
The Kiss of Death



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The Best Bang For Your PR Bucks

By Marcia James

There's an old saying in advertising/PR circles, "Only half of all advertising works, and nobody knows which half."

I wish I had a definitive answer to the question, "Where can I get the best bang for my PR bucks?" But like so much about promotion, it depends on a number of variables—including an author's budget and product. What's an outstanding opportunity for print books might be all wrong for e-books. Category romances with a limited shelf life might require a different PR approach than single title novels. And authors who do 100% of their own promotion face different challenges than those who have support from their publisher's PR staff.

Do the Research

There's no secret formula to determining your PR dollars' payoff. However, you can increase your chance of spending wisely with a little research. Before advertising in publications, check their circulation numbers. For example, according to the RWA® national Web site, the *Romance Writers Report* goes to "over 9,800 RWA members, editors, agents, and other industry professionals." And *Romantic Times BOOKreviews (RT)* offers Web site advertising information, which details the number of "impressions" (sometimes a synonym for "ad views") they receive monthly.

"I've placed...ads in *Romance Sells*, RWA's magazine, and *Romantic Times BOOKreviews*," Kensington author **Elizabeth Amber** explained. "*Romance Sells* is great for getting advance word out to booksellers. If you place an ad in *RT*, they'll consider an article in certain areas of their magazine as well. When I placed a small ad for *Raine*, they also printed a half-page article I wrote in the 'Clubhouse Spotlight' section, complete with color photos. Pretty good exposure!"

If you're interested in using an author promotion site, ask about their number of e-newsletter subscribers or

Web site visitors. Several have additional services, such as Writerspace's *Bookseller Report Newsletter*, which is mailed to "500+ booksellers/ librarians".

RT also offers their Bookstores That Care Network, collecting and distributing author promotion materials to "700 Romance-specific Independent Bookstores" for less money than you could mail the materials yourself. So by researching the options, you can determine how much you are spending to reach each reader, librarian, or bookstore.



Track Your PR Dollars

How do you know if your promotion is working? "I only go by reader feedback," Berkley author **Lori Foster** said. "If they say something drew their attention, I know it works."

What if you're just beginning to build a reader list? I run a monthly contest on my Web site, and the entry form asks the question, "How did you hear about my Web site?" The answers allow me to track the response to at least some of my promotional efforts.

More technologically savvy authors use better quantitative methods. "If I'm doing an online promotion, I generally keep a watch on my Web stats to see if it produces any increase in visits to the site," Cerridwen Press author and Web designer **Karen McCullough** explained. "It can be harder to check any effect on sales, but since Cerridwen pays monthly, it's a bit easier to track results. I track sales on a spreadsheet, and I make notes on it about what promotions I've run and when."

Other authors hire an assistant to follow-up on promotions. "I...have a person who does this for me," Pocket author **Rhonda Pollero** said. "She makes contacts with book clubs, and as the requests grow, I can tell what is effective—or conversely, if they decline, I

know to stop sending materials to people.”

Compare PR Materials: Print vs. Novelties

There are many venues looking for author promotional materials—from writer conferences and reader events to book clubs and book-stores. But how do you know where best to spend your money? Again, it depends.

If you have a beautiful cover, bookmarks are a good investment. If your cover hero looks like the Pillsbury Doughboy (something that happened once to Ballantine author **Suzanne Brockmann**), then maybe excerpt booklets might be a better way to catch readers’ interest. Or you can make lemonade out of lemons, as Suzanne did by offering readers a smiley-face sticker to put over the hero’s face.

“Bookmarks are my standard,” Avon author **Cait London** explained. “It’s essential to have a handout when doing a booksigning, and something to put into an envelope. I mail them to my best supporters or to those mail order places who will stuff them into their orders. Postage for a full run is high, so I usually call prior to a mailout and chat a bit with the bookstore to see if it is worthwhile. My bookmarks are 2 1/2 X 6 [and] 4-color. This shorter, fatter book-mark allows for placing inside the paperbacks, and the top doesn’t fold over.

Ellora’s Cave author **Shelley Munro** recently asked me to guest-blog on author promotion, and I queried those who commented on their favorite PR materials. Excerpt booklets, which offer a real taste of the story, were in demand. **Pollero** said of her booklets, “Hands down the most effective thing I’ve ever done.”

Anything that included an author’s signature was also popular. “I send signed cover flats to romance-minded booksellers throughout the country,” Leisure author **Joyce Henderson** said. “I include 25-50 bookmarks to booksellers who are willing to accept them. I send post cards with the cover art on one side and a short blurb on the address side to...contacts, friends and family.”

Some of my guest-blog commenters mentioned book-cover magnets, while others preferred logoed items and cute giveaways. The thumbcuff keychains I hand out remain popular after two years and more than 6,000 distributed. The thumbcuffs represent both my

law enforcement protagonists and the sensuality level of my stories.

“If you’re going to do a trinket, make sure it promotes your name and not a single book and do your best to make sure it has some durability,” **Pollero** advised. “I did luggage tags, and they seemed to be a hit—I still see people with them at national conferences because they are hard plastic and last forever.”

Of course, free books are always a big hit. “Giveaways are a great way to get readers to come back for more,” Samhain author **Jules Bennett** stated. “If I give away one book, that one person could tell others, and the domino effect should generate more sales down the road.”

Think Outside the Heart-shaped Box

When trying to stretch your PR dollars, look at ways to reach niche markets that might welcome information about your

book. For example, consider elements in your stories that appeal to specific groups, such as knitters, gardeners, or NASCAR fans. There are publications for every type of hobby and profession, and many take advertising or print press releases.

“My writing partner for non-fiction, **Christie Craig**, is a great example,” Adams Media author **Faye Hughes** said. “She pitched articles to pet-related magazines (her books all have pets featured prominently) and scored a couple of articles. Not only did she get paid for writing those articles, she got free press about her book. Talk about a win/win!”

Balance Promoting With Writing

The bottom line is nothing can beat or even match the support of your publisher—such as distribution, store placement, marketing, etc.—but you *can* supplement their efforts and build your readership. And the first step is continuing to write your “keeper shelf” books.

Marcia James’ debut comic romantic suspense, AT HER COMMAND, was released in trade paperback from Cerridwen Press. In June 2009, she’ll have a short story in TAILS OF LOVE, a Berkley anthology. She offers her 170+ page file of author promotion options to any RWAer who requests it. Just email her through the “Contact Me” page on her Web site: www.MarciaJames.net

