



The Writer's Compass

Briefing 7: Marketing for authors Alison Baverstock

This is a briefing for authors, based on a seminar delivered for the literature development organization Spread the Word <http://www.spreadtheword.org.uk> in April 2010. It is intended to provide an overview of the subject sufficient to prompt all authors, whether already published or aspiring, to think that marketing is both interesting and relevant to their work.

About the author

Alison Baverstock worked in publishing for many years and has written extensively about the industry from both publisher and author's point of view. She is the author of *How to market books*, which is commonly referred to as the 'bible' of book marketing, as well as the bestselling *Is there a book in you?* which examines the resources writers need to get published. She is Course Leader for the MA in Publishing at Kingston University and in 2008 won the Pandora Prize, awarded annually to a woman who has made a significant contribution to the publishing industry.

What is marketing?

There is a lot of discussion about what marketing is and is not, and this is explored in more detail in Appendix 2. It is certainly a word that has negative connotations and there is often an assumption that anything that has merit does not need marketing; rather it attracts customers and advocates from its own intrinsic merit.

There have been many attempts to come up with a concise definition, and the one thing that everyone agrees on is the importance of the customer to an appreciation of marketing.

If you keep the following in your head, you will not go far wrong:

- Get to grips with the vocabulary. Marketing relies on the key concepts of **product** and **customer**; inelegant these terms may be when applied to literature but they are helpful before we go any further. The product is what you have to make available – almost certainly your manuscript, but bear in mind that you too are part of the offering; most publishers are interested in the package of book plus author, not just book, and the promotable author is much sought after. The customer is the person to whom you are making your product available – initially the investor (agent, publisher), later the book retailer (bookshop, supermarket, stall at literary festival) and then finally the person who either buys or makes a recommendation to purchase (bookshop browser, present searcher, teacher).
- Effective marketing means looking at yourself and your product from the customer's point of view, and presenting yourself (albeit through the agency of the publisher or agent) in a way that enables them to appreciate you enough to want to spend their time/money on your work.
- Effective marketing is meeting customer needs profitably, because if they do not make a profit, publishers and agents will not be in a position to carry on in the business in future.
- Marketing creates a relationship with the customer that makes them want to come back for more.

Why authors need to know about marketing

When an author signs a contract, one of the responsibilities assumed by the publisher is that of marketing the products they jointly create. Why then should the author need to know about what marketing is and how they can contribute?

The market has changed dramatically in the last twenty years. Twenty years ago the communication channels for telling people about new books were well established – the range of broadcast and printed media through which messages could be broadcast was relatively limited and most titles were sold through bookshops. Today there has been an explosion of media available and the ability to order anything at the click of a button, has undermined the traditional high street retail sales model.

Whereas in the 1980s it was possible to predict who would be watching a particular station or reading a specific interest magazine at any given time – and hence place associated advertising or public relations to reach that market – today the market is much harder to isolate. And confused by all this wealth of connectedness and possible activity, the reader increasingly looks for a trusted mediator to advise – to be able to identify the sorts of things they like and save them the trouble of a search themselves. This may be an online forum or a physical club they belong to, a commentator whose opinion they respect or a network which mirrors their own taste (e.g. Oprah Winfrey, Richard & Judy, Mariella Frostrup).

Given that each year in the UK alone over 130,000 new books and editions come out, and the wealth of magazines, television and radio stations and online entertainment is competing for their attention, many readers welcome help in navigating a path through all that is on offer.

All authors are likely to have a basic understanding of those to whom their work will appeal – and in the case of non-fiction authors, an appreciation of who can be relied upon to both enthuse about a product and convey important messages to other potential customers. Publishers are thus likely to want to access the organizations their authors belong to, their wider circles of family and friends, those who might provide a useful endorsement and so on.

How to come to terms with this

If you are still maintaining a resistance to getting involved with marketing, here are five reasons why it is important for authors to take part:

1) Precise information on sales is now available

Thirty years ago there was only imprecise information on how books were selling. Today most publishers have access to Nielsen BookScan, the database which records the precise number of titles sold through all manner of sales outlets (www.nielsenbookdata.co.uk). This has had a strong effect on writing careers, in that rather than allowing writers to build a profile and their sales to grow incrementally, there is now the evidence to analyse a writing career from its inception – and hence a strong temptation for publishers to look for quantifiable success from an author's first publication. Publishers used to talk about the 'breakthrough' book, after which sales really picked up. This process is getting increasingly truncated – so all the author can do to promote their titles is helpful.

2) Books sell at low prices and in short runs

It follows that there is seldom the money available for high profile advertising campaigns and mass market communication. Free advertising is however available through seeking interviews in the media, public relations (e.g. sending out a press release to the local papers informing readers that their book is to be published) and general discussion around the subject of a new book in public fora such as literary festivals and society talks, and the more the author is willing to take part in this, the better. It takes practice to be able to do this, but most of us improve.

3) Book selection takes time

A book is seldom an instant purchase, given that it has to appeal to the would-be purchaser and they have to be willing to invest time and attention through reading it – or just giving it house room through agreeing it is something they wish to be associated with. This complicated relationship needs time and the author's personality can often be a key draw to the product. The more the market hears about you, the more you may encourage them to give you their time.

4) The number of products on the market is enormous; getting noticed is difficult.

5) Everyone else is doing it

Watch the newspapers and keep an eye on the chat shows and you will see that whenever someone has a new book coming out they pop up all over the place; even famous authors that you might conclude have no need to pursue publicity now see it as part of the deal. It's getting harder and harder to be inscrutable and say 'my book says it all'.

And if you still find the whole process difficult, try this mantra:

"I am not pushing myself, I am simply making my work accessible. If people don't know of my writing, and it doesn't get read, my chances of remaining in print are slim indeed."

How to set about marketing your book

Publishers need information so if you have a publisher, fill out the Author's Publicity Form that you will be sent at the time of signing your contract (and if you don't get sent one, ask). It requests information on your contacts and networks. Fill it out in full detail and return a good six months before publication – because that is when they will be working on the marketing of your book. Providing this information at the time of publication is too late.

Try to distance yourself from your book and think about it as an object. How would you describe it to a third party; what kind of words would you use? This process may be best worked through with a friend, as writing puff for your own work is very difficult.

Make a list of:

- Societies you belong to which might include a mention of your book in a newsletter or on their website
- Local societies that might like to have you as a speaker to address them
- Friends or former business acquaintances who might read your work and provide an endorsement
- Relevant media that might review it (your publisher may not be familiar with every publication or online forum that you know of)
- Think hard about any names you could offer for those who might write an editorial feature, give your title a mention or provide a quotation in support of your book – your publishers may do the asking for you, if you feel awkward about it. Those you ask do not have to be famous, just believable (for example, teachers or parents for books for children; teenagers for titles aimed at them).

How to work with your publisher

Most publishing houses allocate time and resources to their range of products according to how well they think they may sell. Be aware that your book is one of many they will be promoting, so you will not have endless time and energy from them at your disposal. If you are at the beginning of your writing career, they will almost certainly have more time-consuming projects in hand. So, consolidate your requests. Don't keep ringing them up but put all your thoughts together in one place and send it in as a considered and well presented document. By all means seek a meeting to discuss but ensure you prepare well; remind yourself to listen out for clues on how they see your book and its market before you launch into a pitch on how it is sure to be a bestseller.

Nearer publication time, you will probably be contacted by the firm's publicist, who is responsible for seeking PR coverage in the media – these may range from websites and blogs, newsletters and zines (cheaply produced magazines) to mainstream television and radio. They will probably want you to come up with angles to show that the material in a new book, or its author, is newsworthy and interesting. What you consider most significant (the fact that it is being published at all) will not be news (lots of books get published all the time).

Top tip: Your publicist is not your PA and will not want to be responsible for setting up your wider business plan for which your new book is a stepping stone. An agent, on the other hand, may well be interested in discussing your wider and longer term objectives – it is part of what they invest in – but will probably still expect you to do the implementing.

How to write effective copy

Copy is the term used to refer to the words that describe a product or service in a marketing context. It is different from the text within the book being promoted. Copy seeks to make an immediate relationship with the market; all copy gets read in a hurry and so it has to spark an immediate relationship with the person reading it. It is likely to be:

- short
- impactful (words that resonate with the market)
- easy to read
- emotive
- offering a value statement – how a particular product will make you look, feel, appear rather than simply describing what it is

Copy is, in general, drafted by the publisher's marketing department, but as an author you may be asked to write, or comment on, a variety of different forms of copy, from book blurbs and website information to leaflets and emails.

The best way to prepare for writing effective copy is to read lots of it yourself – not just in publishers' catalogues and on websites but in other contexts. You could read the websites of other services you admire (clothes, shoes, furniture?) and consider the advertising on the packaging of products you like (sandwich and drink cartons?). Read the 'history of our organization/about us' section on websites and see how some companies draw the potential customer in by discussing information that interests both parties or provide value statements about what they represent in the hope that their potential customers will similarly identify.

Marketing copy works best when it is reassuring but slightly unexpected – we don't read what we think we already know – so look out for words that might entice without appearing odd. Again, packaging from products that appeal to a similar demographic to your own work might be a good source of inspiration. Look out for words that appear in newspaper headlines that might serve to draw the reader in. Consider too the parts of speech and how they might be used. Imperatives work well in copy because they serve to draw attention ('Look!' 'See!' 'Order now!')

How to build your confidence in marketing and copywriting

Try to distance yourself from the process; to see your book as a product that is being promoted by someone else. Think about an 'elevator pitch': what it is and how you would explain it simply to someone who was in a lift with you for a very short time. You will have time only for a summary of your title's overall interest, not a detailed exploration of the themes. You might have time to say – 'a fast-paced saga set in Victorian England following the rise of an illegitimate under-housemaid to mistress'; it's unlikely you could read them the first chapter (unless the lift got stuck).

It's worth practising this. Most authors want to have their voice heard, but find talking about themselves difficult (there seems to be a common combination amongst authors of big ego, low self-esteem) so developing your ability to provide key information quickly is of fundamental importance. The most common question asked by agents and publishers, whose interest is piqued by a potential new author, is 'what's it like?' and they are looking for a short description, linking what is on the market with your particular unique selling point ('like Bridget Jones' Diary but written by the man the protagonist is pursuing'). Bear in mind too that most publishers and agents have a shopping list for subjects they consider likely to find a market, and so if what you describe matches what they are seeking, your union may be swift and happy. Look through the shelves in your local bookshop and watch out for how publishing categories are described (thriller, true-life crime, black comedy, romance).

Spotting opportunities for marketing

These may be more prevalent than you think.

- Word of mouth is always the best marketing. Can you send a copy to a few people you think might then mention it to others? A conversation with the manager of a well known PR agency for books said she had a list of about 20 people to whom she would send a copy of a title she really wanted talked up – and she did not use the list too often.
- Can you ask friends to review your title on Amazon?
- Could you give a free copy to your local library with a request that they display it on the 'just arrived' table which all libraries use to show recent purchases?
- Could you offer a reading or to run a workshop for other local authors?
- Make a link with your local bookseller and ask if they might stock it (although the best way of managing this is through being a customer yourself – requests to stock when you are not a regular customer seldom go down well). Ask your publisher if you can have some 'reading copies' to hand out to booksellers to encourage them to stock your work (they can either read them or sell them, so they tend to be popular).
- Is there a local museum or heritage centre to which your work relates? Might they stock or display it?
- Also local literature or arts festivals? Writers' groups?
- Can you find out if there are any reading circles run by local libraries, bookshops or independently. They may choose your book if you are willing to go along and take part in a discussion about how and why you wrote it.

Online enthusiasm

This is becoming more and more important for the marketing of books. The skill for any writer is to use the medium of the internet without becoming so involved that they have no time left to do their writing.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- How should your work be classified for online sale? Most online selling sites have room for brief information only and if a title is wrongly classified it may never find its market. Your publisher may handle this for you, but as it generally has to be drafted before your manuscript is with your publisher, do ensure that you are both clear about what kind of book you are writing and they are preparing to publish. Alphabetical lists of the different genres are so easy to mistake (e.g. political/popular science). For guidance on how the book trade classifies work, look at the subject headings in your local bookshop. Be warned, these do change. My own work used to appear under 'Reference', but there is now a section in most shops called 'Creative Writing'.
- Should you write a blog or contribute to those run by other people? If you do the former, you have to manage the format and the editing, the latter means the appearance and editing (vital) are managed by someone else, but your profile is still promoted. Personally I think I am a writer who blogs from time to time, not the other way around. Others love the immediacy of the impact they tend to get from blogging and feel it is a furnace for their work. Just be clear which side of the fence you are on.
- Relevant websites – many now feature books and writing and a review copy sent to them may encourage them to feature your work. See the end of this guide for suggestions. Think too about having your own website and driving people to it through Twitter and links through your emails (adding it to your standard email 'signature' is a good way to spread the word).

Top marketing tips

Finally, here are five top tips for marketing yourself as a writer

1) Have a succinct description of yourself and your work ready to go

Be able to produce it quickly and seamlessly – without the recipient feeling as if they are being pinned against a wall and forced to listen. Practise delivery so that your touch is light and your tone engaged. This matters hugely – you will get asked and how you respond is of crucial importance.

2) Know how your work relates to what else is available

Most authors see their work in splendid isolation. It is the product of a single mind (theirs) and is different from anything else in existence. Potential investors such as publishers, agents, booksellers and readers are more likely to see it in the context of what else is available (and hence in print), selling (and hence for which there is demand) and what they have just read and enjoyed. It follows that they are thus more likely to be convinced by the merit of something that other investors have shown is a good prospect than something completely new or different. If there are no other competing titles, it may show that there is no competition – but it could also reveal that there is no market. To keep up-to-date on what else is being published, read, read the literary press/watch and listen to related programmes in the media and be a regular visitor to bookshops.

3) Think local

Marketing your work often starts with an effective approach to local buyers which builds the confidence of the would-be author. Think about local media (newspapers and radio stations) which might offer access to readers who are well disposed to think well of you because a local star enhances their understanding – and the desirability – of where they live.

4) Find endorsers

Whenever we are in a buying mode, it is likely that the opinion of those either we respect, or feel are credible witnesses, will influence our behaviour. Endorsements on books work, whether they signal to the potential reader that this is not a book for them, or encourage them to head straight for the cash desk/buy button.

Asking other people for endorsements, or a foreword, is not as tricky as it may at first seem. Of course, it is awkward making that initial contact, but think how flattered you would be if someone wanted your name on the front of their book. You are the supplicant but you are offering them further marketing and the chance to associate themselves with a product or an idea of which they may approve, without much corresponding effort on their part. A word of warning. If you are asking others to endorse you, it's important to allow them the option to say 'no' as well as 'yes'; and if they say 'no', to accept it with good grace (rather than trying to change their mind; which will really annoy).

5) Recruit encouragers

Writing is hard work and lonely, and writers are notoriously subject to feelings of rivalry. All writers need friends who can be relied upon to offer support, encouragement and, when you feel down, tea, cakes and sympathy.

Further reading

Websites about books and writing

www.dovegreyreader.typepad.com

www.writersandartists.co.uk

www.bookdepository.co.uk

www.novelkicks.co.uk

www.helpineedapublisher.blogspot.com

Trade information

www.bookbrunch.co.uk

The Bookseller and www.thebookseller.com

www.publishersweekly.com

www.booktrade.info

Books on publishing and book marketing

Baverstock, A. (2007, second edition) *Marketing your book, an author's guide* London, A&C Black

Baverstock, A. (2006) *Is there a book in you?* London, A&C Black

Baverstock, A. and Charley, C. (2000) *A short guide to marketing* London, Society of Authors (can be purchased by non-members)

Blake, C. (1999) *From pitch to publication* London, Macmillan

Clark, G. and Phillips, A (2008, second edition) *Inside book publishing* London, Routledge

Hamilton-Emery, C. (2006) *101 Ways to make poems sell: The Salt guide to getting and staying published* Cambridge, Salt Publishing

Legat, M. (1998), *An author's guide to publishing* London, Robert Hale

Good luck!

Alison Baverstock

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Appendix 1: Template for writing a press release

Bear in mind that most journalists receive many, many press releases every day – some still in print, often accompanying a book sent for review, but many more by email – and so to stand out, yours must be both easy and attractive to read, and contain interesting information. Your aim in sending a press release is usually one of two things:

- To encourage the journalist to use the information whole
- To prompt them to commission or write a feature on the author/book you are promoting.

For most authors, it is the publisher who drafts the press release, but if you are planning a promotional event of your own, and want to seek press coverage, here is a short guide to writing an effective press release.

Date (usually at the top of the page): Is your press release only available for use after a specific time (often publication date)? If you want all journalists to have the story to use on the same day, ensure you add this (although it may get ignored). The usual wording is: 'Embargoed until: 25 November 2010'

Headline (this comes next): Above all, this should be interesting, imparting news or key words that will make the recipient take notice. A book title is very seldom a headline. The headline should also be relevant to the media being targeted, so if it is going to local press, the particular location should be flagged here ('Kingston author speaks to the world').

If you are sending your press release by email, your 'title line' needs similar consideration. Don't just put the book title here; think of something more interesting (unless the title is very strong).

Main text: Keep it short and pithy, and bear in mind that you need to get started on the story straight away (and if the release is used whole, it will get cut from the bottom upwards to fit the space available). There is seldom time for a long introduction, get straight on with the story. Three paragraphs are plenty (and the release as a whole should be no longer than a single page). You are trying to get the recipient to feature your title or use your information to prompt purchase through the medium, not tell them the whole plot/content (in which case there would be no need to buy the book).

Interesting information (quizzes, quotations they can use to substantiate what they write without the bother or further research themselves, interesting anecdotes and statistics) make it more likely they will use your information.

Full contact information: It should be clear who is sending the information and how to get in touch with them. Provide an out of hours contact number and ensure that the information you provide is available on your website if you have one (along with more supporting detail) before your press release goes out.

Most press releases end 'for more information please contact...' so try to think of a more interesting option. 'The author of this book carried out a survey of the catering in UK museums and galleries. For tea in with her in a recommended venue, please contact...'

Appendix 2: The meaning of marketing, in more detail

Marketing is now part of the range of subjects taught at university – indeed courses in marketing have been one of the fastest growing in recent years – but there is no complete agreement amongst marketing theoreticians about what marketing means.

Marketing is often thought of as the media through which it is effected – so perhaps as a checklist of advertising, leaflets, public relations and publicity. Rather, marketing is an approach to presenting a product to those who might want or need to know about it; the positioning of a product so that its constituency of natural customers (and anyone else likely to be interested) both know about it and want to buy or own it. Effective marketing requires a complicated juggling of possibilities, everything from the words used to describe it, the colours in which the message is presented and the people who handle the sale.

There have been many attempts to summarise the nature and practice of marketing through snappy summaries, and one of the most useful is the theory of Ps: product, price, promotion, place. Thus marketing involves considering the nature of the product or service to be offered to the public; the price at which it will be most attractive and sustainable within the market; the nature of the promotion through which information will be circulated (radio or television advertising, door to door leaflets etc.) and the place through which it should be offered (e.g. online, retail outlets from small shops to supermarkets). To these, other Ps can be added such as period of time over which the product will be made available (limited short term offer or sustained campaign); personnel (who will do the selling as this will have an impact on how it is perceived) and profit, without which a business cannot continue to offer a product or service (unless it is receiving external funding).

Whereas these questions are constants, how marketing is effected changes all the time. Marketing seeks to create awareness and desire to own and this is best achieved through elements of surprise and interest. Thus creative copywriting campaigns and interesting promotions seek to draw the potential customer in and persuade them to buy. There are books on elements of marketing that you might like to study, and a browse around the Museum of brands, packaging and advertising (www.museumofbrands.com) in London will show that while marketers seek to preserve the essential nature of a product or service so that it is recognisable to its market, they have always surrounded it with attempts to get short term appeal through promotions, interesting descriptions, product placements and public relations activity.