

Linda F. Radke's Promote Like a Pro: Small Budget, Big Show gives small-press publishers a guide on how to market their books — without breaking the bank!

Linda F. Radke's Promote Like a Pro: Small Budget, Big Show

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*Linda F. Radke's*

# **Promote Like a Pro**

**Small Budget, Big Show**

Written by  
Linda F. Radke  
and contributors

Edited by  
Salvatore Caputo

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**Linda F. Radke's Promote Like a Pro: Small Budget, Big Show**

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The print media—newspapers and magazines—are the most traditional tools in building a publicity campaign. Salvatore Caputo, a veteran newspaper journalist, discusses how to get around the major obstacles that can stop your pitch from getting newspaper coverage.

## Getting Ink in Newspapers

By Salvatore Caputo

I spent many of my 21 years in the newspaper business as the target of publicity pitches. Some worked and got ink in the paper. The vast majority didn't. Why?

Many publicity people, neophyte self-promoters and seasoned public relations professionals alike, showed little or no understanding of the mechanics that drove our coverage. They seemed bent on a vicious deforestation campaign, wasting paper in a hopeless shotgun publicity approach: spray every moving target and you're bound to hit something!

That's not a formula for success. Many reporters and editors have thrown out piles of unsolicited publicity pitches without even opening the envelopes because one look at the return address told them the pitch would be inappropriate.

Your goal is to get these news professionals to at least open your envelope, and that means clearly defining your goals. Why are you pitching to this particular newspaper? Where does potential publicity from this newspaper fit into your plans? Who at this newspaper would be most receptive to your pitch? When you can

answer each of these questions in a simple sentence, then it's time to make your move.

## **Space is Precious**

When making a pitch, remember that editors and reporters aren't committed to you, but to their readers. They want to bring useful and interesting information and stories to their audience. Your job is to persuade them that their readers are your target audience, and that what you're selling will be of interest to those readers.

This is crucial because of the space limitations of newspapers. I watched our book-review editor tear her hair out as she attempted to decide which books would make the cut for the limited space that we had to devote to them.

Our paper published three to four full-size book reviews on one Sunday newspaper page. Simple math tells us that if 50,000 books are published each year, we reviewed a meager percentage of them. For the most part, we did not even have a staff reviewer. Staffers, me included, contributed reviews on an occasional basis, but most of the reviews came from other newspapers through our wire services.

Another two columns of space featured mini-reviews of another dozen or so books, but that didn't mine that mountain of books very deeply either. In one of our weekday editions, there was an occasional column reviewing children's books. Blurbs about health books appeared in the weekly health section. The garden writer would make a rare mention of a few gardening books, and other specialists who covered travel, sports, business, art, and music (among others) also would look at books that fit into their beats. (All of these specialists represent targets for pitches, if your book or other product fits into one of their realms.)

With so little space, the emphasis was on books that we thought would appeal to a cross section of readers. That meant things we thought would be "sure things" or as close as we could get to them. Things that, in a lot of ways, didn't *need* publicity. Tom

Clancy? Stephen King? Sure! And any big celebrity book that came along. You'll be competing against those guys just as hard for newspaper space as you will for shelf space in the bookstores, because most editors will try to mentally gauge the amount of buzz that will surround each book. The biggest buzz gets the biggest play, or presentation, in the newspaper.

This doesn't mean we didn't publish reviews of books by first-time authors, but they were few and quite often came from a major book publisher. The major publishers don't like to make risky moves. They carefully choose projects that they believe will give them a good return on their investment. To us at the newspaper, that guaranteed that there'd be at least some initial interest in each project they put out. Even a book that was lambasted by the reviewer would be something that people wanted to read about, because they'd already heard about it.

Even so, all the major publishers' projects didn't get covered in the paper.

This is a major daily newspaper with a growing circulation. The Sunday paper routinely tops 600,000 circulation. If it's so tight on space for books, what chance does a self-promoting book author or publisher have?

## **Prepare for Success**

Sure, you need to have thick skin and be prepared for rejection. However, the situation is far from hopeless. Remember that reviews and book pages are only the most obvious way to publicize your book. For instance, you can almost always get calendar listings for speaking engagements or book-signings that arise from your book (again, on a space-available basis, but generally speaking, because calendar items are short, the space is available more often than not).

The right preparation will help maximize the chances of getting ink in a newspaper. Remember that newspaper editors are busy,

busy, busy. You can attribute part of this to disorganization if you'd like, but the major culprit is the corporate determination to improve the productivity of every employee. Our book editor didn't just handle books. She edited the movie section, television section, and other entertainment coverage. Books, however important they might have been to her personally, had to be handled efficiently and as effortlessly as possible.

Keep that in mind when planning your publicity effort. Get to the point quickly in press releases. Put the most important information—title, author's name, publication date—near the top of press releases, and make sure every piece of paper (and any photos and cover reproductions) has your name and contact information on it. Doing so will make it that much easier for the editor to find the information when the time comes.

When you do your follow-up calls on your mailings (editors will hate me for saying this, but you *must* do follow-up calls or you'll never know if the appropriate person even got your mailing), approach editors politely in a businesslike fashion. Rehearse your follow-up calls before you make them. Keep them short and to the point, but don't be a robot. It's OK to have a personality, and the editor will appreciate it as long as you don't waste time. Always ask whether the editor is on deadline.

After you've made your pitch, if they say "no" firmly, don't push. Just thank them for their time and say, "Good-bye." If they seem less than firm, you can try to engage them in more conversation to find out whether it's a firm "no" or a "maybe." Many editors feel guilty turning you down if your story is even remotely newsworthy.

Be persistent, but don't be pesky. Try to get a firm commitment of when you should call back to make any subsequent follow-up calls. Then, be sure to call at that time. If another follow-up call is necessary, wait at least five working days before calling again (unless you've got a very timely angle that needs to be worked more quickly—such as an impending press conference).

## **Big Angles for Big Papers**

Don't approach a metropolitan daily immediately, unless you live in the newspaper's coverage area and can exploit the hometown angle. If you can get a clipping from a major daily in your hometown, that's very useful in building credibility and allows you to skip some steps in the plan I'm about to outline.

A major daily will not buy the hometown angle alone. It has to be coupled with some other distinguishing factor. Is this book timely? Don't publish a guide to vacationing in Phoenix just as winter's ending, for instance, unless the guide is specifically pointed at the idea that summer's a great time to be in the city. Is this book the first of its kind? Is the author a distinguished expert in this field? Does the book tell the untold story of some sensational event? Is there a great story behind the book?

One angle that will usually earn some coverage is if your book has sold surprisingly well. If it has, approach the business department of your local newspaper or a local business newspaper. They love to run stories that feature surprising sales numbers. Why is this a story? Because most first books don't sell at all.

## **Climbing the Ladder**

The best way to approach a major daily is to work up the ladder of newspapers in your publicity campaign. The lowest rung is the weekly or biweekly community newspaper. Some of these are free "shoppers" that are thrown on your driveway, more advertisement than news. Send a press release to your local shopper, and they'll most likely be happy to have another item from the community to fill the space around the ads. Your press release might be reprinted verbatim or with a few minor changes. However, it's also possible that the shopper will be so intrigued that they'll assign an article on your book. If so, clip the story and put it in your media kit.

Next, you might hit the higher-level weeklies. These are publications that people buy—through a subscription or at a newsstand.

Include good clips from the shoppers in your press kit. Don't include any verbatim reprints of press releases. However gratifying they are to you, the editor will see that your press release and the clipping are one and the same, and you will have built no credibility, which is your only goal at this point.

Again, if this tier of newspapers responds, take the good clippings from these and go to the small-market dailies. By the time you've got some clippings from these smaller publications, you'll have gained experience in what approaches work and don't work with newspaper editors. Now, you're ready to try your newly honed publicity skills on the big boys.

The big boys come in three classes. The biggest of the big in circulation and influence are *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*. When approaching these markets, know what they're about. They are so few, that you should take the time to read through a few issues at a library. Where do you see your book fitting in? Do you need to refocus your press release to get them interested? It's worth the effort, because clippings from these newspapers impart a great deal of credibility to your campaign. You won't sell millions of books, but you can bet the bookstores and distributors will note the coverage you're getting there, especially if you send them clippings.

The rung just below would be newspapers in the long-established Eastern seaboard, Midwestern and major Texas markets—Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, Miami, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Dallas and the like.

Next would be the major markets in the West—Denver, Phoenix, Seattle, San Francisco and others.

I would start with that third tier and move eastward, adding clips from each tier to the batch going to the next tier.

The clippings aren't meant to impress jaded media members. Rather, they're meant to show that other people took you seriously and that you have a track record. Few writers or editors want to go out on a limb for a complete unknown, but once you develop a

track record, they warm up a bit. One warning, this psychology works best when you're dealing with media that are at nearly the same level. If you send a clipping from a small-town newspaper to the editor at the *New York Times Book Review* section, it's unlikely to help your cause much, unless it's also accompanied by clips from higher rungs on the newspaper ladder.

## **Finding the Papers**

A good source for developing your newspaper media list is *Editor & Publisher* magazine's annual guide to newspapers. *Editor & Publisher* is a newspaper trade magazine, and its guide lists newspapers state by state. This format gives you a rough picture of each newspaper's clout in the state, something that won't be as readily apparent in *Bacon's Media Directory*, although that publication does list circulation of each newspaper, too. Many libraries have copies of both or other similar publications that list newspapers, their markets, and their editors.

Don't be discouraged. A good story that fits the newspaper's readers will get you in. Be brutally honest with yourself and make sure you have a good story before you make the approach.

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