

## THE ART OF SELF-PROMOTION

By Heather Lester

So, you've written a book. You've sent off a query letter or two, and someone actually wants to see it. You've printed it out, kissed it goodbye and have reluctantly handed it over to the post office.

Now what?

Are you prepared should the publisher want your book? Do you have a marketing plan? Are you ready to promote your book and yourself?

If you're like most new writers, probably not! Most first-time authors are caught unaware of what's expected of them when that fabled "Call" comes in.

First, plan ahead. Almost any type of promotion is going to cost money. Even before that, you will need money to send out queries and manuscripts, so author Leslie Levine ([www.leslielevine.com](http://www.leslielevine.com)) suggests that all unpublished writers should start a promotion fund before sending their work out. Then, once that call comes in, you will not be left wondering how you are going to pay for promotional items and mailings.

There are many ways to promote your book (and yourself), whether you are published by a print or e-publisher, and you can begin to market yourself now.

**Message boards.** A publisher's MB, or one in the genre you are targeting, is a good place to start, before publication as well as after. On the pre-published side, it allows people to get to know you BEFORE you sell, building a ready-made fan base. Your online friends will revel in your first sale and line up at the bookstore. For someone already published, writing websites such as RomanceDivas.com allows a writer to promote herself through mentoring newer writers. Spending time on your publisher's message board or reader sites (such as WritersUnlimited.com, WriterSpace.com, or RomanticTimes.com) puts you in touch with fans as well as potential new readers. Many have bought books simply because they got to know an author online, and it doesn't stop with that one person! That reader then goes to the super market, local bookstore or their friends and says, "I know this author!" Before you know it, five more people have bought your book. And not just that book, but your next as well. Word of mouth is a powerful tool, especially when people find out they can actually *talk* to the author online.

A word of warning, though: one thing readers despise is an author who only visits a website to promote a new book. You will gain more supporters (sales) by being a regular fixture in an online community, even if you post just once a week, than you will if you only show up when a new book is out. Many authors have been shredded for this.

**Signature line.** Some message boards allow members a signature line in which you can list your website and current and/or upcoming release. Always check forum guidelines to see how many lines are acceptable, if allowed at all. If unsure, ask a moderator or community manager. Plan on no more than three to five lines in a signature as that allows for your name, website and most recent release information. If people want to know more about your books, they *will* visit your website. The “billboard” effect, however, in which you list every title you’ve published, award you’ve won, or upcoming appearance will turn people off more than it will entice them.

Some boards also permit members to enter a user profile. If someone is interested in knowing more about you they click on your name and voila! There's a brief bio and your website. The Writer ([www.writermag.com](http://www.writermag.com)) is one such site that allows this.

**Groups/Email Lists.** Join writing and author email lists, as well as groups pertaining to a particular interest--or that ties in with a subject you are writing about. If you're writing mysteries, join a forensic science or mystery-readers group. Writing about Appalachian quilt making? Join a quilting or sewing group. You'll find a place to pose questions on your subject and, by being a member of the group, grow a fan base for your article or book. Be warned, though, that many lists prohibit shameless self-promotion, so if all you do is promote your book you will not only lose fans, but may be asked to leave.

Most groups also allow a three-to-five line signature. As with message boards, if people are interested in contacting you or checking out your website, the info is right there. Be sure to check the guidelines or ask the group owner or moderator to see what is allowed.

Consider starting an author group for yourself where readers can interact with you and each other. Ask a friend or family member to moderate and drop in whenever you have the chance--but make sure you drop by often enough that your fans get to *know* you. You can also form a group with friends, as The Ditzzy Chix did. They have a joint website ([www.ditzzychix.com](http://www.ditzzychix.com)) linked to their individual sites, as well as a "fan" email group, The Chixadees. They hold contests and

chats together, and work to promote each other at conferences, book signings, and through a group newsletter.

**Personal Website.** In order to be truly effective a website must be clean, easy to navigate, offer something for readers and writers alike, and give them a reason to come back. Regular updates are important, whether you do it yourself or hire someone else. List upcoming books, your backlist, and any appearances--real life as well as cyber. Post excerpts, free short stories, writing articles, games, or contests. Some authors post a photo or recipe of the month. Others choose to include a photo gallery, and many now have blogs. What you choose to offer is entirely up to you, but you need something to bring people back.

**Newsletters.** This is an excellent way to keep fans up to date on your latest releases, appearances and publishing news, but whatever else you include is ultimately up to you--recipes, book excerpts, short stories, member-only contests--just make sure you offer something to keep people signed on to your newsletter and encourage them to visit your website.

**Book reviewers.** Reviewers, both print and online, can be both a risky and effective marketing tool. Send your book to magazines that review your genre or, for nonfiction writers, magazines on your subject matter--but by no means should you limit yourself. If you've published a book on family vacations on a shoestring, don't just target travel magazines, send your book to women's and parenting magazines as well.

**Local Media.** This is particularly effective in small towns. Send a copy of your book or a press release and bio to your local paper, radio station and TV station. Larger papers and stations may not have the room to concentrate on lesser-known authors, but small-town presses are always looking for material. Don't forget your alma mater or alumni associations, either!

**Book signings.** Whether alone or in conjunction with other local/regional authors, it's important to remember that the focus of a book signing isn't really you or your book -- it's the reader. Talk to people. Find out what they like in a book and then suggest yours or a signing partner's based on their interests. Granted, this may not work for ebooks unless the epublisher offers books in both electronic and print format, but if you have a friend who is having a signing, you could tag along and offer freebies to entice potential readers to your or the epublisher's website. Also consider "drive-by signings" in which you merely pop into the booksellers in your area and sign your books on the shelf. A "local author" sticker will also draw attention to your book.

**Conferences.** Attend conferences and book festivals. Talk to people. Give workshops on topics you excel at or agree to participate in a panel discussion. Regardless of being published or not, everyone has strengths! Be active and get your name out there!

**Chats.** Chats give readers the chance to ask questions about your book and your writing in an online forum. If they like what they hear, they will be running for the bookstore. Entice readers to your chat by giving away a copy of your book or other goodies.

**Contests.** Monthly contests can be offered through your website or newsletter. Some merely ask people to fill out a form or send an email with “contest” as the subject line. Others require readers to read an excerpt and answer a question based on it. If you are in between books, offer readers the choice of a back title, a current book by an author friend, or other small gift. Writing a book on massage for couples? Include massage oils with your book. Offer gift baskets or novelty items unique to your area. One author gave away an afghan she crocheted herself. Others have offered one lucky entrant a walk-on part in an upcoming book. Don't think you have to spend a lot of money on contests, though. You don't. The possibilities are infinite and you can find great inspiration at a dollar store!

**Freebies.** The possibilities here range from bookmarks, bookplates and postcards of your cover to pencils, magic wands, magnets, and even luggage tags. Be creative. Look for something that ties into your book. For example, a character in one of Bronwyn Jameson's ([www.BronwynJameson.com](http://www.BronwynJameson.com)) books loved to-do lists and fast cars. In addition to a signed copy of her book, the winner received a small BMW and a to-do list with her name and logo. Have a character that's a cowboy? Offer a country music CD along with the book.

Take freebies and business cards with you to book signings and conferences. If you can't attend, find out if you can send promotional items. Visit local bookstores and leave free bookmarks by the register or in the section devoted to your genre. Find sites such as Writer's Unlimited ([www.writersunlimited.com](http://www.writersunlimited.com)) and Romance Junkies ([www.RomanceJunkies.com](http://www.RomanceJunkies.com)), which allow authors to send in materials they then send out to readers.

As you can see, the opportunities to promote your work are endless. All it takes is a little time and your imagination!