



The Writer's Compass

Marketing – an errant guide to promoting a first poetry collection Sarah Hymas

About the author

Sarah Hymas is a poet, performer, editor and coach. She works part time for the Lancaster Literature Festival: on their imprint, Flax, and on providing professional development for writers based in the NW of England. She also works freelance as a facilitator, coach and sometime consultant; most recently she co-founded the Writing Smithy, an editing and mentoring service for writers (thewritingsmithy.co.uk). She has had cartoons, poems and a short story collection published, and a play and three live literature pieces produced. Her first poetry collection, *Host*, was published in 2010 by Waterloo Press (<http://www.waterloopresshove.co.uk/>).

Introduction

My interest in family politics culminated in June 2010 with the publication of my first poetry collection *Host*, a book that celebrates heritage, predominantly ancestral heritage. It contains a sequence of poems detailing one family's development over the 20th century; the second section covers a wider geographical landscape.

When *Host* was accepted for publication I applied for a Grants for the Arts grant from Arts Council England to develop a digital marketing strategy. Having finally got the thing finished and ready for publication, I wanted to find a public to read it. I was lucky, they awarded me money to research, develop and implement one. With the grant, there was no avoiding what would have otherwise been put on the backburner.

This article follows the journey of that strategy, the good bits, the less successful stuff and the help I received along the way.

The challenge of self-promotion

My passion for writing is way ahead of my passion for self-promotion. Marketing other people's writing is a considerable element of my work – as the editor of Flax I am responsible for promoting the anthologies we produce as well as providing materials for the writers to promote it – but marketing something personal is a different ball game.

Rather than building up the necessary [cringeworthy] objectivity to declare the book a thing of lasting value, I decided on a different tack – to have fun and extend the creative element of my work. I had no marketing budget beyond the small amount from the Arts Council for web research and development. It was down to my time, skills and ingenuity.

I already had MySpace and Facebook pages, a Blogspot and appeared on various other websites as a collaborating artist. All these various elements needed to be integrated into a cohesive presence before I could usefully proceed. With six months before publication, Blogspot became the centre for my web presence, my professional identity. Time to devise a plan:

My Marketing Plan

Pre-publication

Online

- On my blog <http://sarahhymas.blogspot.com/>:
 - hold Q&As for 6 new publications by writers I know in some capacity (real or virtual)
 - document the publication process of *Host* on a fortnightly basis
 - review gigs: mine and other people's
 - preview the book, talk about particular poems you like
 - make audio recordings of favourite poems from the book to post
- Write my Wikipedia Entry
- Find websites with relevant theme/subject matter, ask them if they'd like content, or make links.
- Send newsletters to friends/colleagues with gig updates, video releases etc.

Offline

- Get 6 gigs towards publication date.
- Make a freebie giveaway (with weblink) for the readings (with no budget I made foldout booklets of a poem from *Host*. With money I could've had moo cards <http://uk.moo.com/> or postcards designed)

Post Publication

Online

- Viral Campaign (within six months)
 - contact all bloggers I'm friendly with to seek out other friendly bloggers – offer a swapsie review/interview/film/promo
 - identify themed websites/blogs that might be interested in reviewing/interviewing book/me.
 - identify websites that could link to mine (blogs or otherwise)

Offline

- Local Newspaper Coverage
Send press release to local newspapers:
 - a) Where I live
 - b) Locality relevant to *Host's* content
- Readings
- Aim for 6 readings within 9 months, through contacts made through previous readings and Litfest work; libraries; open mic nights; regional festivals.

- Radio Presence
Send press release to local, regional and national radio
- Publisher Activity
 - a) Submission to prizes
 - b) Sending of review copies to magazines who have featured my work

Rules

- Don't do anything if it seems like a hideous chore.
- Find collaborators to help promote, artist friends to make things.
- Remember, it's all trial and error.

What Worked

Online

200% rise in weekly blog hits weekly by publication date. The average time online was 2 minutes but few comments were posted. The main place for comments was on Facebook. Hits have stayed steady post publication. I still post regularly, once a week.

Book reviews and interviews continue to pull in new readers to my blog.

3 websites carried interviews/reviews/poems before publication; 6 following.

The audio recordings for the poems had to become videos, since Blogspot wouldn't accept straight mp3s. This meant extra work, but going for simple photo collages proved effective and great fun. There was 100% positive feedback from newsletter recipients for these videos, and a fair amount of reposting of them occurred on other blogs and Facebook. While I absolutely loved making these shorts, I'm dubious as to the marketing value of them. A review has been promised of these, yet to materialise. There's the unquantifiable 'profile raising' I could lay at their door.

Offline

I had 4 gigs before the launches, two launches and 8 gigs post-publication in 2010. All these were through work connections, friends or colleagues. Pre publication, 4-10 poem freebies were taken at every reading, with a consequential rise in blog hits immediately after. Post-publication, I sold at least 1 book (up to 30 on the 2nd launch) at every reading. 81 books sold through readings by December 2010. Through Waterloo – 23. While this doesn't sound much, it does come in as the third highest selling book for Waterloo in 2010 (it came out in June).

As one of a group of local poets (<http://www.sixfold.org.uk/>), we have offers of 3 joint readings in early 2011. I have another 6 individual invites to September. Buddying-up with fellow poets or musicians (two of my pre-publication gigs were with musicians) made the travelling more tolerable, enjoyable even, and made for a larger pool of contacts.

The writing workshops built up a 'fan' base. This wasn't part of the original strategy, but one I semi-capitalised on by ensuring the 'freebies' I made were available for participants to pick up, so linking those interested with my blog/website. I could have gone further, with a newsletter sign-up form, but this felt like one step too far for me.

1 newspaper article printed, resulting in 9 direct book sales.

What Didn't

Online

There is no clear trackable link between the 500 hits on YouTube videos and book sales.

The online presence through other blogs and websites wasn't as widespread as I'd hoped. Several agreements for interviews and guest posts came to nothing. I failed to post a Wikipedia entry, due to server blockage.

I didn't take details of participants of writing workshops to add to irregular newsletters so the number of newsletter recipients hasn't grown at all.

Offline

2 radio interviews promised but yet to manifest.

I have yet to have any magazine reviews from copies sent out by my publisher.

All gigs were/are in the North of England. To date, no national media (excluding web) has highlighted my work.

Next Time

Twitter. (Or whatever is buzzing then)

I need to become more active in leaving comments on the blogs, leaving a trail back to my blog, building swapsie-relationships.

Be more adventurous in 'guerrilla' tactics generally. Searching more widely for avenues that I might connect to, or work with.

Make better use of video poems. Make better quality ones. Send them to more online channels.

National impact: gigs; blogs further afield.

The figures are low. It's poetry. But from now on I'll gird myself to take an e-newsletter sign-up form everywhere I go, and be more regular in e-newsletters.

Connections

My learning and activity all boiled down to relationships. People I either knew or approached.

Kate Pullinger (<http://www.katepullinger.com/>) was fabulous in her advice for consolidating my web presence at the outset.

Jenn Ashworth (<http://jennashworth.co.uk/>) offered extremely useful advice on clarifying my blog. I still enjoy having a blog that doubles as a website. It's a good representation of my professional identity, working primarily as a public 'creative journal'.

Peter Wild (<http://bookmunch.wordpress.com/>) ran a great review post publication and an in-depth interview beforehand.

Along the way I was inspired by Bernardine Evaristo' blog interviews (<http://bevaristo.wordpress.com/>); Jo Bell <http://www.bell-jar.co.uk/> for her unrelenting out-and-aboutness; Daniel Kitson's wonderful e-newsletters (<http://web.mac.com/dk27/Site/home.html>); loads of other blogs, these two in particular: <http://freakingbookworm.com/>; <http://baroqueinhackney.wordpress.com/>

Working with the Publisher

Waterloo Press are knowledgeable, enthusiastic and overstretched. I sent them both pre- and post-publication marketing plans and they clearly valued my lead on the marketing of my book. While they don't have the time or resources to promote books individually, they sent copies to all the poetry prizes and review copies out to whoever I suggested. They also have an e-newsletter and always ask for news and information from their writers. Gigs get a mention, bringing my name and the book into 'current' news.

Top Tips

1. Have fun; play to your strengths; keep your integrity.
2. Label blog posts effectively to draw new readers.
3. Make the most of who you know; talk, ask for advice.
4. Follow up every enquiry/press release you send out.
5. Buddy up with fellow poets/artists to make a 'package'.
6. Involve your publisher as much as possible. Tell them what you're doing.
7. Be brave.

Resources

- Salt – offer information on getting a virtual tour together <http://blog.saltpublishing.com/about-virtual-book-tours/>
- The Writer's Compass/Litfest briefing *Digital Ink* by Jacob Sam-La Rose <http://www.nawe.co.uk/the-writers-compass/resources.html>
- The Bookseller consistently has fascinating articles from publishers on marketing <http://www.thebookseller.com/>
- Ink Sweat and Tears <http://ink-sweat-and-tears.blogharbor.com/blog>
- Businesslink has some very simple and useful advice on devising marketing plans <http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/layer?topicId=1073861169>
- Canongate's well-oiled machine - <http://www.canongate.net/> has loads of interesting ideas to mould to your use
- <http://booktwo.org/> discusses books, technology and futurism. Packed with ideas.