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# The Kiss of Death



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## PROMOTING YOURSELF AND YOUR BOOKS: What Do Readers Want?

By Marcia James

Readers enjoy schmoozing with authors through email loops, booksignings, chats, and conventions. They like making that one-on-one connection, having their pictures taken with their favorites, and getting personalized autographs. In addition to online and in-person meetings, what do readers want in the way of promotional materials? Ask them. That's what many PR-savvy authors do, using their blogs, e-newsletters, and even their contests to gather information. While there's no single answer to the question, there are trends in responses that can help authors spend their PR dollars wisely.

### The Power of the Printed Word

Giving potential readers a taste of your writing is a great way to interest them in your novels. Several popular options are cover flats with back cover copy and bookmarks or postcards with blurbs.

"I've discovered my cover flats are a really big hit with readers," Samhain author **Melissa Lopez** confided. "They go like hot cakes at conferences. And when I've included them in a prize pack, I've received thank you e-mails from readers."

"I asked readers on my blog about bookmarks," Berkley author **Denise Rossetti** stated. "Those who enjoyed bookmarks far outnumbered those who were indifferent—by a factor of 3 to 1, in fact. A few readers are amazingly particular, displaying bookmarks on cork boards or matching them to the book itself; but for the majority, it's just a thing [they] grab. However, I do believe a bookmark can be another effective way of getting a writer's name in front of readers."

"For my first book, *Nicholas*, I printed bookmarks and sent them to bookstores and conferences as giveaways," Kensington author **Elizabeth Amber**

said. "I think the bookmarks helped, though having an amazing book cover certainly didn't hurt. With the second book in the trilogy, *Raine*, I printed postcards. However, personally, I think I'd probably pick up a bookmark before I'd pick up a postcard."

"I offer freebies of bookmarks and bookplates on my Web site," Kensington author **Susan Lyons** explained, "and for my last two books I changed from the usual [bookmark] format to a tri-fold bookmark with an excerpt, review quotes and a 'Dear Reader' letter.

Those go to bookstores, reader groups, and conferences."

### The Tease of Excerpt Booklets

In addition to a well-designed Web site, booklets containing either your novel's first chapter or an excerpt is another way to offer readers a look at your books. These teasers can be homemade, using programs like Microsoft Publisher, or professionally made by Kinkos or Staples. When questioned about effective author promotion, readers consistently mention these booklets.

Just like her readers, Harlequin Spice author **Alison Paige** enjoys excerpt booklets. "I like anything where I can get a glimpse of the writing style and story. It's the same way I decide whether to buy a book at the bookstore. I read the blurb and the first few pages to see if the story idea appeals to me and then the writing style."

"By far, I received the most feedback from people who bought the book as a result of the excerpt," Kensington author **Rhonda Pollero** said. "I pay someone to do them, but any person with more techno skills than I have could do it from their own home computer. I use the [book's] front and back covers and try to keep the excerpt to eighteen pages. You have to have an even number for the booklet to work."



“I’ve made them several times,” Samhain author **Sharon Long** stated. “I did close to a thousand for last year’s RT and around 300 for RWA® last summer. Since I was willing to put the time into making them, it was quite inexpensive, and they were very well received.”



**Lyons** also does excerpt booklets. I, however, designed tri-fold brochures that include my bio, my book blurb, and a short excerpt. They can be less expensive to produce than excerpt booklets if you’re using a professional printer.

### The Temptation of Logoed Giveaways

Trinkets, knickknacks, *tchatchkes*—whatever you call them, they’re a hit with readers. But will they sell your books? Contrary to popular belief, that’s not their job. Logoed giveaways reinforce your brand and, hopefully, tempt readers to visit your Web site. There are often several steps to interesting a reader in your novels, and your Web site has a better shot at persuasion than any single PR item. But first you have to get the readers to your site.

“I had sports bottles with my name, Web site URL and branding slogan created,” Kensington author **Patricia Sargeant** said. “Several readers told me they liked the sports bottles. Conference organizers said they made great additions to their raffle baskets. Readers also liked the notepads I offered, which were printed with my contact information.”

“I’ve had requests for my Apache arrowheads,” Ellora’s Cave author **Ashlyn Chase** explained, “which I used to promote *Being Randy*... about a shape-shifting coyote and the only nurse in the... psychiatric ward who believed him because of her Apache ancestry. I gave out a bunch of arrowheads at RT last year... and sent some to sites that send out promos for authors with their contest prizes. I always try to do something different for each book and tie it into the theme of the book. There’s no way my business card is going to bring up a memory of what I wrote or become a conversation starter.”



I’ve given away over 6,000 thumbcuff keychains, mostly one at a time while I chat up a potential reader. The reaction I get to my giveaways is enthusiastic, and it’s fun to see whether the reader will notice the thumbcuffs first or the funny dog logo on my attached business card. My Web site hits increase significantly after an event where I’ve hand-distributed my keychains.

### The Pull of Personalized Materials

Readers value an author’s signature, whether it’s in a book or on a promotional item. “I put up a Free Stuff page on my Web site,” Sourcebooks author **Michele Ann Young** said, “and recently have been getting requests for personalized bookplates and bookmarks... One lady wrote all the way from Italy.”

Ellora’s Cave author **Jan Springer** has had similar experiences. “Most [of my] readers request autographed cover flats, autographed personal photos and bookmarks.” I also offer bookplates on my Web site, and like most authors, ask for a SASE from readers requesting signed materials.

You can make your own label bookplates on a color printer, customizing them to match your book cover or your brand. The most popular label sizes are 4” X 2” and 3 ½” X 4”, and some authors prefer clear labels to the white versions.



When targeting a niche market, you can design PR materials to appeal to that group of potential readers. For example, I promote my brand to other authors by offering PR articles on my Web site and by sharing my author promotion file. Both things bring traffic to my site.

“The most successful giveaways I’ve done with my group of co-authors on Ten Steps was a ‘character diamond fan’... taken from the Ten Steps book,” Wings Press author **Becky Martinez** said. “It was a series of bookmark-sized strips that spread out into a fan. We have given these away at a number of conventions and found we could not keep them in supply at the RWA® goody room.”

Nothing will increase your sales like writing a great book and having a professional Web site. But there are effective promotional materials. So the next time someone says, “I never bought a book because of a bookmark”, don’t let that stop you from giving potential readers a taste of your writing or a trinket that will bring them to your site.

*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 180+ 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](http://www.MarciaJames.net).*