

The First Year And Before: 45 Hints for Planning For Success

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This handout was prepared for a workshop titled "Planning for Success, Before and After the First Sale", given at the Two Hearts Conference, RWA Region II, Chicago

Tips for inexpensive promotion before your first sale....

1. Contests provide lots of good publicity. If you win or place, you'll be listed in the chapter's newsletter and on its website, and perhaps in an announcement sent to the Romance Writer's Report.
2. NETWORK after those contests. Write thank you notes to coordinators and judges. It's the polite thing to do, but also you are making contacts with potential readers for the future...and these contacts could lead to other opportunities, as well.
3. In that vein, write thank you notes at every opportunity.
4. VOLUNTEER at local, regional, and national conferences. Meet people. Expand your horizons. Then keep in touch!
5. The web: establish an e-mail address early (such as pobox.com) so your address is permanent even if your local server goes down or you move across the country. Make it easy for people to find you.
6. NETWORK online. Get your name out there in positive ways. Never get into heated debates, or slam editors, agents, other writers (or their work)...your message could be forwarded anywhere. You want your name associated with a positive, not negative image, and the romance community is smaller than you think. Don't shoot yourself in the foot!
7. Consider starting a web page before you sell. Val Taylor, who wrote *The Mommy School*, had her website up well before her first release, and was receiving over a 1000 hits per month before her book was out! Once you're selling, you might not have the time to research all of this, so consider doing it early. There are many sites which offer free web pages, and also give you free use of easy-to-use software. You can also purchase your own web page software, or hire a web design service, but beware of costly web designers who charge substantial fees for set-up, maintenance, and each update.
8. Join a number of larger RWA chapters, and announce your good news (contest placings, first sales) in their newsletters. Your news will be reaching hundreds of people, and your name will become more familiar. But DON'T send in your negative news ("I got rejected again..." or "Well, I'm in a terrible slump right now...") because many chapters send their newsletters to the editors at all the major romance publishers.
9. Pick up promotional materials at every conference. Study what works, what doesn't. Keep a file.
10. Start a database early: learn how to use one before you sell. ASK before you add someone to your snail mail list of addresses. Some sources of names--anyone who has given you encouragement along the way (such as contest coordinators, and judges who answered your thank you notes), members of your chapters, old school friends, relatives, neighbors, business associates, etc. Soon you'll be adding the addresses of readers who write you about your first book!

NOTE: you cannot blithely harvest names from RWA chapter rosters and add them to your list--RWA doesn't allow this, and it will also alienate some of the people you hit with your promotion efforts.

Also, it is illegal to automatically add names and addresses to a database for sending out mass e-mail announcements, and there are other strict regulations regarding this practice, as well. Check them out first if you decide to go this route!

11. Learn publishing software and mail merge early on--don't wait until you are swamped by deadlines!
12. Save online posts and chapter newsletter articles on how to develop press kits and press releases.
13. Keep a notebook on your contest placings, articles you've done for newsletters, any newspaper articles about you, honors or achievements, speaking experiences, etc., so it will be easier to write your bio later.
14. In that vein, start working on bios to use for your press kit, newspaper reporters, the proposals you might write for giving conference workshops, speaking engagements, and so on. These may each have different slants, and will need to be amended later, but you'll have something started.

AND AFTER YOUR FIRST SALE...

15. Buy business card paper at your office supply store or via catalogs. Print up your own business cards in moderate quantities, so you can amend the content easily without a lot of waste.
16. Find low-cost sources for bookmarks--there are a lot of good companies around. Or, if your budget is tight for now, you can print your own bookmarks, using heavy weight cardstock. It's available in bright colors, you can print on both sides, and then cut them cleanly using a paper cutter. You can scan and use your photo or book covers (check with your publisher to see if permission is needed), but keep these color pictures fairly small, because they use a lot of ink!
17. Develop promotional flyers for different groups--readers groups, the local library, writers' conferences, and so on. You can print these double-sided at home on bright paper. Consider putting writing tips or an article on the front side, to increase the chances that people will pick them up.
18. Never leave home without your business cards and bookmarks. There will be countless opportunities to distribute them. When you see your books in the stores, tuck a card inside each one.
19. Before your book comes out, send a press kit to the local newspapers--the major papers, and the smaller ones that cover community news.
20. Offer to speak at the local library, at your children's school, at the local bookstores.
21. On your computer, do colorful postcards to send announcements to bookstores. I found pretty floral cards at Kinko's, four cards per sheet. Announce the release of your book to bookstores in your current town, your hometown, the area in which your story is set. Find bookstore addresses via the yellow pages on the Internet.

22. Stop in at bookstores everywhere you go--even on family trips. Leave bookmarks, talk about your books to the manager.
23. When your book comes out, offer to sign and sticker the copies at your local bookstores. Slip one of those business cards in each copy. A signed book is a sold book!
24. Offer to do signings--especially if you can do them with other authors, which can make the experience much more comfortable. Some of the chains are much more restrictive about this now, but it doesn't hurt to ask.
25. Contact your local Anderson News, Levy, or other book distributors. Promote yourself as a local author, ask if they'll order more copies and let you come to the warehouse to sign and sticker each one. Again--the rules are much tighter these days, but you never know!
26. Maintain those memberships to the larger RWA chapters! Some have low-cost options for your book to be included in promo flyers that go out to hundreds of bookstores across the country. Many chapters will include a scanned cover and blurb about your book in their newsletters, and also feature their published members on the chapter website. This is a lot of coverage for the price of membership. From four chapter memberships, information on my first and second releases went out to over 1,800 addresses.
27. Print off labels with your name, book, and release date--plaster them on every piece of mail you send.
28. Time your submission to the "First Sale" announcement section in the RWR to appear the month before your book comes out, and you have over 8,000 notices going out there, as well!
29. Romantic Times will distribute your promo materials to bookstores and distributors through their "Bookstores That Care" program, for a very reasonable fee.
30. Look for opportunities for you and your chapter to have a booth at a regional bookseller's convention, or major women's events. The last year I attended, the Women's Expo in Minneapolis drew over 60,000 women!
31. Before developing any of your promotional materials, be sure you establish a post office box address. It may sound far-fetched, but don't risk the attention of a potential stalker. I know of three authors who have been stalked, and there are probably many more. Don't advertise your phone number and street address.
32. Scout for mutual website and blogging opportunities, where you can share the cost of additional promotion online. Many authors have joined others writing for the same house, and will welcome you. For an example, check out www.superauthors.com
33. After your first sale you can contact other new authors and look into joint advertising in Romantic Times or the RWR. Consider cooperatively producing promotional materials for distribution at conferences.
34. Join Pan; look into every opportunity that comes for free online promotion opportunities that can be accessed by readers, booksellers, and librarians, or for sending materials out to various events.
35. List your books with the RWA website.

36. Put your website address on your stationery.
37. Run contests for free books, a piece of jewelry, etc. on your web page, to encourage repeat traffic.
39. Check out your book's listing on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Borders. You can gather some of the reviews you get from RT and review websites, and post them there, to help interest people in your book. Check every now and then, for what readers post. One author discovered very cruel comments, which could have greatly impacted her sales. When she notified Amazon, they were able to take the comments off and also track down the source.
40. Be sure to link to Amazon from your website, so a visitor can hop right over and buy your book! If you write for Harlequin/Silhouette, you can join their affiliate program as well.
41. It may seem scary, but moderate workshops at regional and national conferences. It's good exposure for you, and if speaking makes you nervous, it's a gentle introduction that can help you gain enough confidence to do workshops on your own.
42. Sign up to be a part of the literacy book signing event at the annual RWA Conference. It may seem intimidating, but it's a great experience and again, provides you with extra promotion and exposure. The most important thing, of course, is helping to raise funds for literacy!
43. At conferences, spend time at your publisher's suite--its another good opportunity to network--with editors, writers, and those who are visiting.
44. Do your research before seeking advance reviews--some online sites are known for blistering attacks, others are much more fair. You can't expect to receive roses every time, but there's no need to put your head on the block, either! Quotes from established authors are best sought through your editor or agent, unless someone has specifically volunteered. An author who had judged my ms in contest wrote a note on the score sheet, saying she would love to do an author quote when the book sold. When I contacted her, she agreed... but I wouldn't have asked her otherwise!
45. BE PREPARED. And DON'T BABBLE! Out of the blue, you may receive a phone call from a newspaper reporter wanting to do an interview at that very moment. It has happened to me twice in the past year, and while this is a great opportunity for promotion, it's also a potential disaster! Be careful about what you say---if you ramble, and start to say anything inane, you can bet it will appear in the article. Offer to e-mail or fax a copy of your bio immediately....and if you have publicity photos, offer to send one. Don't forget to impress on the reporter that you work very, very hard at your writing--that your book has taken X number of months or years to write, and that you've spent a lot of time researching your facts. All too many reporters take the sleazy route and toss off phrases such as "...churning out these romances" or otherwise try to belittle the genre. RWA has a great flyer that can be faxed to you, covering very impressive statistics on the romance genre. Harlequin also has excellent material on the massive romance market, and they can fax it to you, as well.