

## The truth about publishers' marketing campaigns

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If you've seen that under-rated Tom Cruise film *Jerry Maguire*, you'll remember our eponymous hero, an amoral sports agent, wakes up in a sweat one night while attending a conference to find he's developed a conscience. For the next few hours, he sets about composing a manifesto of how his narcissistic, exploitative world could be a better place, and how sports agents, those quintessential marketers, could actually operate within it with some integrity. Three days after he's delivered his freshly typed-up, lovingly photocopied mission statement to every delegate, he's fired – for breaking the code of honour amongst his fellow operators ( the code of honour that might exist today amongst those who, whilst despising the war in Iraq, respect the marketers at Sony who'd copyrighted Shock and Awe for a forthcoming shoot-'em-up PlayStation game within days of hostilities starting ).

Without being too portentous, I do feel a little like Jerry. This article is called *The Shocking Truth* because it is one thing no one associates with anything to do with marketing. Even good old polite and cuddly book marketing. I've worked in the book industry for 13 years, during which time the very term marketing has mutated in meaning. Once it signified bookshop posters, local author showcards, special order forms for the reps and headers for dumpbins (those free-standing, slightly sagging cardboard objects filled with face-out copies of the latest paperbacks which littered bookshops up and down the land until retail research showed how browsers hate tripping over them). Or small badly reproduced black and white advertisements in the *Daily Telegraph*. Or it was simply another word for PR. Now it apparently signifies how much a publisher loves an author and how creative and different they are being about telling bookshops and readers the book actually exists.

### We are all more marketing literate

As we all know, the world today is generally more sophisticated at reading cultural signs, so placing greater pressure than ever on the marketing teams within publishers to have as many of their books – or dare I say products – as possible heard amongst the daily white noise babble of every available entertainment and information medium, or seen at the front of a shop on a table facing up rather than a mere spine-out on a shelf at the back.

Publishers are rightly obsessed with conveying how every book is unique whilst at the same time wanting to send as many comforting familiar positioning signals as possible via the format, cover design and copy, the advertising shout-line and quotes. This leaves us ever more open to accusations of pigeonholing and relying on over-simplistic hype. (Hype. The most feared and revered word in the marketing lexicon. We smiled when I worked at Penguin at the idea that somehow we had hyped Zadie Smith and her remarkable first novel *White Teeth*; that it was the publisher who had the power to

manipulate the media and turn that sort of publicity and awareness on and off like a tap. If only. No. Everything about the success of *White Teeth* was down to an extraordinary author, her extraordinary first book and the extraordinary reaction to it. And great timing.)

### What does book marketing mean now?

If I were cutting to the chase, I might say that, like many commodities, our marketing often comes down to how the publisher or retailer decides to position the price of a book for the consumer. Is it £2 off or 2 for £10 or 3 for the price of 2? However, broadly speaking, marketing activity is still centred around the three periods of pre-publication/sell-in, on publication in-store and post-publication sell-out. Obviously this represents many months in the life of the book.

Sell-in is about the positioning of the book through the copy on the cover or in a sales presenter and AI (author information sheet). All publishers and retailers need some distilled version of every book because (deep breath) not everyone in the lengthy food chain of this process will have time to read every line of every one. Certainly not the underpaid and overworked bookseller who has to make decisions on what and how many to buy. Of course that *doesn't* mean we don't care and know what we're doing. Then there is the proposed advertising or promotional campaign (if there is one), the process of being clear to everyone – reps, book shop buyers, key account selling team, author, agent – about what your plans are for when the book is actually published and out there fending for itself.

There are always interesting developments and refinements in this area too. For HarperCollins' Flamingo imprint we've created response cards, which go out with certain proof mailings to booksellers encouraging their reaction to a book or an author and allowing us to create an on-going dialogue with them through a database.

On publication, as much as the marketing team might want to be concentrating on initiatives at local bookshop level, this is now largely driven by reps or through trade wholesalers. At HarperCollins, ten retailers drive almost 70% of our trade business. That concentrates the mind when allocating marketing time and resource. When a book is published the reality is that we all have to ensure that we have achieved as great a breadth of physical distribution as possible and that the book has been afforded the maximum exposure and opportunity to actually be purchased. Where spend was previously focussed on publisher produced point-of-sale (posters, competition leaflets, book marks, postcards, samplers) this has been reduced drastically and replaced by contributions towards retailer produced equivalents supporting their in-store communication and offers.

Then it is for the marketers to concentrate on how best to try and sell the book out of the shops, to add to the awareness

created by the publicists through the efforts of the author themselves or of the reviews. This means money either for featuring in something like a summer reading multi-buy promotion (buying space by any other name) or for advertising. It is a snake pit of difficulties because every piece of consumer research worth its salt suggests that it is pointless raising awareness 'above the line' unless you are either targeting very specifically the (particularly non-fiction) niche market or you are spending sufficiently really to alert fans or attract new recruits.

## The people

The best marketers are often the bridge between editorial (the initial conduit) and sales (the external, customer facing team); the glue in an increasingly (thank heavens) joined-up process of publishing. What they actually do during these three phases includes copywriting (sales presenters, ads, jacket copy), designing (posters, proof jackets, catalogues) and liaising with book retailers over the best promotional vehicles in their stores and how much they will cost. Depending on the area of publishing and the size of the budget, it could be creating direct marketing mail shots or emails to targeted niche potential markets or booking nationwide outdoor poster campaigns for the bigger releases. It might even bear a slightly greater resemblance to marketing within other industries and organisations i.e. analysing trends, using relevant qualitative and quantitative consumer research in a meaningful way to plan campaigns and strategies. But not much. Not yet.

Above all, real quantifiable marketing still begins with the rather old-fashioned notion that, although we know intellectually it is impossible to artificially manufacture word of mouth - that most potent selling tool in the business - what could ultimately make a difference is the buzz, the thrill of the new discovery, the desire to tell as many people as will listen what a new pre-publication book proof means to you, how it has made you feel. The best marketing departments are quite simply full of good, bright people who are passionate about books and who love proselytizing about them in as creative a way as possible.

## A few myths and misconceptions

*The accountants make sure that there is a direct correlation between marketing spend and the size of the author advance*

Allocation of marketing spend in publishing starts as it does in any business, as the calculation of an overall percentage of projected turnover. When a book is originally acquired, an estimate is given of what might be required to achieve a certain level of sales. After that the fun really begins. In my experience a judgement call is then usually made by a combination of publisher, and the heads of marketing and sales, within the finite overall marketing budget. Although it would be naïve to assume that, if a heated auction has led to a large advance, any publisher wouldn't want to recoup that by investing in an appropriate level of spend, no starch-collared bean counter I've worked with has ever created a template for what should be

spent. If there is a criteria or a definition, it is that marketing allocation is the sensible use of finite resources in a way that experienced people think will actually make a difference.

*Marketing is dictated by the demands of the retail chains*

Probably the biggest change in the world of marketing books in the last decade has been the shift in emphasis from publisher-controlled expenditure to that which is used to position and promote books through the retail bookselling chains and supermarkets; or co-op. Or bribery. I would question everything that implies. That somehow a publisher has strong-armed a retailer into supporting a book to which they otherwise wouldn't offer house-room. All that has really happened is a movement towards more measurable and quantifiable ways of publishers spending money to support the publications they have invested in. As long as both publisher and retailer are in greater control of the bangs for their bucks, less will be down to luck and happenstance.

*All I wanted was one measly ad!*

A curse on your house. Multiply this by a hundred of your soul-mates and we have no budget to make any difference on any campaign ever... Are you sure this isn't just because you want to say to your friends that your publisher really cares? There are other more cost effective and potent ways for us to show this.

*Nobody does any real marketing anyway because we don't have the money*

Certainly there is no equivalent spend to the film or music CD or even video/DVD launches which enables mass awareness through advertising and in-store promotions. But some of the best marketing involves crafting cover copy, lovingly creating the artwork for the covers themselves, a proof placed in the right hands. Analyse any research into why people actually choose one book over another and in amongst the influence of reviews or recommendations from friends comes the carefully chosen synopsis or selling copy on the back cover. Higher than advertising usually.

*But you promised...*

I'm sorry. I got carried away. All I meant to do was to express undying love and passion and commitment for that new book or series of books. Whether it is the original pitch document or the eventual final marketing plan. Once, my boss and I were crafting a marketing plan pitching for a book and we promised we'd build a bridge between two poster sites on the A4 in London on the Cromwell Road. We got the book. We didn't build the bridge. So sue me for having a fertile imagination.

*It's about the book stupid*

And it is. Which is wonderful. No matter what your publisher's marketing Svengali might suggest. Brilliantly, expensively marketed books fail all the time. And million sellers start without a budgetary bean against their names (come on down, *Captain Corelli...*).

During the last decade, book publisher and retailer

marketing has become more professional, more quantifiable, and has established its position as one of the most vital and misunderstood disciplines within our business. If as an author you have been marketed well, it can be perceived as the difference between success and failure. If you haven't, it is an opportunity missed for that laser-targeted communication strategy. And worse, it means lost sales and the postponement of world author-as-brand domination. But we are still a pretty creative lot with relatively limited resources in an increasingly time-poor, low attention span world. And we really care. That is the shocking truth. Honest.

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