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Book Business

Tips for a Successful Book Launch

By Amanda Baltazar

Marketing experts weigh in on how to get the most out of your next campaign.

Add a note...

The Internet has changed the way that publishing companies market books, providing a myriad of new opportunities. But marketers shouldn't forget lower-tech methods of getting the word out. Here, some experts explain how they promote their books using both the latest and the more traditional methods.

TIPS FROM ...

Ruth Chamblee, vice president, retail marketing, National Geographic Books

1. Use author questionnaires.

We have an extensive author questionnaire that asks about the authors' media contacts and experience; for ideas of courses and awards the book might be appropriate for; and people they think might offer a quote for the book. We also ask about their previous marketing experiences. We utilize our authors to the fullest extent.

2. Rethink book tours.

I think the traditional author tour with visits to around 20 cities is waning, and there are other ways to get media in those markets. Book tours are exhausting for authors, and I'd rather take their time and do a satellite radio or TV tour. You can very efficiently reach more consumers.

3. Arrange author talks.

In big cities like [Washington] D.C., Seattle and Chicago, we offer lectures in up to 2,000-seat auditoriums. These major events stand a better chance of attracting media and good crowds than smaller events. That sells books.

4. Consider cross-promotion.

We work with other renowned institutions like the Smithsonian, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on cross-promotion. For example, National Geographic is publishing a new atlas of the ocean, and this fall the Smithsonian opened its new ocean hall. So, it's a good opportunity for cross-promotion.

5. Get online.

We greatly expanded our use of online advertising/promotion and have been using some fun new tools in addition to traditional methods. For example, we've used our

vast archive of footage and still photography to create two types of video book trailers. For Web sites like YouTube, we go for viral activity with a softer sell that people might pass along. Online retailers get a more direct sell with information about the book.

6. Involve your audience.

We run user-generated promotions. We had a book come out this fall called “Visions of Paradise.” We asked National Geographic photographers, “Where is heaven on Earth?” and the book is [a collection of] their photographic responses. So we invited consumers in an online contest to submit their images. The winners receive a customized copy of the book, with their photo as the cover image. This really helps brand awareness.

7. Time the launch for maximum impact.

We launched a book about the Hubble Telescope and timed it with the Hubble’s last servicing mission, the 400th anniversary of the telescope and the 50th anniversary of NASA. Timing is everything. When people see the online ad campaign, they can download images of the telescope for their desktops.

8. Run radio giveaways.

We work with radio stations in top media markets to give away 25 copies of the book we’re promoting. The on-air personality, who is liked and trusted by listeners, reads our advertisement. Plus, if the personality likes our book, he or she may go on talking about it. It’s a great way to reach millions of consumers, and the free book really gets their attention.

9. Explore social networks.

We’re exploring different ways to use these sites. We created a Facebook page for our book “In God’s Name,” which deals with the nature of faith around the world. People are often surprised at the different types of communities that pop up on these sites, and we were able to target several very robust, faith-based groups.

TIPS FROM ...

Jeffrey Yamaguchi, associate director of online marketing, The Doubleday Publishing Group

10. Maximize your reach with mass mailings.

There’s a bazillion unique things going on online, so it’s difficult to stand out. It helps to have a strong arsenal of things you can pull the lever on—such as a good mailing list; your publisher’s newsletter list; and an author list, from the publisher or the author—and contact all these people in one fell swoop.

11. Have an anchor site.

You don’t need a Web site with lots of bells and whistles, but you do need an anchor site for either the author or the book. It’s important to have information on the site like readers’ guides and a “Buy Now” button, but you don’t want that to be too overt. Hopefully, the author runs the anchor site, and they should do it before the book comes out. Building a presence online takes about a year.

12. Encourage your authors to leverage social networks.

... Many authors are on Facebook, and their friends and readers are on their account. I always tell authors to get to know it as a marketing tool before they start to use it (in case their friends post photographs they'd rather readers don't see, for example).

13. Take advantage of niche audiences.

If you've got a sci-fi book, for example, you've got a niche audience to target. When you have a broader book, it's harder because you're marketing to the whole world. It also helps if an author has a fan base already, so you can market to them.

14. Make it unique.

The key to marketing books is that every time we market a book, it is a unique campaign, and we want to build the underlying marketing campaign. It's about creating a foundation for the author and publisher.

15. Video didn't kill the book star.

Video is the hot thing right now. It's a moveable piece ... you post it all over, and the media can even embed it in their stories. Wherever you put the video online, link back to your anchor site where readers can find more information on the book. In the video, you're not telling people everything; you're telling them what they need to know.

TIPS FROM ...

Lori Cates Hand, trade product manager, JIST Publishing

16. Hire a good author.

Effective book marketing begins long before the book is written. It's the acquisitions editor's responsibility to scout out that perfect combination: a book title with a good hook, and an author who can be a major contributor to the marketing effort. We're looking for authors who have a built-in audience—commonly called a platform. An author needs to have a following, as well as existing opportunities for exposure (e.g., a blog, a huge client list).

17. Online articles have more impact than radio interviews.

I don't think radio exposure translates to sales (unless, of course, you're on NPR). The people who do still listen to the radio aren't able to go buy the book right then. If they read an online article that mentions your book, they can click right through to Amazon and buy it on the spot.

18. Major media are looking for negative stories.

Sad but true—our recent book pitch was declined by a major media outlet because it was too upbeat and constructive.

19. Timing is everything.

Don't compete with major events such as an election or holidays. Time your book release and related PR efforts for a relatively quiet time of year. Your book subject will often dictate the best release dates.

20. Blog marketing can work—if you do it right.

Every morning, a million bloggers wake up and say: “What the heck am I going to write about today?” If you find blogs that focus on the same subject as your book, the blogger will usually be only too happy to devote a post to your book—especially if you send them a free copy. I’ve seen a few major publishers who sent out hundreds of galleys to the general public, with the stipulation that they review the book on their blogs, on the publisher’s site, and on Amazon. And once a buzzworthy book hits the echo chamber of the blogosphere, it’s bound to reverberate for awhile.

21. Target your advertising.

Traditional print ads are expensive and don’t generate much of a return on the investment. Look for smaller niche publications that charge lower rates and target your book’s audience more specifically.

22. Do author tours on the cheap.

Try to fit in appearances at places where authors are going anyway. Family vacation to Disney World? Call months in advance and maybe the Orlando Barnes & Noble will let you stop in for a signing.

23. Subscribe to “Help a Reporter Out.”

I subscribe to Peter Shankman’s “Help a Reporter Out” mailing list (HelpAReporter.com). Twice a day, I get an e-mailed list of reporters looking for sources for stories. I scour the listings and look for ones that my authors can answer. Then I forward them to the authors and they write excellent pitches. Best of all, it’s free!

Amanda Baltazar is a freelance journalist in Washington state. She writes about publishing, food and the retail industry, and hails from the United Kingdom.