

Write From the Heart

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Marcia James: "PR Isn't a 4-Letter Word"

By Marcia James

On September 29th at the Central Ohio Fiction Writers' annual conference, I co-presented an author self-promotion workshop with Kensington author Patricia Sargeant. The following is a wrap-up of that presentation. Given the workshop's length, we didn't have time to answer many questions. So I reiterate my offer to email my 100+ page PR information WORD file to any RWA member who would like it. This file includes details on the PR options mentioned in this wrap-up. Plus, for those who didn't get to ask a PR question, I'll do my best to answer them privately. Just go to the "Contact Me" page on my Web site (www.MarciaJames.net), and send me a question and/or a request for my PR file.

Self-promotion isn't for sissies. It can be expensive and time-consuming. There are many factors that play into an author's decision concerning which PR options to try, including technical savvy (e.g., creating your own Web site), shyness (e.g., public speaking and power-schmoozing), and whether the publisher is also providing promotional support. You need to decide if you're going to target existing romance readers and/or try to "convert" new ones. Here are several options to consider, starting with the most traditional types of author promotion.

Readers can be found on message boards and email lists. And there are many Web sites that offer access to romance readers for a price. You can also purchase a list of readers groups from Pat Rouse and mail the groups your promotional items. Or you can buy an ad in RT BOOKreviews. But don't overlook budget-saving options. For example, there are sites (e.g., Coffee Time Romance www.coffeetimeromance.com) that offer some free services, such as an online calendar for authors to post their booksignings. And many publishers have an email loop for their authors to chat up readers, as well as post book blurbs and excerpts.



You can reach readers by cross-promoting with other authors. The simplest way is reciprocal links-authors posting each other's URL links on their own sites. Another is guest-blogging, which is an easy, free way to introduce yourself to another author's readers. Guest-blogging requires a short commitment of time and sometimes the offer of a prize for a reader drawing. Patricia is part of the multi-author Pink Ladies Blog (<http://www.pinkladiesblog.com/>), and she features another author once a month.

There are also authors who interview other writers for articles, blogs, etc. COFWer Carol Ann Erhardt does a fun author Q&A on her Inside the Writer's Mind blog (<http://carolannerhardt.blogspot.com>). And there are free e-zine opportunities for author interviews. One great example is Su Kopil's The Motivated Writer e-zine (<http://themotivatedwriter.com/>), which features authors at all stages of their careers.

Creativity is part of a writer's "toolbox", and many are putting it to good use by inventing interesting ways to cross-promote. One such author is COFWer Paige Cuccaro, who has a popular Writer's Cave page on her Web site (<http://www.paigecuccaro.com/>). She posts photos of other authors' offices along with their URLs. Readers visit Paige's site to see their favorite authors' offices, then stay to explore the other authors' photos and sites.

In addition to meeting readers and other writers, an author can forge relationships with booksellers and librarians through readings and booksignings. Consider joining with several other authors to booksign at a store or do a panel discussion at a library. If you're too shy to speak in front of groups, you might consider presenting an online workshop. And there are print and electronic publications that are always looking for articles from authors.

PR (continued)

Targeting niche markets is a great way to reach interested romance readers and tempt those who normally avoid romance novels. Look at the different elements in your book to see which groups might be interested in it. For example, if your hero drives a vintage car, there are groups of vintage car enthusiasts who might buy your book. If your heroine is a veterinarian, you can send a press release to the veterinarians' professional association. Library reference books, such as The Encyclopedia of Associations, offer the contact information on thousands of groups.

You can also reach readers through your local media. Patricia discussed questions to consider when developing a press release: Who is your audience? What is your angle? Also, it's important to use a cover letter to put the press release in context and suggest the next step to your media contact (e.g., an interview, coverage of an event or simply your availability as a subject matter expert).

Patricia also explained the contents of a sample folder-style press kit: the cover letter, a business card, an author bio, a press release, the book's cover flat, a book excerpt, book reviews and copies of any previous media coverage. The press kit and its components should reflect your author brand (e.g., darker colors for a suspense author vs. brighter colors for a comedic author). You should share your press kit with your editor and agent, so they'll know how you're promoting yourself.

Whichever PR options you choose, promote your author brand as well as your books. There are a number of good resources on branding, including articles on author Jenn Stark's Web site (www.JennStark.com). And it's never too early to create your brand or to develop your Web site, on paper at least. If you go to the national RWA's Web site page on member sites (http://www.rwanational.org/cs/authors_and_books/rwa_author_websites), you can check out what others have done and note what you like and don't like about their sites. When it's time for you to create (or pay a Web designer to create) a Web site, you'll have noted your preferences on color, graphics, visuals, etc.

Self-promotion is a vital part of the business of fiction writing, and the time to study it is BEFORE you're published. Don't get caught playing PR catch-up after you sell. Learn about the many PR possibilities and which might work best with your schedule, budget and personality. But most of all, have fun with it. Your options are only limited by your imagination.

Marcia James used her own PR background to develop her brand-an author of "hot, humorous romances". Her logo is a Chinese Crested hairless dog, an animal found in all of her manuscripts. And her PR giveaway, a thumbcuff keychain, hints at both her law enforcement protagonists and the level of sensuality in her writing. James' debut comic romantic suspense, AT HER COMMAND, is out in trade paperback from Cerridwen Press.