

# The Writer's Compass

## Turning the Next Page

### Briefing 4: Your Book Needs You! Busting the Myths of Promotion Sara Sheridan

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This briefing sheet is based on a session delivered by Sara Sheridan at Turning the Next Page, an event for graduates of Scotland's Creative Writing Masters and PhD programmes and early career professional writers held at the CCA, Glasgow on Saturday 16 April 2011. Turning the Next Page is presented by The Writer's Compass (NAWE) in partnership with CCA, Glasgow Life, Gutter and Scottish Book Trust and funded by Creative Scotland.

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### About the author

Sara Sheridan was born Edinburgh, studied English Lit at Trinity College Dublin and is published in a variety of genres from contemporary commercial fiction to ghostwriting and historical fiction to children's picture books. A self-confessed swot, I am obsessed with stories, words and historical detail. I thoroughly enjoy events and in the last year, in addition to a variety of book festival and library appearances, I took part in an exhibition of writers' responses to historical objects at the V&A during London Design Festival. This involved me writing a poem which was displayed only a couple along from Andrew Motion's.

I'm unexpectedly geeky. I run my own website and often find myself evangelising twitter and blogging on a variety of sites including the London Review of Books as well as writing for the printed press (most recently the Scotsman, The Natural History Museum magazine, The National Library of Scotland magazine and - believe it or not - the Women's Institute Magazine). I sit on the SOAIS committee and am an active member of 26, a UK group dedicated to the importance of all kinds of writing in our society.

In 2011 I'll be taking part in another museum exhibition this time at the National Museum of Scotland, and appearing at both the Eden Project and the National Trust for Scotland (among other events). I have had two books out in the last two months and am currently

working on a series of cosy crime stories and two historical novels - one about chocolate production in the 1830s and one about Antarctic exploration. Upcoming work includes the historical novel *Secret of the Sands* (HarperCollins, February 2011) and the children's picture book *I'm Me* (Chicken House, March 2011).

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## Why you need to get involved in promoting your book

The traditional view of the writer is creative but writers have always required business skills and never more so than in the current climate of cutbacks and corporate publishing. In this environment, most publishers don't have the time or the budget to put a huge amount of time or resources behind an individual book or author, especially if that author has yet to prove themselves in the market. Different publishers have different resources – a large conglomerate will probably have well-kept mailing lists, a set routine for different genres of books and professional PR people to undertake the plan while a smaller publisher might rely on an editor to also cover PR and tailor a more individual PR plan. In either case, the author's involvement in the publisher's plan is vital and, as publishers are unlikely to cover all the bases, it's in the writer's interest to have an additional plan of their own.

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### 1 What can you expect from your publisher?

The answer to that question varies but it's likely that if you ask, they'll tell you! It's worth contacting your publisher well in advance of the book coming out (perhaps six months in advance initially) and asking who will be dealing with PR and what they will be doing for the book. Tie down if there will be advance press copies available or if the publisher will only be sending out e-copies or manuscripts before publication. In the current climate of cutbacks, early copies are not always produced. Talk to your editor about the biographical information that will be included and if they will require an author photo before the print run (photos cost money to reproduce and publishers are putting them in books less and less). If you have a website, Facebook page or twitter account, make sure they include these details as part of your bio. Very few publishing contracts give you power over the cover copy or image used on your book, but you should be shown what the publisher has decided to use in advance and are at liberty to comment on it if you feel that something has been left out or misrepresented. Any help you can give – for example, if you can inveigle a more well-known writer to give you a quote for use on the cover – is usually gratefully received.

Publishers only organise a launch event if they feel it's worth their while – but talk to them about that. Can you attract press to a launch, for example, or get a well-known figure to come and make a speech? If you organise the launch will they contribute towards wine? Be clear and try to stay calm! As long as you know what they are and aren't going to do, you can fill in the gaps yourself.

Agree what information you will receive and when you will receive it. It's worth meeting a short while before publication just to run through the publisher's plan once more. Go into detail about how their system works. Once the book is out, will they send you copies of press (online and traditional)? Will they pitch you for events like book festivals and local libraries? Will they nominate your book for prizes and awards? If so, which ones? What coverage can you expect on their website, twitter stream and Facebook pages? Would it help if you provide

copy or photographs (of you signing, for example)? If you feel they aren't sending out enough press copies, will they give you free copies to do it yourself?

It's also worth checking if they provide sales information and if so how often. How are advance sales looking? Is the book going to be on special offer anywhere (WHSmith or Waterstone's promotions, for example)? Can you expect weekly updates on actual sales for the first month?. It's interesting and helpful to know how many books you're selling.

Your publisher will need: an author photo (for use in press pitches), a biography, a few quotations or 'angles' on the book to use in pitches (see later for pitches), contact details for you (in case interviews come up at short notice). You need from your publisher (in addition to some idea of their plan): a good, digital image of the cover (often having one without straplines helps)

After publication, keep in touch and encourage them to keep in touch with you. Publishers are busy but sending an email or two over the first couple of months letting them know what coverage you've generated encourages communication to flow more freely. Lack of communication from publishers is the thing that authors complain about most!

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## 2 What can you expect from my agent?

Your agent should also be involved. A publisher is only really interested in a particular book or series of books to which they own the rights. Your agent is interested in promoting your wider career. It's worth having a meeting, firstly to share the information you've got from your publisher and secondly to review the PR plan that you will be operating alongside it. Agents generally won't get very involved in making pitches for you, but it's worth asking if your agent has any contacts that tie in directly or might be able to help. Often an agent might have a link with a particular book festival or journalist, for example. It's absolutely reasonable to ask for a couple of favours though you might need to provide a photo or pitch for your agent to send on.

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## 3 Making your plan

### **a) Understanding your product**

It's difficult for most writers to even think about their books as a product, but if you're going to take part in the marketing, then you have to! In addition, the writer is also part of that product and you need to understand what readers, journalists and event organisers find interesting about you. You also need to be able to provide this information quickly. The tools you need here are a biography and an 'elevator' pitch. You may need more than one of each – for example, some books might appeal to people for more than one reason and it's helpful to have a pitch for each of these markets.

To help you understand the appeal, it's helpful to use the blank Branding Wheel provided. Brainstorm ideas to fill it in and try out different ways of expressing what you and your book are all about. Be flexible – you may find you continually fine-tune these pitches as your career progresses. This is all about seeing yourself and your book from outside (which is difficult because, of course, these things are normally internally generated perceptions).

## **b) Your biography**

So what is interesting about you and what is relevant to the people you are trying to reach? If you have written an academic or non-fiction book your college degree might be important, but if you've written something more commercially based it's probably less so. What are your quirks and obsessions? If you're an historical novelist, for example, do you have a favourite period of history? If you have written a business book, do you have some boardroom experience that people might find interesting and will lend weight to your opinions?

Read other writers' biographies in the same genre. What makes you want to go and hear that person speak at the library or inspires you to seek out their novel in a bookshop? You might like to develop two or more biographies – one for press (and ultimately aimed at readers) another for events organisers (and containing more information about where you have spoken in public before).

Alongside this biography you need a good author photo (one black and white and one colour is helpful). It's a good idea in addition to these standard shots to take photos wherever you go – behind a stack of books at a library or bookshop event, on stage at a book festival, at a microphone at the BBC.... These are good resources to have for tweeting, website use etc.

## **c) Your book**

Be prepared! You need to have a one or two sentence way of describing what you've written to those who will enquire! This might be anyone from someone you bump into in the street to a journalist you meet when you're appearing at an event. Remember, what interests you most about your book might not be what interests others so have a pitch for every angle. Don't be afraid of comparing your book to bestselling successes in the same genre or that touch on the same subjects. All you're doing is trying to give a clear idea of what you've written and spark some interest.

In addition you need to think about pitches that will work for events and traditional media (like newspapers or radio). What are the themes of your book? What will interest people about your main character? You should have at least three pitches you can use for any book that will work in different environments. If you've written a children's picture book, for example, is it 'a politically incorrect look at how children can deal with their difficult relations'? or 'the story of a little girl who doesn't agree with her aunt'? or 'a beautifully illustrated look at the importance of play within a family'? It might well be that you use all these pitches in different contexts.

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## **4 Network!**

There are various networks available to writers of all stripes so find out what's going on and get involved! You might like to join the Society of Authors or a specific society that is relevant to your genre. If your work is suitable for the screen, apply to join BAFTA. Make sure you subscribe to writers' mailing lists to receive information about grants, events, jobs and opportunities and if you're eligible for schemes like the Scottish Book Trust's Live Literature Funding make sure you apply. It's worth keeping an eye on 'published author only' prizes (short story competitions for example).

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## 5 Application, application, application

Now you have the basic materials you need to look at how and where to apply them. Take into account your own strengths and weaknesses. If you've got a bad stammer, hate public speaking and are chronically shy it's probably not a good idea to put yourself through a huge amount of pitches for large events. If you find producing copy easy it's worth thinking about starting a blog. Ideally you'll try some publicity in all categories, but it's a better idea to play to your strengths than force yourself to do something you'll hate. So stretch yourself but don't beat yourself up when things don't work or if there's an area you've decided to avoid for personal reason. Also bear in mind that you will be turned down most of the time you're pitching. This is absolutely normal! You just need to keep going and take on board the opportunities that come off. Fine tune your pitches and your success rate will increase – it takes a while to get known so the first few breaks are the most difficult. The main thing is to be persistent.

### **a) Online:**

You need to research online resources relevant to your book and the people who read your genre. Most writers have a website now, and that is, at base, probably essential. But there are a host of other online outlets for writers and readers from twitter and Facebook (both very effective in different markets) to specialist book blogs where you might like to offer free copy in exchange for a link to your book. Some writers blog about writing or about the issues around their work and build up a following that way. Enlist the help of friends to post reviews on Amazon and other book sites. The online community is generally friendly and you can always unsubscribe if something you're trying doesn't suit you, so it's worth giving lots of different things a try. The advantage of online PR is that often you can track directly how effective it is by providing links to Amazon or another book sales site. It's also instant – someone can read about your book, be interested in it and click to download a copy to their kindle in seconds.

### **b) Events**

Readers love hearing authors speak about their work, about writing generally and about associated subjects. Think about different pitches for events and be as creative as you can! If the main character in your book is getting divorced you might try putting together an event called Splitting Up and talk about how relationships are represented in literature – or one called After Jane Austen Put Down Her Pen about how romantic literature doesn't traditionally cover long term relationships. If you've written something semi-autobiographical about your childhood in India you might put together a talk about the contrast in cultures (with slides, please!). Every book probably has one or two pitches for events at least and you might like to include other authors or experts who write or work in similar areas and put together an 'in conversation' event.

Now make a list of places you want to pitch the event: libraries, bookshops, schools, book festivals, museums and art galleries, even retailers (an event about a tea expert in a tea shop, for example). Start local but don't be afraid to think big and be ambitious. It's also worthwhile looking at festivals or special weeks that are coming up – World Book Night for example, or Independent Bookshop Week. Research who is the most relevant person in the organisation to pitch to and then get to it!

It's a good idea to keep track of these conversations and emails. People are busy and there is no harm chasing them up if they haven't got back to you (as long as you remain professional about it!) Don't forget to update people where you have successes – if you've blogged about researching in a particular area, for example, tell the library about that when you're pitching your event about research.

It's also worth mentioning that you're happy to appear on panels – these are increasingly popular events where three people with a related interest talk together. Festivals or libraries might be putting together events of their own and if you're lucky they'll fit you in.

### **c) Traditional Media**

This covers newspapers, magazines, radio, TV etc. Your publisher should be covering some of these pitches, (and in fact, probably you need them to do large, national and institutional pitches for you like BBC Radio Four or The Telegraph) but they almost certainly won't be doing as much as you'd like! Again, persistence is the key – remain professional, but keep going until you get a no and don't be afraid of trying the biggies if your publisher isn't covering them (just be prepared for a low success rate) While everyone would like to be on the front page of the weekend Times, remember that there are a huge amount of specialist publications and radio programmes whose audiences might be more tailored towards your book. An article in BBC Gardeners magazine about the main character of your novel (who is a gardener) might actually sell more copies than a review in a daily, national tabloid. In this category more than any other, you personally are material as much as your book and there are a variety of columns in circulation (What I had for dinner to Where I write to My favourite shopping stops).

Think carefully about where you want to draw the lines in your personal life, but it's worth doing if the readership of that magazine or newspaper are likely readers for your book. Also, newspapers are subject to cutbacks in this climate too and are often keen for free copy which they will print in exchange for a mention of your book. Think about articles that work within your brand (an article on Mother's Day about the history of mothering, for example, if you've written an historical book about a woman who has had 10 children.)

**Remember:** the publisher will concentrate PR efforts on your book for only a few weeks after its publication and then their activities will probably ease off. Festivals, bookshops and libraries, however, stage events year-round and online the book world buzzes 24/7. The careers of some of our most famous and best-loved writers started slowly and built gradually – your career needs your help so that it can do the same.

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## Appendix One: Case example for Section 5

I'm an historical novelist and a children's writer so I run two different PR plans at the same time, although they are often geared to the same buyers (Historical fiction is bought mostly by women over 26 and so are children's picture books!)

The plan for my latest book *Secret of the Sands* and my new children's picture book *I'm Me* looks like this:

## **a) Online**

I identified areas that would reach not only readers but also a wider network of those involved in cultural issues. I decided against Facebook (people in these groups appear to largely use Facebook for personal photos etc.)

### **Twitter:**

- build up following targeting readers, book bloggers, journalists, children's organisations and campaigners, other writers and events venues
- tweet regularly about history, books, publishing, children's issues and links to reviews or blogs of interest, particularly about my work and also what I'm up to in my life as a writer (events etc)

### **Linkedin:**

- create professional, online CV and build recommendations for events work, in particular

### **Website:**

- build and maintain a website that is of particular use to journalists but also readers and events organisers. Include bonus material (youtube, podcasts, free additional material like extra chapters and readers' group questions), biographical information, events listings, photos of suitable quality for press use

### **Blogging:**

I chose not to maintain a blog of my own, but to 'cuckoo' other people's blogs. I provide copy on related issues to my books and also am available for interview. The links to these articles are then tweeted when they go up and listed on the website. I arranged with my publisher for free copies to be given to some book bloggers for review and again, when these reviews go up I tweet them (so does the publisher) and provide links on the website.

## **b) Events**

I try to integrate events – so if I'm appearing at a book festival I will try to blog about it on someone else's site, tweet about it when I'm actually there, phone the local radio station while I'm in town and sign stock in local bookshops. One event might spawn several small PR successes!

### **Book Festivals:**

I identified book festivals with suitable programmes and wrote a pitch – some were pitched by my publisher, some by my agent and some by me. I also offered to appear on panel discussions and as a chair. We always make it clear that I will tweet about events I'm appearing at and provide references from past events.

### **Bookshops:**

Organising signings – this was done by the publicist at the publishers. Then I tweeted pictures! Anywhere I'm going I make sure to check if there's a bookshop nearby that might take a signing event. Some bookshops also have regular group readings or other events – I emailed to let them know I enjoy that kind of thing and are happy to take part. It's also worthwhile for some retailers to offer special prizes for instore promotion. For example, we offered one national bookshop a prize if they ran a competition surrounding the latest children's books. Generally this is in tandem with publishers.

### **Institutional Events:**

This has been one of the most interesting strands. I designed and pitched several events to individual institutions – museums, botanical collections (I have written a book about a botanist) archives etc. Often these events are tied into writing a free article for institutional magazines (if there is a relevant exhibition or another event coming up, it's a good way in). As these are very targeted the results are impressive in terms of sales. Many institutions also have bookshops and giftshops so it's worth seeing if they might do a 'special' on your book, if it's relevant to their customers. For institutional events it's worth making sure you build a good network of contacts – join mailing lists and get involved in open, writing/reading campaigns like those run by the Scottish Book Trust and Edinburgh City of Literature and '26' for example.

### **Libraries**

Build up a mailing list of librarians! Offer to speak to library reading groups.

### **c) Traditional Media**

- I offered to write copy for the Scotsman and pitched a suitable article that was about the historical research behind the book.
- I agreed a list with the publisher's publicist to give her pitches and let her try for some national press articles
- I agreed a list for review copies and included handwritten notes with the copies, where appropriate
- Built up a small database of radio producers/researchers, journalists etc who cover my kind of material. I pitch to them myself and also keep them informed of what is going on (other articles or blogs they might find particularly interesting.) If there's a scoop I make sure these people get it first (ie an award shortlist, TV appearance etc)
- Identify special interest magazines and pitch tailored articles suitable for their readership

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## **Appendix 2: How to use a branding wheel**

You need to think laterally. You're brainstorming so it's OK to make a few mistakes – try out ideas for size and see how they feel! You probably want to find about 10 words in each quarter of the wheel and from these you will be able to finish the sentences that sit outside (I am, I feel, I look) It's OK to use real life people as a personification of what you're trying to get at (branding experts do!). If you've written a book about a female sailor for example, you might pop in Ellen McArthur or even Joanna Lumley (after her recent trip up the Nile). You might decide your brand is personified by another writer (the new 'Nick Hornby' for example). This isn't set in stone – it's just shorthand. If someone tells you it's just like a Sylvester Stallone movie, for example, you immediately know what they mean, even if Mr Stallone isn't in the cast.

1 Start at the top right of the wheel and come up with some words that identify what your book is all about. These are your brand values and might include whether the book is aimed at men/woman/children/Ya audience, details of its genre (action/adventure/chicklit/horror/fantasy etc) and whether it is educational or entertaining, intelligent, escapist (or even a mixture of these things).



2 Then move onto the bottom right quarter and identify the themes and tones of the book. Is the narrative voice cheerful/knowing/self-aware/naïve? Is it set in a particular geographical location, social group or time period? From this information you can extrapolate how a reader might feel about reading it.

Try to finish the sentence 'I am' with three or four words using what you've learnt in 1 and 2. This I am refers to how your reader will feel about the themes and tones of your book. If you're writing a chicklit book for example you might come up with I am funny, good-hearted and romantic. If you're writing horror it might be I am dark, scary and edgy.

3 Next is the bottom left quarter. Try to think how your readers will identify with your book. What will they identify with? Might they like the romance of it? The modern sensibility? The whacky nature of the plot so that they are constantly surprised? Do they like the traditional setting?

Try to finish the sentence 'I feel' with three or four words using what you've learnt in 2 and 3. Does your reader feel afraid after reading? Do they feel liberated? Do they feel like they learnt something?

4 Next move to the top left quarter and think about what the key talking points of the book are? How might they describe it to a friend? Is it inspirational? Is it shocking? Is it articulate? Is it a rollicking good read?

Lastly think about the sentence starting 'I look' and from what you've come up with in 3 and 4 finish this sentence.

Now you should have a clear idea of what people who will read your book will like about it!

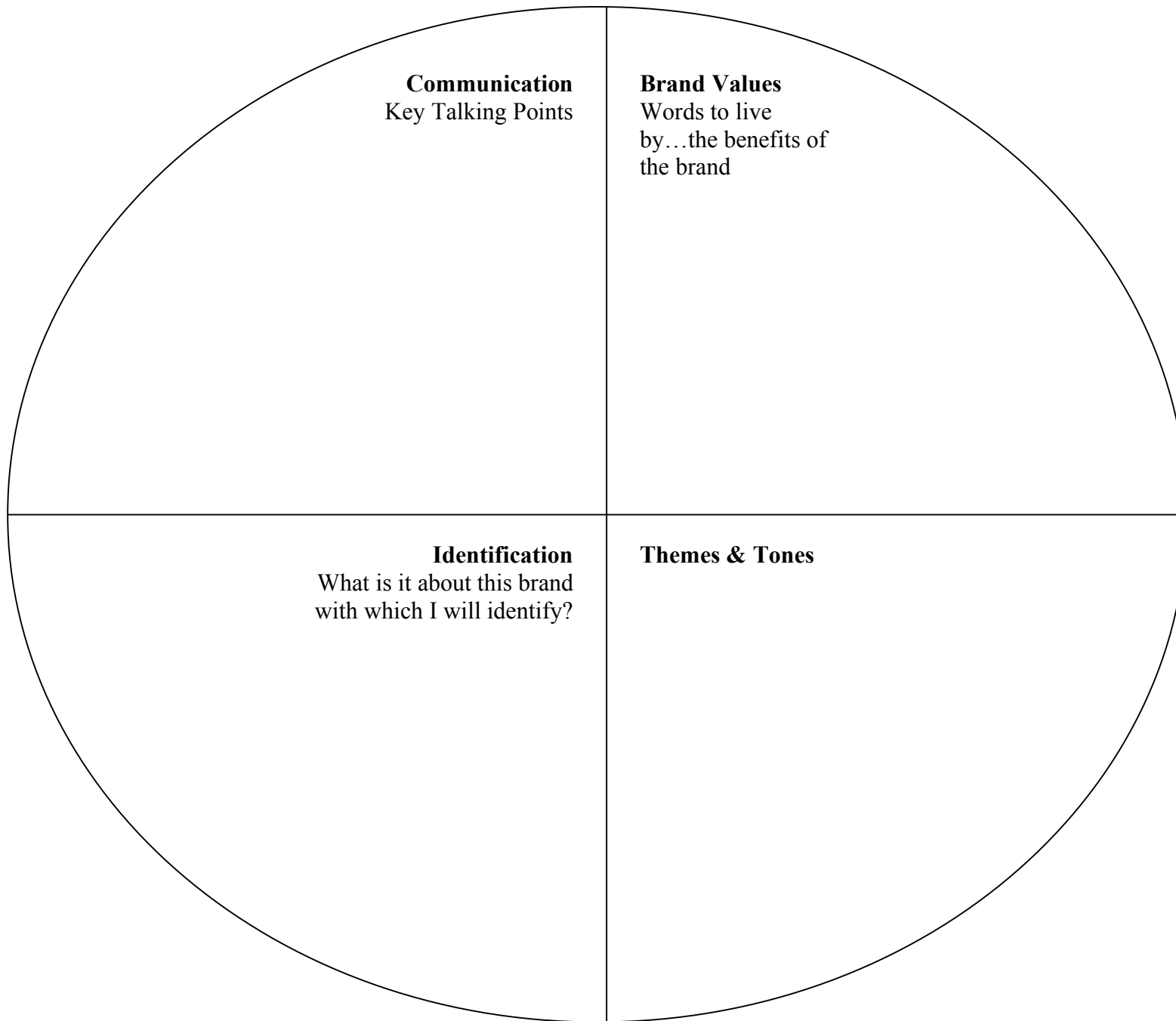
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## Further Reading

The Writer's Compass Briefing 7: *Marketing for authors*, Alison Baverstock (free to download from <http://www.nawe.co.uk/the-writers-compass/resources.html>)

*Marketing Your Book: An Author's Guide*, How to target agents, publishers and readers (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Alison Baverstock (A & C Black)

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**Communication**  
Key Talking Points

**Brand Values**  
Words to live  
by...the benefits of  
the brand

**Identification**  
What is it about this brand  
with which I will identify?

**Themes & Tones**

**“I Look...”**  
How does it  
make me look?  
(Look for answer  
in identification /  
communication)

**“I am...”**  
What is the  
purpose of this  
product / brand?  
(Look for answer  
in themes/tone.  
Normally this is  
fairly functional)

**“I Feel...”**  
How does it make me feel? (Look for answer in Themes/Tone  
and Identification)