

ADVICE TO AUTHORS

PUBLICITY - GIVING YOUR BOOK THE HELP IT NEEDS

By Milton Kahn

In today's highly competitive literary marketplace publishers and authors are finding that it takes more than reviews and book signings to make a book successful. The reality of publishing today, even among the mainstream, big-name houses, is that unless you are one of their heavy-hitters you are going to have to promote your book largely on your own time and with your own money. While hiring an experienced, knowledgeable publicist does not guarantee success, it can go a long way toward separating your book from the rest of the pack. A successful public relations and promotions campaign does more than simply sell books for an author; in addition to increasing sales, a well executed campaign can also serve to institutionalize the author's name, which leads to bigger and better publishing deals.

To give you an idea of how the publishing industry has grown, in 1975 there were 3,000 publishers in the United States. Today there are over 200,000 publishers made up of large, medium, small, as well as print on demand companies who put out 560,000 books a year of which approximately 295,000 are self-published..

Though publishers and authors can certainly contact the media on their own, including sending galleys to publications such as Publishers Weekly for reviews – and even mount aggressive book-signing campaigns, there is a very limited amount of meaningful exposure that an individual writer can secure without the resources and contacts of an established publicist. A solid national public relations campaign targeting all of the key media in television, cable, radio, newspapers, magazines and wire services is the most important factor in determining the success of a novel.

“It is vitally important for any author to have an outstanding website as this will prove to be an extremely important element for the success of your book. Regarding what kind of a website you want to have created I suggest you Google well known authors who publish in your specific venue and get an idea of what their websites look like.”

Once you have decided to engage a professional publicist, the next step is finding one who is right for you. Beware of any publicist who offers guarantees. Ask for references and contact authors they have represented. A good publicist will work with you to find issues in both your book and your personal life that will make you a saleable interview to the media. Interesting background elements about the author are often what open the door to interviews.

Issues touched on in a book that relate to history or current events are another positive element in getting media exposure. An example is my campaign for former head writer of the CBS series *Murder She Wrote*, Thomas Sawyer, for his first mystery novel *The Sixteenth Man*. In his novel Sawyer had developed a theory about the Kennedy

assassination which was highly controversial and intriguing. As a result of this particular issue I was able secure countless television, cable, and radio interviews throughout the country as well as articles and mentions in publications ranging from the Wall Street Journal to Liz Smith's nationally syndicated column.

While everyone dreams of getting on major television shows such as Oprah, a variety of key radio shows is really critical to building a successful national publicity campaign for a book because it allows the author a much greater block of time to promote his or her book. As an example, a show such as the Jim Bohanan Show, which is syndicated by Westwood One, reaches over 5 million listeners every weekday night, with authors getting approximately one hour on the air. Talk show hosts such as Richard Neer, Michael Smerconish, and Jerry Doyle, are incredibly effective interviewers who give the author a great deal of time to talk about his or her book as opposed to a show such as Good Morning America in which the author will most likely get two or three minutes.

Preparing an author to be an interesting guest is a critical element and one that should be worked on prior to the promotion of a book. I sometimes recommend that my clients sit down with a coach to help go over some of the basics of public speaking and interviews. For example, when Dallas-based author James Halperin hired me to publicize his science-fiction novel *The Truth Machine*, I recommended that he contact a staff member of the Southern Methodist University drama department to engage him in videotaped mock interviews. As a result, Jim became a very effective interviewee. What made James Halperin such a fabulous client was his willingness to do anything it took to be successful. Halperin was willing to avail himself for interviews regardless of the hour of the broadcast as he realized that the only way that people would buy *The Truth Machine* would be through his being able to talk about it and make people aware of his book. Through my campaign for Halperin, over 200,000 copies of *The Truth Machine* were sold.

During the interview it is important for the author to mention the title of your book so that the audience can order it from their bookstores or online. It is also important for the self published author to make sure that his or her novel is readily available to the public and currently listed with Amazon as well as other major online distributors such as Barnes & Noble.com. Your listing on Amazon is crucial and as an author you should take advantage of all the free publicity that you can secure. A helpful tool for convincing prospective buyers on the internet to purchase your book is to have people who have read your book send in positive reviews to the major online distributors such as Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com, etc. These positive reviews are very effective and can be the difference between a prospective book buyer deciding to order their book or not.

Another essential is to have your own website where potential buyers can learn more about the book and the author. A website is also a good way for readers to purchase your book and gives you yet another opportunity to promote yourself to your audience.

While book signings are certainly not going to produce giant revenues, I think that doing local signings in which you do not incur any travel expenses are worthwhile. It gives you

the opportunity to refine your skills as a speaker and also to meet with the public and get a feel for what they are looking for in the way of his or her genre. However, I do not recommend that you spend your own money orchestrating an expensive book tour to various parts of the country, as the costs of hotels, plane fares; car wear and tear, etc. can run into high numbers very quickly. The reality of book signings is that unless you are a famous author you are not going to generate a tremendous number of book sales.

Staying abreast of the publishing world and networking are incredibly important elements that no author should ignore. It is essential to be apprised of what is going on in the publishing industry at all times. I am surprised at how many authors do not subscribe to *Publisher's Weekly*, nor read other publications that devote a great deal of important information about the publishing industry such as the Book Review sections that appear in the Sunday editions of *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, etc. It is not necessary to buy a subscription to these publications as much of this information is available on the internet. Another very helpful way of getting a better feel for the publishing industry is to watch C-SPAN and C-SPAN 2. These cable networks are devoted to the publishing industry and feature extremely interesting authors who have a great deal to say about their books. Watching these authors in action can help you become more successful in communicating with the media and the public.

It is also vital that the author create a great title and cover for his or her book, along with receiving a strong quote or endorsement from a celebrity, or from successful authors within the same genre.

Milton Kahn, President and CEO of Milton Kahn Associates, which is based in Santa Barbara CA is considered to be one of the premiere book publicists in America. Among the honors that Kahn has received number Publicist of the Year by the Book Publicists of Southern California.