

Generating Word of Mouth for Your Book *

By Eleanor Sullivan

“Do you have \$500,000?” the former marketing executive asked me.

I had invited him to lunch, requesting his advice on how to promote my first mystery novel. I knew I had a lot to learn about marketing.

After I replied that I most certainly did not have half a million dollars, he explained, “Then you’ll have to use word of mouth.”

Envisioning myself standing on a street corner and telling passersby about my book, I asked him how I could possibly generate word of mouth enthusiasm for my book.

“You have to give it away.”

Now I was confused. In order to sell my book, I’d have to give it away?

“Only to select people,” he explained, going on to describe the selection process. The people I should send copies of my book must be friends, family members or colleagues who know me well enough to care about my work and, most importantly, are influential.

After a twenty-five career in nursing education and university administration, I did have friends who wielded influence within various circles. I knew professors, leaders of professional organizations, business and corporate executives, and even a former U. S. Senator. But what could they do?

My expert went on to explain that if these influential people enjoyed the book, their enthusiasm would encourage others to read it and so on. I should send the book, individually autographed, with a personal letter to each individual (no form letters),

explaining how I've entered this new, creative endeavor and that I'd like them to have a copy of my book. In addition I should ask them that if they enjoy it, to please tell others about it. The letter should be fun, light-hearted and enthusiastic, he said.

In addition, he suggested that we hold a focus group with some local health care leaders who are influential in the national arena. He offered to facilitate the group. The members of this group became enthusiastic and have helped promote me and my book with other groups.

Dutifully, I ordered 75 copies of TWICE DEAD, in hard-cover no less, created a list of people I considered to be influential and whom I knew well enough to ask this favor, prepared my letters with care, and sent off my packages. Within a few days the e-mails started coming in, the excitement palpable. Some had no idea what I was up to, others had been waiting for the news. "I e-mailed 30 people the day I received your book," one retired public health administrator told me.

On a roll, I decided to follow that mailing with an additional 150 letters to family members, friends, and colleagues, people I knew and liked although I didn't see them as particularly influential, at least not in the way that those on the first list were. I shared with these friends my excitement about my book, explained how they could get a copy and, again, asked for their help by telling others. I included a few postcards and a business card with each letter.

More kudos arrived. And Hilliard & Harris, the publisher of TWICE DEAD, wanted to know what I was doing because they wanted all their authors to do it!

Now the word has spread. I am hearing from people who heard from other people. Several publications in the nursing profession, in this country and in the U. K,

have published interviews and articles about me and my book. And I've assembled an extensive database of contacts that I'll use to promote my next book.

So, what have I learned? All of us know lots of people and even those we think aren't especially influential still know people who know people and so on. Most of all, though, I've learned that people want to help, that they can catch our enthusiasm.

Mystery fiction is entertainment, and there are few lay people who are not intrigued by what writers do. Giving friends an opportunity to tell others about your book is exciting fun for them.

More than a year ago I took a friend to lunch. And I've learned one more thing: The cost of that lunch was worth it.

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