

AgentInsight: Marketing Your Way to Success by Nupur Tustin

As a writer aspiring to be traditionally published, do you really have to worry about promoting your book and yourself? The answer, according to our panelists—Peter Rubie of FinePrint Literary Management, Dawn Dowdle of Blue Ridge Literary Agency, Paige Wheeler of Creative Media Agency, Gina Panettieri of Talcott Notch Literary Services, Lucienne Diver of the Knight Agency and her colleague Jia Gayles, marketing director—is that yes, you do!

“The sad truth is,” says Peter Rubie, “the most successful writers, by and large, are those who know how to promote and market themselves, not how to write better than anyone else.”

While agents perform a number of necessary tasks, it is, as Dawn Dowdle reminds us, the “author who is going to market the book.”

And although the publisher’s marketing and PR team can help an author’s efforts, “these teams,” points out Paige Wheeler, “always seem to be understaffed, and can’t possibly give every author’s title the time and attention it deserves. Ultimately, it is in an author’s best interest to make sure that there is continual effort in getting word out about the book.”

Although all our panelists agree that it’s never too early for an author to think about marketing, they do differ on when exactly the plan should start. Dowdle, for instance, asks that writers include a marketing plan in their query.

“I use that to see if they are even looking at marketing,” she says.

Wheeler suggests starting at least six months before publication. This, she explains, enables authors to get the word out in long-lead print publications such as magazines and alumni newsletters.

Jia Gayles, the Knight Agency’s marketing director, recommends that the networking and relationship building begin even earlier. “It’s much easier,” she points out, “to get your Twitter followers buzzing about your new release when you’ve already proven yourself to be an engaging presence online.”

Gina Panettieri agrees: “You’ll remind yourself that this is very much a business and it’s important to network and to begin the process of building useful relationships as soon as possible, and that way you can finish up your book miles ahead of your competition.”

“Word of mouth is still the biggest seller of books,” says Lucienne



Diver, “so getting your work into the hands of readers and reviewers who will post and spread the word (and, hopefully, the love) is all important.”

Another advantage of this kind of early engagement is that aspiring authors can learn about what works or doesn’t from more established authors—a strategy that both Gayles and Dowdle recommend.

“Study how other authors both in and out of your genre are successfully cultivating their online persona and connecting the dots between various platforms,” advises Gayle. “For example, what sort of content are they uploading to Instagram versus Facebook?”

Although marketing plans can vary over time, changing as the industry changes, or differ from one author to another depending upon the resources available, all good marketing plans share one thing. They are specific.

“A marketing promotion plan,” says Rubie, “has to have concrete things in it that will clearly produce results, that is, a) people will pay attention to your offering, and b) hopefully put their hands in their pockets and cough up hard cash for your book. The ‘I intend to do this, and hope to do that’ approach because the author has little to put in that column is not going to fly.”

Wheeler agrees. “I advise authors to have a spreadsheet with a timeline and checklist of everything they hope to accomplish for promotion. Of course, not all of an author’s efforts will yield positive results, but there is less likelihood of putting it off or becoming lost in the weeds of possibilities with a firm strategy in place.”

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Panettieri provides a list of items authors should consider as part of their strategy. These include professional organizations and conferences. Both provide invaluable networking opportunities and can even give authors access to blurbs from other authors in their genre or experts in their field.

Radio and television shows, print publications, reviewers and bloggers can all help to put the word out about both you and your book. Signings and readings at bookstores and other public appearances can put you in touch with potential readers as well.

Interesting media campaigns such as contests, giveaways, and book trailers can help create much-needed buzz, as can a presence on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads.

If resources permit, hiring a PR firm can be useful as well.

Both Gayles and Dowdle recommend using street teams—a team of fellow authors and readers who will repost relevant items about the book that the author posts on social media. Street teams help to grow your established audience, explains Gayles. Members of such teams get an advanced reading copy of the book, which they can then review on Goodreads or other retailer sites.

Dowdle advises her clients to establish ties with other authors in their genre, in particular those with bigger platforms. Getting such authors to participate in your release party or guest blogging on their blog, she feels, can be especially useful in getting the word out about your book.

Blog tours, says Diver, are not as useful as they once were. “But if you’re targeting the right blogs with the right audience and enough of it, they can be very useful. Targeted marketing is worth its weight in gold, so do your research about who your readers are and where they’re likely to be found.”

Wheeler reiterates the importance of targeted marketing as well. “An effective plan will take into account the core audience of readers—do they congregate online? Do they read print book reviews?”



Photo courtesy of Leslie Budewitz

Leslie Budewitz, selling books at a fair. Paige Wheeler cites Leslie's Spice Shop series as having a very effective marketing plan.

Wheeler also recommends that authors use a multipronged approach to market their works. She cites Leslie Budewitz's Seattle Spice Shop mystery series to illustrate how this can be done.

“Leslie can use the region for promotion—local Seattle publications, online venues, etc. She can also use the foodie angle—any food-related websites, magazines, blogs, etc. Finally, she can use the mystery angle—MWA, Sisters in Crime, mystery blogs, and websites. That's a good three-pronged approach to marketing the title.”

It's also important to think outside the box. For Dowdle, this means finding places to promote your book that aren't conventional—Facebook groups that pertain to the subject of the book, for instance. For Panettieri, this means focusing on the unique elements of your book. Doing so can help you reach an entirely new set of readers, she explains.

“Does your MC [main character] practice yoga, raise bees, or love sailing? There are great magazines devoted to those audiences, and those are readers who might love your book if they know their favorite hobby is highlighted in it.”

But whatever you do, keep in mind that self-promotion is all about, as Rubie puts it, “connecting with people, not bombarding them with unwanted information.”

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To suggest a topic for an upcoming column, please email Nupur Tustin at nupursen@gmail.com.