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MARCH MADNESS GUEST BLOG – MARCIA JAMES



My Favorite Thirteen PR Tips by Marcia James

There are numerous ways for authors to promote themselves before and after “The Call”, but many authors dislike PR and don’t know a lot about it. Here are some tips for new authors and suggestions for ways all authors can narrow down which promotional options are right for them.

1. Choose a pen name, Google it to make sure it’s unique, lock in your domain name, and create a website. I chose my pen name in 2001, and according to Google there were only two other “James” romance authors at that time. Now there are so many that I interview a different one each month for my website’s James Gang page (http://www.marciajames.net/James_gang.html). You can make lemonade from lemons like I did if things change in the future, but when you’re starting out, it pays to do some research before picking a pen name and branding it. And since your website will be your #1 PR tool, make sure it’s professional. I’m a technophobe, so I hired a Web designer (Karen McCullough — <http://www.KarensWebWorks.com/>) to create and maintain my site.

2. Understand branding, determine your brand, pick a tagline (optional), and make all of your marketing efforts reinforce your brand. I cover the basics of branding in my promotion workshops, and here's how I developed my tagline and branded my PR materials. I knew my author's "voice" and manuscripts were funny and risqué, so I wanted a tagline and brand that would let readers know they'd get a funny, risqué read when they picked up my books. And I chose a simple tagline ("Hot, Humorous Romances") that was general enough to encompass all the romance subgenres I want to write — from comic contemporaries and funny romantic mysteries to lite paranormals. My website reflects my comic voice (with the cartoon visuals, the light tone of the text, the cute fonts, etc), as well as my books' sensuality level (with my R-rated book excerpts and my sex advice column "written" by a sex therapist character of mine.) Everything from my business cards and bookmarks to postcards and thumbcuff keychain giveaways reinforce my "Hot, Humorous Romances" brand.

3. Use email signatures. In all your emails — especially those to writer loops and reader forums — use an email signature that includes at least your website URL and possibly your recent or upcoming release. And make sure your URL is a link, so people can click on it to visit your site vs. having to copy-and-paste your URL into the browser. Internet servers, as well as forums, have directions on setting up your email signature. Pay attention to the rules of your email loops/forums, since some restrict the number of email signature lines. Here's my current email signature:

Hot, Humorous Romances
Heating Up the Holidays, 12/10
www.MarciaJames.net

If you don't have a website yet, you can still have a tagline to use in your email signature. You can also include contest wins, blog and social media URLs, even favorite quotes. Email signatures can bring you new readers and more. I entered a fun contest hosted by a local magazine and won, so I sent an email to thank the editor. She clicked on my URL, checked out my website, and interviewed me for the magazine.

4. Reinforce your pen name in your URLs. In almost every case, website URLs are not case sensitive. That means, your website address does not need to be all small letters. Make your URL work for you. For example, I don't type my URL this way: www.marciajames.net I type it: www.MarciaJames.net so people can easily see my pen name within my URL. That will work for your domain name URL, but not necessarily for pages within your website. For example, the link to my site's Contest page is <http://www.marciajames.net/contest.html> If I try to capitalize my name within that link, it won't work. My webmistress explained: "The URL itself, the part that ends in .com or .net or similar, is handled by the ICANN databases, and it doesn't care about case. However, the local hosting system...is responsible for serving the pages to the browser, and the file system for many, if not most hosting services, is case sensitive."

5. Do not add people to your email/e-newsletter subscriber list without their permission. There are lots of ways to encourage people to sign up for your promotional emails or e-newsletters — including having an e-newsletter sign-up sheet at your booksignings, putting a subscriber form on your website, and holding contests that are open only to your subscribers.

Don't irritate potential readers by "harvesting" their email addresses and adding them to your subscriber list without their permission.

6. Learn what PR options are out there in order to make educated decisions. To pick the best promotional choices for you and your books, you first have to learn what's available. I have a 335-page WORD file of PR options I give away free to other writers. Just go to the "Contact Me" page of my website and email me requesting the file. I'll attach the file to my return email. In addition, for those who take my workshops, I offer lectures that present overviews of the different types of author promotion. The following tips are ways to narrow down your self-promotion choices, once you know what they are.

7. Determine how much money you have to spend on promotion. You will hear people comment that you need to spend a certain percentage of your advance or royalties on promotion. That isn't written in stone. Only you can decide what money you have to spend. And there are MANY free PR options available.

8. Budget your time as well as your money. Unless you can afford a publicist, an author promotion site, or an assistant, it will fall on you to do whatever it takes for your PR push. And any time you spend doing promotion is time spent away from creating those books you want to promote. So take your time constraints into consideration.

9. Take into account any limitations due to your physical location. Where you live can greatly limit opportunities for in-person promotion, such as networking, book signings, and presenting workshops — as well as increasing mailing costs for promotional materials. And authors who want to market their books outside of their countries have to deal with other concerns, such as customs. So your physical location (and travel budget) will impact your PR choices.

10. Consider the PR limitations or requirements of your specific books. For example, there are different opportunities and concerns when promoting an e-book vs. a print book. And shelf life can play a part in how you promote a category romance print book vs. a single title romance print book. In addition, the sensuality level of your books might limit the venues where you could hold book signings. For example, I have a Chinese crested hairless dog in each of my books, but I doubt Petsmart would offer to host a signing of my more explicit romances.

11. Determine your best niche markets. Who is your target audience? For example, the romance-reading community is huge and voracious, but finite. If you can spot elements in your book that lend themselves to niche promoting, you can win new readers and help grow the romance market. If you write Scottish historical romances, you might want to sell your books at a local Scottish fair. If your hero drives a vintage Mustang, you could hand out your PR materials at a vintage car rally. If one of your protagonists is a quilter, you can join a quilters' online forum. And if your heroine is a special events coordinator, you could contact the professional association for that career and ask their newsletter editor if you could send a press release about the book to their newsletter. You can find contact information for thousands of groups, hobbyists, etc. in several library resource books: *The Encyclopedia of Associations and Associations Unlimited*.

12. Try not to duplicate the promotional support your publisher is providing. Nothing can beat or replace publisher support, especially when it comes to distribution and brick-and-mortar bookstore placement. Some publishers' promotional teams will work with authors and some won't. Learning as much as possible about your publisher's marketing plan will help you avoid duplicating efforts. For example, ARCs (Advance Reader Copies) of your book are expensive to make, so sending ARCs to the same bookstores and reviewers your publisher does is a waste of money. And authors need to dole out their PR dollars very carefully.

13. Don't discount the roles your personality and skills play in which PR options are best for you. Not everyone is cut out to do every PR option. There are promotional opportunities that are better suited for extroverts — such as speaking at library functions and power-schmoozing at conferences. Introverts might prefer cyber-networking with readers on email loops or forums. Some authors might have the skills to design their own websites and graphics, while others will shy away from anything technological. For example, I'm coming late to social media sites just because setting up a "Marcia James" page on Facebook, etc., was intimidating to me. But I love doing booksignings, in-person networking, being on panels, etc. So you can pursue marketing situations that make the most of your personality strengths and your talents. Thanks to the many PR options out there, an author shouldn't have to choose promotional opportunities they dislike.

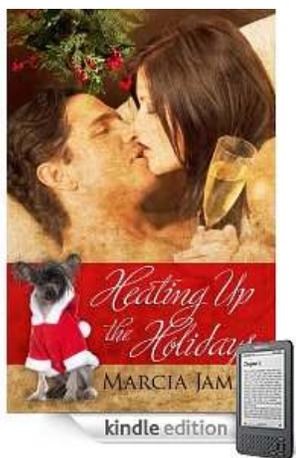
The bottom line...

Authors are being pressured more than ever to do a LOT of self-promotion. It's easy to feel guilty over not doing enough — and to worry that your promotion isn't effective. Consider co-promoting or cross-promoting with other authors to share your marketing costs and time. And choose those PR options that work best for you and your books.

Happy promoting!

Marcia James

www.MarciaJames.net



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