



PROMOTING YOURSELF BEFORE “THE CALL”

By Marcia James



Think public relations (PR) is something you do after selling your book? Think again. Author promotion can be a daunting task when faced during the hectic days after “The Call”. Don't make it more difficult on yourself by waiting until you sell to learn all you can about self-promotion.

Nuts and bolts

Prior to publication, there are many things you can do-free and easy things-to become PR savvy.

- Read those author promotion articles in the Romance Writers of America® (RWA®) Romance Reader Report and your chapter newsletters.
- Get a subscription to RT BOOKreviews to check out author ads and the press releases in the “RT Clubhouse” section. Ask the published authors in your chapter what they do for promotion and take note of their e-mail posts about chats and blogs.

The more you know about marketing yourself-especially the nuts and bolts of available PR options-the less intimidating it will be. For example, well before I was a featured author-guest in a chat room, I participated in several online chats with other authors to learn the process, the lingo (GA, BTY, TTYL, etc.), and my server's ability to work with different chat hosts' software. And before my first guest-blogging opportunity, I set up my blogger profile and figured out how to post comments on blogs.

Brand identity

The most important thing aspiring authors can do to get a jump on PR is to choose a pen name, lock in the corresponding domain name, and design-on paper, at least-a Web site. However, I recommend learning about author branding before spending a lot of time and money on your Web site. Golden Heart winner **Jenn Stark** has very helpful branding tips on her site (<http://www.JennStark.com/>). And when picking a pen name and slogan or tag line, remember to Google it to make sure it's unique.



Modern technology

Exploring PR opportunities on the Internet is another pro-active move. Kensington author **Dianne Castell** believes in building your name recognition by networking online. “Get on loops and message boards you like and make contacts there,” Castell said. That way, “they care when you sell, and it's a big deal to them as well because you're friends. They will spread the word for you.” However, she warns that being friendly and helpful on loops is the key; not just pushing your books.

Social media sites, such as MySpace, offer a chance to start building your brand and your pen name before selling. I'm technically challenged, so I've resisted taking the MySpace plunge. But I was able to test the waters by joining a MySpace page for Ohio romance authors (<http://myspace.com/romanceauthors>), which Berkley author **Lori Foster** designed and maintains. By being one of many, I'm learning to navigate, blog, friend people, etc., before

committing to my own site. This concept is true for blogs, as well. There are aspiring author group blogs, started by friends, critique groups, and award finalists.



If you're technically handy, you can experiment with making book videos, which can cost less than \$50 if you use stock photos, paid instrumental music, and free software such as Movie Maker. Several authors have become so good at creating these video promos, they've started their own companies.

Another helpful skill is podcasting. You don't have to be published to have your own Internet radio show, although most podcasting is not inexpensive.

Writing and workshops

Penning press releases and articles also provides name recognition. It's never too early to learn to write a press release, and there's a number of books at your library offering samples of this promotional writing. You can volunteer to write press releases about your local RWA® chapter's conference or contest as a way to hone your skills and make contacts within your local media. And remember, a press release is not just a recitation of facts. It's important to point out in your cover letter or e-mail why the media person's audience will care about your press release.

KODer **Jacqui Jacoby** writes for the Kiss of Death newsletter and other publications. “The first goal I set for myself back in 2002 was to start submitting at least two articles a year,” Jacoby explained. “You can pack a lot of info into that little bio at the end of an article, though I tend to steer clear of the laundry list of awards and accomplishments.” Jacoby's articles are available on her Web site

(<http://www.JacquiJacoby.com/>), which she considers her “virtual resume.”



In addition, Jacoby teaches both online and onsite workshops, which has the added benefit of getting her name known within the industry. Aspiring author **Kellie Finley** (www.KellieFinley.com) also presents online workshops, as well as writing articles, volunteering, and using the Internet to promote herself. Since studies show that fear of public speaking is more prevalent than fear of death, presenting workshops isn't everyone's cup of tea. But aspiring authors can give it a try by participating in (less scary) panel discussions, such as joining with critique partners to do a creative writing presentation at your local library.



Fiction writing requires a great deal of craft and business knowledge, and there are only so many hours in the day. But learning about self-promotion now will save a lot of stress later in your career. As Jacoby said, “We need to be seen and make a little noise. But most important, we have to have fun doing it.”

Marcia James' debut comic romantic suspense, “At Her Command”, was released in trade paperback last year from Cerridwen Press. After a career in marketing and advertising, she enjoys PR but tries not to admit that in front of other authors. She offers her file of author promotion options to any RWAer who requests it. Just e-mail her through the “Contact Me” page on her Web site: www.MarciaJames.net.