

The Role of Promotion in the Book Publishing Process

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WHEN I ADDRESS STUDENTS in publishing workshops on the role of promotion, advertising, and publicity in the book publishing process, I ask them to write down the title of one book they have read in the previous year—one they have chosen at leisure, not one required for school or business. Then I ask them to try and remember the *reason* they chose to read that particular book, that is, what stimulated them to buy or borrow it. Then I tell them that I will guess that reason, that I think it likely they had responded to one or a combination of these nine stimuli:

1. *An author interview, talk or lecture.* For example, Barbara Tuchman interviewed on the “Today Show” or Coretta Scott King speaking at an American Library Association breakfast or Norman Cousins lecturing at a university may have triggered an interest in reading their works.
2. *A news or feature story.* The Olympics coverage may have stimulated interest in books on certain athletes or by sports medicine experts, while news reporting of runner James Fixx’s sudden heart attack may have led readers to books on health and aerobic fitness.
3. *A book excerpt.* Sections of Toni Morrison’s or Bob Woodward’s new book may have appeared in *Esquire* or the *Washington Post*, or perhaps in one of the airlines magazines, and intrigued the reader enough to want to read the entire work.

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4. *Movie or television presentation.* The television presentation of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* or Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave*, or the viewing of a feature film like *Gandhi*, *Ragtime*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, or *Sophie's Choice*, stimulated you to want to read the literary works on which these films were based or derived.
5. *Advertising.* A particular print advertisement or radio or television commercial caught your attention, perhaps reminding you that the new book by your favorite author was now in the bookstores, or that a book critic you respect raved about a writer whom you had not yet read. For example, you are a Dick Francis fan and you chose to read his latest novel as soon as you saw the ad for it announced in your local paper, or you read Maxine Hong Kingston's first book when you saw the quote drawn from the rave notice the book received from John Leonard in *The New York Times*.
6. *Direct response.* A flyer or phone call from an association, book club or political, social or professional group directed your attention to a book on a favorite subject like bridge, bird watching, China, colonial history, art collecting, tennis, cats, or politics.
7. *Book browsing.* While browsing in a bookstore or library, you became intrigued by a book jacket, cover or merchandising display. You picked up the book, got a "feel" for the book, and decided you would like to read it or give it as a gift.
8. *A book review.* A review may have appeared in a national publication like *The New York Times Book Review*, *McCall's Magazine*, a professional publication like *Library Journal*, or *Booklist*, or in a local newspaper, or a review may have been given by a radio or television commentator.
9. *Word-of-mouth.* Somebody you know and respect (a relative, teacher, librarian, friend, or colleague) said: "Read it, you'll like it."

When I finish going through these nine points with their various and ever-changing examples, I find that the last point—word-of-mouth—is always the most common reason given for reading a particular book. Book reviews are a distant second. And more often than not the person who first recommended the book chose it because of word of mouth as well. If one accepts that this is the most effective method to bring books to a reader's attention, then the ultimate question for anyone studying the promotion and marketing of books has to be: How does the word get started, when does it get started, and by whom is it started? Indeed, can it be built?

Role of Promotion

From the point of view of someone who has been specializing in the promotion and marketing of books for over twenty years, I believe word-of-mouth can be nurtured and built and that the other eight stimuli mentioned earlier are all aspects of that building process. In practice, word-of-mouth represents an evolving chain of communication, one that links the book to an enthusiastic reader, and one which often begins a year or two or more before the book is published, when it may be just an idea, a proposal, an outline, or a draft manuscript.

It usually starts when the author and/or his representative present the book idea to the editor who will acquire it for the publishing house. This is where the buzz may begin since it is at this point that the book acquires its first in-house advocate. The editor passes the word on to other "word passers" involved in the publishing process, including the sales, promotion, publicity, advertising, and subsidiary rights people—i.e., the marketers and the licensers—who will communicate outside the publishing house to the trade and to the public using an assortment of communications techniques. In this way word-of-mouth rolls out in ever-widening circles from within the publishing house itself, to the publishing trade (booksellers and librarians), next to the media (especially to book review editors), to special-interest groups and/or influential individuals, and finally to the consumer or reader who will be the ultimate judge of the book's continuing or lasting life in the marketplace. These impressions and enthusiasms are passed on either in casual conversation or in methodical, planned (and often paid for) communications by the various promotion and marketing professionals employed to create and execute the campaigns on behalf of the books and authors.

Depending on the company's structure and size, any number of professionals can be charged with the responsibility of "doing" something to stimulate attention for a book. With the exception of licensing of book excerpts and/or film rights, which are generally the purview of the author's agent or the publisher's subsidiary rights department, the promotion professionals are the ones who try to create any one of the other eight stimuli mentioned at the outset of this article. They usually function as part of a promotion department with their budget for doing things based on a percentage of sales volume computed either by title or by the total list. If computed by title, standard publishing practice is to set the promotion budget based on approximately 10 percent of the anticipated gross sales. For example, if a book is priced at \$10 and sold at an average discount of 50 percent, the gross sales to the publisher will be \$5 for each copy sold. If the publisher estimates selling 10,000 copies of

this title, the publisher can expect gross sales of \$50,000. Therefore, if it were using the standard 10 percent practice, it would allot a promotion budget of \$5000 to this title. Budgets are not cast in stone, however, and publishers normally review them periodically, especially during the period when the book begins to establish itself in the marketplace. Anyone who has been involved in publishing over the years has dozens of examples of books that never lived up to their sales expectations (even after publishers poured many promotion dollars into their launching), or, more happily, those that performed way beyond the initial expectations (and had their promotion budgets accordingly adjusted upward).

The various specialties involved in these promotion efforts are sales and direct mail promotion, advertising, publicity, school, college, library, and professional promotion, and very often whatever is left over falls into the category of "special promotion." The individuals who practice these specialties have varying interests and talents. They are artists, copywriters, production and traffic managers, publicists, media specialists, event planners, secretaries, administrators, and clerks. Their effectiveness depends not only on their talent or the budget, but also on their relationship with the rest of the people in the publishing process including the author. Good promotion people are spotters and users—in a positive sense of course. They are as thrilled about spotting someone else's good idea and putting it to work (giving credit where it is due, naturally) as they are about creating one themselves. They are conveyers of ideas and information. They are convincers. They are, above all, communicators. The difference among the various promotion specialists lies mainly in whom they communicate with and how they get it done.

Sales promotion specialists assist the sales force to communicate to the buyers known as the "trade," that is, the wholesalers, jobbers, chain stores, book and nonbook retailers, as well as to individual, targeted purchasers through direct mail. They traditionally prepare much print material—catalogs, order forms, announcement flyers, and direct mail brochures for mailings. Also, since many companies are now using audio- and videocassettes and special filmed presentations, sales promotion specialists create for other types of media as well (they have also been known to promote with aprons, shopping bags, hockey pucks, baseball bats, jellybeans, buttons, or magic pencils). They set up booths and programs at various national and regional sales conventions and professional meetings. To influence the book browser, sales promotion specialists may prepare merchandising display materials such as posters and counter units when they are part of a book's campaign. To make use

Role of Promotion

of other promoters' budgets, they may work with movie companies on promotional tie-ins, or with department store event-planners on an author appearance or demonstration.

Educational promotion specialists also communicate to buyers, but they are buyers for schools, colleges and libraries (rather than the retail trade). Often, they are also charged with communication to individual professional purchasers, specifically, the educator and librarian. They create flyers, catalogs, newsletters, teacher's guides, posters, audio-cassettes, or other materials which they distribute by direct mail or at conventions and meetings where they set up publishers' booths and schedule promotional events and social gatherings.

Advertising is a technique of communication where you have to pay for what you say. It is the most expensive form of promotion, which is why many books do not get advertising from publishers in the style in which the author would like the publisher to become accustomed. Most trade advertising goes to the professional publications like *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal*. Most consumer book advertising is in the print media although radio is being used more and more, especially when a book's market can be targeted. National television is rarely used. Often advertising budgets are spent on a "coop" basis in conjunction with retailers. Sometimes monies are allotted to direct-response advertising in print, radio or television, rather than purely to display advertising. Consumer advertising is used: (1) after a book is launched, (2) once it is well reviewed (so quotes can be promoted), (3) to quickly communicate the availability of a new book by an established author with a following eagerly awaiting news of his or her latest work, or (4) when a book starts to take off in sales. The advertising message will be repeated as frequently as the budget will allow.

Then there are the publicists, who are the people who thrive on communication. Their success comes from making the connection between the book and the media contact—kindling the interest of newspaper reporters, gossip columnists, book reviewers, television or radio producers, magazine editors, or any other persons who have access to a communications outlet—which means gaining access to the public. However a publicist manages to interest a contact, whether in conversation over lunch, cocktails, over the phone, or by letter, mailgram, press release, or carrier pigeon, his or her part in the marketing process is quite clear: A publicist's function is to make the book known through all available media sources without paying for the time or space given to the book or author. Without question this is the least expensive promo-

tion support in launching a new book, author or publishing program, and it can be the most potent.

What all these combined people and activities do is to help to get the book noticed, to get it sold and into the hands of the reader, to get word out, to create the "word-of-mouth." Word-of-mouth, as I mentioned earlier, is the most common reason why people read the books they do. How effectively and imaginatively the promotion team does its job may prove the difference between a book being "published"—that is, becoming publicly known, in the dictionary definition of the word—or "privished," which is how one marketing colleague of mine, Lillian Friedman, describes those books which see little of the public eye. However, if there is one thing that just about everyone in the business agrees on, for a new book to make it, it helps to have some luck. With some exceptions (the obvious "big money, big author" bestsellers), the business does not generate the kind of sales—ergo, the kind of promotion budgets—that can afford heavy or sometimes even adequate promotion expenditures. For most books, book people have to try and get a lot of communications mileage with relatively modest resources, which is why they rely heavily on personal energy and on networking with the various professionals who love books—especially librarians and booksellers and book reviewers. Fortunately there are booklovers of all kinds everywhere and many times they become the book's foremost and most effective promoters.

One of the most popular "building word-of-mouth" techniques draws on that potential. It involves sampling portions of the book or manuscript, even the entire work, in advance of publication. Obviously one has to be very selective when choosing the book for this kind of target preview. The first time it was employed in a major way was with Frederick Forsythe's thrilling first novel, *Day of the Jackal*. The manuscript was acquired by Viking in 1970 and soon after by Bantam for paperback. In planning the Viking launch the two houses worked together in plotting the promotion strategy, which was to be focused on "word-of-mouth." Excitement about the book was already being passed along by in-house readers of the manuscript. To spread the word further, the two publicity departments devised a plan to circulate 2500 advance-reading paperback copies of the book months before its hard-cover publication. The targets were people who were sociable, influential and good talkers. A mailing list was built (at Bantam it was affectionately titled "the big-mouth list") featuring media people, opinion-makers, restaurateurs, producers, buyers, publicists, wholesalers, booksellers, librarians, relatives, politicians, stewardesses, movie

Role of Promotion

stars, columnists, agents, and other potentially powerful word passers. By publication date the book had become one of the most talked about new novels of the year. Eight years and many successful sampling campaigns later, the quality of Hank Searles's exciting *Jaws 2* novel, based on characters in Peter Benchley's *Jaws*, inspired an unusual variation of the technique. Although the novel had been commissioned as a promotional tie-in for release with the film in June 1978, Bantam was so impressed with Searles's manuscript that it convinced Universal Pictures to allow the book to be published three months *before* the film's release so that an extensive publicity effort could be made independent of the film. In order to generate word-of-mouth, 25,000 advance-reading copies were distributed to sales and publicity lists and to respondents of a *New York Times Book Review* advertisement—the first time a free book offer had been made to the general public. In fact, the ad itself was publicized, resulting in its appearance on the "Today" show. Also, the first chapter of the book was so compelling that it was placed in the back of 1.1 million copies of other Bantam paperbacks and in addition it was sent on a "Chapter One Tour"; that is, the first chapter was published in thirty-eight Sunday newspapers including the *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *LA Times*, and *New York Post*—two weeks before the book went on sale. The results were tremendous. *Jaws 2* became a bestseller ten weeks before the film opened. In fact, the book's success became such a marketing advantage for the movie that the technique of advance publication for books based on original scripts has become one of the strategies now commonly considered in early campaign planning of movie tie-ins.

Sampling can be effective for books other than those blessed with six-figure best-seller budgets. For example, reader attention for *The Female Stress Syndrome* by Dr. Georgia Witkin-Lanoil, published by Newmarket in March 1984, was helped enormously by the excerpts published in such magazines as *Health*, *Working Mother*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Modern Bride*. This kind of sampling is not only cost free, but it brings in licensing revenue. And it allowed the promotion budget to be applied totally to a publicity tour for a very promotable author as well as to advertising.

Word-of-mouth can also be created by drawing on the strengths of other interest groups, as with a tie-in to a motion picture like *Gandhi*. When Newmarket published its Richard Attenborough books, *The Words of Gandhi* and *Gandhi, A Pictorial Biography*, with Gerald Gold, the promotion effort was centered on generating bookstore and library displays. A budget was allotted for creating a distribution net-

work to make maximum use of the Columbia Pictures merchandising materials (which included posters, educational teacher's guides, buttons, bookmarks, photos, audio-cassettes, and many other kinds of materials) as well as arranging a series of advance screenings of the film to build up word-of-mouth for it. Newmarket's marketing strategy was that the film was the most effective selling tool for the books so the tie-in to the film was made as strongly as possible. And it served Columbia's purposes as well since it delivered a constituency of enthusiastic book-sellers, librarians and publishing "big-mouths" for a film which needed tremendous word-of-mouth to overcome initial lack of interest from the public.

These are just a few examples of books that, when published, were supported by energetic promotional efforts concentrated on building word-of-mouth. Although these kinds of campaigns help a book become established, there are many variations to the approach. The point is to make the connection between the book and the reader and between the publisher and the public. The challenge to the book promoter and book marketer is to try to recognize the values inherent in each book property and to devise a way to communicate those values to the maximum number of book purchasers and readers. Fortunately for authors and publishers, good books have a lot of friends who enjoy helping a book reach its readers. Often these friends become the best promoters of all.