgements section. If you've

written a few books, you'll be in a better position to ask for a "with" or "and" credit. In my case, I generated the idea and the proposal that put me in a great position to ask for and get a "with" credit.

- **Copyright.** Most people assume that if you're a ghostwriter, the copyright automatically goes to the author. The best possible situation is a shared copyright, but in many cases you may not be able to get that. If not, try to negotiate a better deal on something else, like payment.

- **Payment.** Whether this is your first book or not, ghostwriters need to get paid. There are essentially two ways you can structure this part of the agreement. You can simply get paid a flat fee for your service, or you can negotiate a percentage of the advance and royalties. If you think the book isn't going to get that six-figure advance, you might want to settle on a fee up front for your services. If you think this is going to be a blockbuster project, then negotiate a percentage of the advance and royalties. Fifty-fifty is ideal, but sometimes you'll have to settle for less.

To get the best possible agreement as a ghostwriter, seek out projects. For instance, look for experts featured in the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. If they've made it to the pages of one of those publications, they probably have a solid platform for writing a book. *The Today Show* and other morning news shows are other good sources to find expert talent to collaborate on a book.

Don't be embarrassed or shy. Pick up the phone or write a compelling letter. Convince that expert why you should write their book. Showing initiative will put you in a better position to become less of a ghost and more of a writer with maximum exposure and publicity for your writing career too.

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