

GUIDE TO PUBLICITY AND MARKETING 2023



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1 There are no easy solutions

Marketing essentially means paid promotion. Publicity is promotion takes advantage of the fact that a work has attracted some attention (e.g. the author being invited to speak at a festival). They are, notoriously and universally, the most challenging (many would say impossible) areas of publishing. By far the most effective form of promotion is genuine independent endorsement and word-of-mouth. To quote the publicist at one the UK's biggest publishers: authors should realise that *any* publicity achieved is a major plus; this is a small market being chased by very many books.

2 Help your book to speak for itself

Metadata

Whenever anyone asks you to submit information about your book (especially if the request is from a publisher, retailer, wholesaler or distributor): this is your chance to influence its discoverability.

'Metadata' is the machine-readable information about your book. It influences whether your work will come up if a retailer or anyone else is searching online. The metadata embedded in an ISBN is what retailers rely on for a work's title, author(s), format, edition, price, and – crucially – from where copies can be ordered. Amazon relies on the categories embedded in the metadata when compiling its bestseller rankings and when flagging up that a work is part of a series with links to those other titles. Metadata can also include keywords so the work comes up when people are searching for those words online. For example, keywords for *Northanger Abbey* could include *Bath* and *young adult fiction* as well as *historical romance*. Keywords can be subjective ('a cross between Stephen King and Beatrix Potter'). Try to be consistent in your use of the keywords but keep refining them as appropriate – an obvious example being if you are shortlisted for a prize.

Basic ISBN metadata:

https://www.editeur.org/files/pdfs/BIC%20Bites%20Introduction%20to%20BIC%20Basic%20Metadata_FINAL.pdf

Enhanced ISBN metadata: <https://www.nielsenisbnstore.com/Home/EnhancedServices>

Amazon metadata: [Ebook metadata](#) and [Paperback metadata](#).

The cover

Book covers and the blurb are a work's built-in advertising poster. Publishers insist on having the final say on the grounds that it is their business to know the market, but such matters are subjective and they should take account of your views (ask for the right to be consulted on the cover and blurb to be included in your publishing contract). If you are self-publishing: try not to think what cover might

most satisfy you but what is most likely to attract your target readers. Browse the relevant section of a bookshop or library to have a sense of what seems to be selling well in your genre.

Your next book

Especially when it comes to genre fiction, building a list can be a good way of attracting readers who have liked your previous books. And each time a new title comes out, you can take the opportunity to remind readers of the previous ones.

3 Promotion from your publisher

What the best publishers do for the biggest authors – and useful information for what you might do yourself

A publisher's *marketing* team handles paid-for activity like print or digital advertising, in-store and online promotions. Their involvement is generally in the weeks after publication. Their activity will be largely determined by the work's metadata (and they should ensure that online copy includes the best keywords) and will make what use it can of any contacts you may have, notably a social media following.

A publisher's *publicist's* job is to get the word out about the book - principally in the weeks up to and around first publication. They should deal with potential reviewers (in all media, including bloggers), events with bookshops and festivals. Publicity might start as early as a year before publication and pretty much stops on publication other than reacting to demand. Publicity should alert the sales team if e.g. there's been a media or social media stir about a book not yet published and the sales team should then alert bookshops. In such event publicity should also alert journalists, producers and festivals which have previously shown tentative interest.

The publicity department is likely to have an annual budget which is allocated depending on what's on the publisher's list and will change depending on circumstances. Focusing on lead titles and things like flying in a US celebrity are likely to be priorities.

Do you have personal stuff the publisher can use as a hook for promotion? If it's sensitive, for example a bereavement, they should treat the material with care and if needs be supply a media trainer. Be confident raising special needs. The industry is fundamentally kind.

What more often happens

Your publisher should welcome publicity suggestions, such as suitable recipients for review copies. However, the reality is that most books receive very little by way of promotion from the publisher; and those for which the publisher has not laid out any significant sum receive the least. Be wary of mistaking vague undertakings for promises. Ask for a marketing plan and, in appropriate cases, a guaranteed marketing spend. Ask whether it would be useful for you to meet the publicity department and/or sales reps.

Publishers will expect you to do a great deal of the publicity for the work. Contracts often stipulate that you will, if asked, participate in a certain amount of promotional work, in which case the publisher should pay your reasonable expenses (travel, accommodation, etc) for any appearances. Limit obligations about the amount of blogging or other social-media activity you are expected to do to fit with your abilities and ensure they are for a finite period of time around first publication. Beware requirements that you write promotional articles and web-copy for no payment. You want to do your best for your own book – but don't end up being contractually obliged to do things, for free, which are outside your comfort zone, which make unreasonable demands on your time, or which the publisher should itself be doing in-house.

4 Paying for promotion

Paid-for advertising and sponsorship

Advertising can be in the hope of securing sales, or just a way of increasing awareness of your work. Use your judgement about what advertising is likely to be worth it, and focus on the outlets most likely to be seen by your target readers (be it FaceBook or Saga Magazine. And for advertising on Amazon, see advertising.amazon.co.uk).

Online advertising is useful because it can be reactive in response to things like a topic becoming newsworthy.

When it comes to sponsorship, think outside the box: <https://www.peterjames.com/the-official-peter-james-police-car/>.

Paid-for publicity and marketing

Beware of the danger of scams and false or misleading promises – see the SoA guidance on *scams*, and the *paid-for services* section of our website.

Reviewers and retailers are less likely to be persuaded by paid-for publicity – they will suspect that it may not be genuinely spontaneous third-party endorsement of the work, and they can generally recognise the imprints of author-pays publishers.

Likewise social media activity has to be authentic; the audience can spot the difference. That is why BookTok is so successful: it consists of genuine reader responses without nudges, bribes or anything like that from publishers or publicists.

The value of even high grade paid-for publicity and marketing is questionable.

If you are considering an author-pays publishing contract which offers publicity and marketing as one of the things you are paying for: scrutinise the fine-print and be sure you are getting value for money. It is very rare that, when you look closely, there are any specific commitments. Instead, there are likely to be vague promises that, for instance, you will be sent a bundle of fliers (how useful is that?), and that publicity ‘*might* include XYZ’ but is entirely at the publisher’s discretion.

Feedback from writers is that the cost of engaging a PR agent may well significantly exceed the income likely to be generated by sales of the book. Indeed, we are told that most PR companies are unwilling to take on self-publishers.

5 High-street bookshops

Bookshops cater for their specific readership and will be selective on that basis. They have very limited space for books, very narrow profit margins, and limited staff and resources. Contacting a local bookshop or one which focuses on your subject-area (the Travel Bookshop, for instance) may well be productive; not so random mail-shots or cold-calling in person.

6 Online bookshops

6(a) Amazon

If you are conventionally published, some of these activities will need to be coordinated with or be under the control of your publisher.

Your Amazon Author Page

You can (at no charge) use Author Central (authorcentral.amazon.co.uk) to set up your Author Page. You can ensure that all your books are listed, upload photos and videos, give details of forthcoming events. Your Author Page is, in effect, your author homepage on Amazon and you can link to it from your own website and social media channels. For more about managing your Author Page profile, [click here](#).

Amazon could be considered the world's biggest shop window for books. You have nothing to lose by making the best of your Author Page. Have fun with it. Keep it up to date and make it as appealing to visitors as possible.

The Amazon 'Follow' button

The Follow button allows your fans to add you to their list of favourite authors and thereby receive emails from Amazon about your new books as they become available. Your followers are also more likely to see your new releases while browsing on Amazon. Feedback from members is that this can have a noticeable effect on sales. For more, [click here](#).

Amazon customer reviews

You can see a report of all the Amazon customer reviews of your books, sorted by date, rating and title using Author Central (authorcentral.amazon.co.uk).

Amazon sales ranks

Author Central reports on the sales rank of your books, updated on an hourly basis to show the day's trend. You can compare details for each of your titles in the past and now, across the various formats and retail prices in which your book is available.

Sales Ranks are based on your book relative to the activity of other books on Amazon by category (be sure to include all the categories you can in the metadata you send Amazon, see point 2. A book ranking #1 in Romance is the book with the most activity in Amazon's Romance category. Rankings are relative: so even if your book's level of activity stays the same, its rank might improve if other books see a decrease in activity, or might drop if other books see an increase in activity. Be aware that rankings can be misleading. They do not necessarily equate to sales.

Amazon Product Pages

The Product Page is designed to provide customers with all the information they may need when deciding to buy a product. For books, it will include information about all the formats that a book is available. (Alongside the copies that Amazon sells itself, the Product Page also lists 'new and used' copies that are available from third-party sellers (second-hand copies, remainders...))

Let your publisher know if the information on the Product Page is inaccurate. If you self-publish with Amazon, information on submitting book details can be found [here](#).

Kindle Unlimited

Reading ebooks via subscription services such as Amazon's [Kindle Unlimited](#) has become a significant way for readers to discover new authors and titles and to read more of their favourite author's work. This is particularly the case with genre fiction. (Amazon pays the rights holder on a per-page-read basis.) You can ask your publisher whether your works are available for Kindle Unlimited. If you self-publish with Amazon, see more at [KDP Select](#).

6(b) Other online bookselling and book discovery sites

6(b)(i) Bookshop.org: <https://uk-support.bookshop.org/en/support/solutions/65000104816>

For books to be sold by Bookshop.org they need to have an ISBN and to be supplied by Gardners.

The site includes Author Affiliate pages where you can upload your profile and other content (and you will receive 10% commission if someone buys a book you've shared). The Affiliate page is in development and will include things like a dashboard showing the number of visits to your page and sales. There is also a Writers Recommend section which again can generate both commission and publicity.

A link to bookshop.org can be effective for raising your profile with shoppers and independent booksellers; there is a newsletter which can give buyers a sense of engagement with the author; and Bookshop.org is also building relations with BookTok.

6(b)(ii): **Litalist** is a UK built platform designed to help readers make recommendations, discover more books for themselves and to help everyone buy books locally and ethically. <https://www.litalist.com/>

6(b)(iii): **Shepherd-Browse** is a UK site offers something very similar. <https://shepherd.com/>

6(b)(iv): **BookBub** does not sell books, but you can upload books and they will be reviewed by real people – the idea being that it helps readers discover books. <https://www.bookbub.com/welcome>

6(b)(v): **Smashwords** is a US site which does not pay authors and offers ebooks for free. Some feel it's a way to raise their and their books' profile. <https://www.smashwords.com/>

7 Speaking opportunities and appearances

Your local bookshop might host an event or a signing for you, as a local author (whether or not they are willing to stock your book more generally)? If not you on your own, perhaps as part of a group of other local authors? The audience is likely to be small and the fee modest (if there is a fee) but you may feel it's worth it nevertheless. Win just one new fan and they tell their friends... Even if the event is cancelled, if there were fliers they have raised the profile of your name and book a little. Focus on independent bookshops.

Smaller festivals can be good for including less well-established authors, and for reaching new and different readers.

Big festivals tend to be preaching to the converted. If you are a big name, weigh up who really benefits – the festival or you? Might you be better off doing a single big one-off event of some sort. If you are not a big enough name to secure a slot at a festival, the organisers might be happy to host an event or allocate a space for a gathering of e.g. local authors; or to pair you with a big name. Or if you have the training/expertise, might you be able to moderate/chair an event?

For non-fiction authors in particular: consider talks to the audiences such as the U3A, WI, local history and special interest groups. Though you may well be paid little more than your travel expenses.

Children's writers will want to consider school visits; poets: performances and open mic events. If you are focusing on the educational market: schools will be focusing their very limited budgets on core texts. You might want to consider attending education conferences.

Giving talks to commercial companies, direct or via lecture agencies. Key points are to have a book to your name (which establishes your credentials) and good metadata so when companies are searching online for speakers, your name comes up.

Cruise-ship tour operators engage lecturers - though the audience may be limited and the remuneration may well be no more than going on the cruise.

Consider podcasts, pay-to-view webinars, YouTube videos. See *Social Media* below.

For more information on events, including payment, contact the SoA.

8 Newspapers, radio and TV

Local opportunities

Exploit all local connections: bookshops, local radio and TV, local papers.

Highlight your and/or your book's link to the area, and remember that journalists and broadcasters will rarely have the time or inclination to look at your book, but are hungry for content and always on the lookout for a good story. You are unlikely to be paid for such appearances. Find out in advance how long the slot will be and whether the interview will be live or pre-recorded. Try not to imagine the audience, concentrate on the conversation you are having with the interviewer.

National opportunities

Newspaper reviews can have a tangible impact on sales. However, most of the advertising on which newspapers traditionally relied has migrated to the internet, and the substantial reduction in space given to book reviews and serialisations in the last few years is largely related to the drop in the amount book publishers spend on advertising. Coverage of new books is likely to be limited to only the biggest authors and most headline-grabbing new publications.

Interviews, features and ‘talking heads’

Consider the opportunities to be a ‘talking head’ on programmes like Start the Week, Midweek, and TV documentaries. Judicious use of keywords may lead content-hungry producers’ research assistants to your door.

Beware producers and research assistants who ring you for your expertise but do not ask you to appear on the programme or guarantee to credit you and your book. Ask early on whether you will be on the programme and what credit you will get. Show willing, but do not waste time giving valuable information for no return.

Especially for non-fiction authors: consider writing placed articles for a newspaper or magazine which will credit you and your book, even if you do not receive a fee. Instead, think what that amount of space would cost if it were a paid advertisement.

Maybe give an interview. Again, even if you are not paid, it can be valuable promotion for you and your book. Remember that interviewers will rarely have read the book so you (or your publisher’s publicist) will want to feed them key story points, questions to ask. Again, if it is for broadcast rather than print media, find out in advance how long the slot will be and whether the interview will be live or pre-recorded. See if you can be sent questions in advance.

If you are called by a journalist and want to be sure you will be quoted accurately, ask for the discussion to be moved from the phone to email, or – if you trust them – press for an unequivocal assurance that any comments attributed to you will be checked with you before publication.

9 Your online presence and social media

A website

Even if you don’t have a website you probably do have some presence online: your publisher or agent’s website, an Author Page on Amazon and/or Goodreads, a FaceBook, Twitter or other social media platform account.

Treat one of them as your ‘home’ online and ensure it has all the basic information about you, to books, news that might interest your readership (or potential agents/publishers). Keep the information there up to date, and link back to it as much as possible, including a link in your email signature so anyone you email can find you online. Google yourself and take a brief look at the first few results that come up. If there was anything off-putting, improve it.

There’s no such thing as accidentally stumbling upon anything online; there is a giant web of algorithms binding everything together. Add links between your online profiles - it helps search engines to recognise that all of them are you, and that you are active online.

Blogging and blogsites

For specialist non-fiction authors blogging can be very effective for getting yourself known; and consider asking for contributions from any contacts you may have who have an established audience of their own. But you need to keep it going; the odd blog just every now and then will not impress.

Book bloggers are powerful – and some go on to become reviewers for the national press. But authors and publishers tell us that blog tours are very time-consuming for all involved. You might do better to ‘like’ any nice review of your book from a blogger – that will go down well.

Goodreads is a reader blogsite (owned by Amazon). You can set up an author profile on Goodreads where you can also see reader feedback and author-generated advice. (Create a Goodreads account, call up the book(s) you’ve written, from there page click on your name, ‘claim’ your Author profile,

watch for the confirmation email that signals you've been upgraded to an Author account, customise your Author page.) Blogs for 'authors and advertisers' on Goodreads can be found at https://www.goodreads.com/news?content_type=author_blogs. Goodreads Giveaways (you offer to give away a certain number of copies of your ebook on Goodreads; readers sign up on the Goodreads website; once the giveaway ends, the winners are chosen at random) can be worth considering if you are targeting a North American readership.

Other social media

If you have a strong online following: If you have a social media following, that can be invaluable. Indeed it is one of the questions a potential publisher is most likely to ask you. If you have a good following, that can be a strong negotiating tool for securing improved terms. It can also beg the question: do you actually need a publisher (if you are being offered poor terms, or you are asked for payment) or is it worth considering self-publishing?

Crowd-funding: an online search will bring up a number of crowd-funding platforms – for example Kickstarter. The theory is that readers are willing to fund your next book in return for intimate access to the process of creating it as well as exclusive goodies available at various pledge levels. Rewards for giving money could be e.g. a copy of the book (signed or unsigned), an author visit, an acknowledgement in the book, personalised thank you cards.

To succeed, you need to have a wide reach into your target community or a concept which is catchy enough. Remember that a fundraising campaign is a great deal of work, and even if you have an established fan-base it does not necessarily translate into sponsorship.

Posting comments on social media: what social media you choose to engage with is up to you. Remember that social media users are very good at spotting authors who are only in it to promote their books - BookTok is so successful primarily because it consists of genuine reader responses.

Take what you read on social media with a pinch of salt; some people wrongly generalise from a personal experience. Others seem to relish posting spiteful and toxic comments. The SoA has guidance on dealing with trolls.

Online reviews: there are sites which will review appropriate books, but you are likely to be asked to pay to secure a review. And remember that the review could be negative.

It is best not to respond to reviews of your books beyond sharing the occasional positive one with a friendly note. Talking to readers is good, but be courteous, professional and good-humoured. If a review upsets you, it is generally best to keep your distance and ignore it.

Amazon review guidelines: see

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html?nodeId=201929730>

Online advertising: focused advertising on the social media platforms likely to be used by your target readers can be valuable.

10 Miscellaneous

Using your personal contacts

Data protection law means you must be very careful how you deal with any contact data (e.g. email addresses) – you cannot use or share people's personal details in ways to which that person has not consented. And you can encourage readers to leave reviews on retailers' websites but be mindful of Amazon's review guidelines on solicitations (other sites are likely to have similar guidelines) at <https://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html?nodeId=201929730>

Press Releases

Target your approach and be clear about why your title might be of interest to that publication, reviewer or bookseller. If a mailshot is generalised... consider: what do you do with unsolicited material dropped through your letter-box?

Book launches

Launches are not a significant way of publicising the work or selling copies, and guests – even more so journalists – are likely to come only if it's nearby with good refreshments. Treat a book launch as a party for friends, relatives, and those you want to thank. It would be very rare for a publisher to organise a book launch though they might be willing to make a contribution to the cost and to attend (with luck, with some copies of your book to sell).

Stated publication dates often slip; better a belated launch with books than an early one with no books. And if your launch will be held at a bookshop, be clear about who will be bringing along copies of your book. Will the publisher send them; should the bookshop order them in; or will you be responsible for arranging them?

As well as inviting friends and family, invite the relevant people from any organisations which may be related to your work's topic. Even if they don't come, the invitation will act as publicity.

Publishers' proof-drops

Proof-drops to bookshops was a 'thing' in 2022 but has probably been overdone. Proof-drops for a festival might still happen. The proof copies are given away, not sold; it is about raising awareness (not unlike Goodreads Giveaways – see point 9).

Artificial intelligence

Be careful that anyone whose services you engage protects your identity and your work from being accessed by generative AI without your consent. For more, see the SoA's guide to AI.