

Promoting Your Writing (or, as I like to call it: what to do the morning after)

As writers, for many of us much of our focus is on one thing: Getting Published. If and when it happens, you have every right to be jubilant and exuberant and dance like no one is watching. In many cases it is a long and difficult road. And if that wasn't long and difficult enough, I'm sorry to say that your journey is only half done. This is an article about all the work that begins the morning after.

Having your work accepted for publication is a great accomplishment. Having a lot of people read it is even greater one. You worked hard to get those words on paper, so it only makes sense you should work equally as hard if not harder to get them read.

My name is Anthony Bidulka. The first book in my mystery series, featuring Saskatchewan PI Russell Quant, was published in 2003 by Insomniac Press of Toronto. Insomniac will be publishing the sixth book in the series this fall 2009. I am a former chartered accountant, teacher, farm boy and shoe salesman – among other things I won't mention here. I have served on the SWG and SWG Foundation board of directors, and I currently sit on the boards of the International Association of Crime Writers, and Crime Writers of Canada as prairie VP. I live and write in Saskatoon.

Before my first book was published, I believed that all I had to do was write a damn good book. With some luck I'd get an agent or a publisher, and they'd take it from there. After that, my job was done. I could go back to writing another good book and hope for the best.

Fast forward 8-9 years, and I now know how wrong I was. My job was only half done.

Many times I'll get a call or an email from a friend or family member and they'll casually ask: So what are doing today? I hadn't written one word of fiction all day, hadn't for the past several, and didn't expect to for several more. But how could that be? I was a writer. I should be spending my days plotting murder and getting my protagonist in and out of sticky situations. The reason why was hard to explain. So I always answer: I'm writing. In the bigger scheme of things, this is always true, because what I *was* doing is a big component of what I've come to believe is vital part of a writer's career.

I divide my career activities as a writer in two. One part is the *creative* side. All the good stuff we all know about: research, outlining (if you're an outliner), character planning, plot development, the actual writing of manuscripts, editing drafts, proofing galleys.

But there is a part two: the *business* side. And the biggest component of the business side is: promotion.

Way back 8-9 years ago, I assumed that if the book was good enough, my publisher would hand it over to the distributors, the booksellers would sell it, people would read it,

and when they did, I'd go on a book tour throughout Canada, maybe even the US and people would line up to hear me read and get me to sign their copies. And indeed, the contract I signed with my publisher even made reference to my agreeing to be available for such activities upon request of the publisher.

Coming from a business background, I had a fair bit of awareness of the importance of promotion on the success of the products sold by my clients. So, as the date of the release of my first book was fast approaching, I called up my publisher and asked: so, what's your promotion strategy for my book?

Well, they didn't really have one. They were dancing as fast they could just to get all their spring releases—mine was one of many—to the printer. Money was tight. The industry was being tossed on its ear by store closures, higher than ever book return rates, poor sales. It wasn't that they didn't want my book to sell, and have the best chance it could out there in the big, bad, cold, real world, but times were tough, competition was fierce, and I was a first-time, unknown writer from Saskatchewan.

I was suitably disappointed and worried and wondered about dusting off my CA designation and getting my old job back.

But I was also determined, exuberant about my new career, creative, and willing to roll up my sleeves and work and help my publisher help me.

Looking back on what I did then, and still do today, I have come up with what I call: the 5 'C's of promoting your work.

Confidence
Circulation
Communication
Capitalization
Creativity

(1) **CONFIDENCE**

This may be the one "C" that some of you might think is a bit too touchy feely. But I truly believe a successful career comes from within.

Portray confidence: Portray confidence with whoever you are dealing with. Whether it's an agent you hope will represent your work, a bookseller you want stocking your anthology on their shelves, or someone you meet at a party who asks what you do. Be confident in who you are as a writer, what kind of writer you are, and what you have written. Inside your head, not only should you believe your novel or article or poem is the best thing you've ever written, but that it's the best thing anyone has ever written. Warning: be confident, not overbearing.

Protect your confidence: This is an industry that employs people whose job it is to take what we've written, dissect it, decide whether they think it is good or bad, and then announce their decision in very public forums. Good or bad, you need to find ways to protect yourself at these times. I know a writer who, with one bad comment from a reviewer, can't write for a week. What a waste of time and talent.

If possible, minimize your exposure to non-professional reviewers. There will be many people who want to read your work. As writer's we want to share. Be wary. I now only ask for critique and comments from professionals: editors and the like. Although many people tell me what they think of my work, and I welcome their comments, I am never the one to solicit it.

Nurture the confidence of colleagues: Some believe that writers should be competitive, especially writers within specific sub-genres (in my case, regional, soft-boiled crime). I disagree. What is good for any other writer, is good for me. Another author who does well and gets a lot of publicity and/or accolades is simply raising the awareness and profile of my industry – it creates readers. One of my favourite writers is Gail Bowen, from Regina. A publication recently named her Canada's best crime writer. Not only do I think this is wonderful because she truly is an extremely talented writer, and just happens to be a terrific person too, but it's good for my business. It publicizes Canadian mystery writing, and a side benefit may be that some of her readership will spill over into mine. Support each other. Not only will it feel good (when given and received), but it makes good business sense.

(2) CIRCULATION

YOU are the best salesperson of your work.

You have to be out there, at the forefront of your promotional activities—in person, on the radio, in print interviews, in mailings, your face on posters, whatever—you have to be out there in circulation.

I used to believe that there was a person in my publisher's office who woke up every morning, drove to work, sat in their office, and whose main job it was to think about: what can I do today to sell more of Anthony's books.

There is no such person. You have to become that person.

Do not rely on your publisher, agent, favourite bookstore, distributor, best friend, mother, sibling, co-worker to do it for you. No matter how well intentioned they might be, you need to take control.

Help them help you

Put them on a team. A team led by you.

At one point in my career, faced with no discernable publicity campaign or budget, I developed my own. Knowing nothing, I did a lot of research. This meant: going to conferences, joining writers groups, talking to other writers. The internet became my best

friend. Use it. I identified writers who I thought were successful promoters and visited their websites. Most have event listings or calendar of events on their web pages. These gave me great ideas, or at the least an idea of what real authors did for publicity.

I created a wish list—from conferences I wanted to attend, readings I wanted to do, touring I wanted to undertake, advertisements I wanted placed in magazines and newspapers, review copies I wanted to distribute, bookstores I wanted to focus on, mailings I wanted done, and on and on and on. Altogether it was too much, too big, too soon, and waaaaaaaaaaaaay too expensive. But, my theory was (as it still is today): ask for nothing, and that is what you will get; ask for a hundred things and there's a chance you might get a couple. This began a negotiation process and healthy dialogue between me and my publisher. That being said, be respectful of your publisher. Be aware of their capabilities, restrictions, as well as the business and financial environment they are operating in. Demand nothing. Instead, discuss and negotiate.

A couple of years ago I was attending the Bouchercon Writers conference in Madison, Wisconsin. I had the opportunity to go out for dinner one night with a small group of heavy hitters and I thought, ah ha!, here's my chance to learn the promotion secrets of wildly successful authors. So at the right time, after the right amount of wine was imbibed, I asked: What are your strategies for marketing yourselves and your work? As a group, they hesitated a bit, then all at once started describing the many things they'd done, things they'd tried that succeeded, and those that had failed miserably, and how hard it was to measure whether what they'd done was successful. In the end, after much talk, the answer was quite surprising to me. **There was no golden bullet.** No one could say: if you just do THIS, then you'll be successful. Instead, the best advice was to just keep trying stuff. Keep on getting out there in front of people—be in circulation. Get your name in print. Get your picture or the cover of your book on a poster or in a newspaper article or on TV. Get involved in the writing community. And one day, after you've done this for a while, you'll find that your name will simply start becoming part of the public's consciousness. And that's where it all begins. Subliminal advertising I think they call it.

I've seen this work. Oftentimes now, when I tell strangers about what I do, they'll get this look on their faces and say: You know, I think I've seen your name somewhere or heard of your book title. But they can't quite remember where or when. Some of them are just being polite, but for others, they probably had my bookmark in their paperback for a month or maybe they pass by my poster everyday to work—and that's good promotion.

For many of us, we did not become writers to be salespeople. Quite the contrary in fact. So the idea of being out there in circulation, putting your face in front of the world, and selling a 'product' can be daunting. Even if you enjoy publicity, the sheer volume of what it might take to make a difference can seem like having another job, on top of the one you have as a writer – and for many writers, on top of even another job you might have in the non-writer world. But I for one think it's vitally important, especially in the first years of your career. I think of myself as an entrepreneur. The most successful entrepreneurs I knew in my former life as a professional accountant, were the ones who devoted many

hours and resources to their businesses in the early years, and continually reinvest in their ventures.

Step one: Don't be overwhelmed. Baby steps are not only a good thing, but encouraged. Find a comfort zone and start there. Who knows where it will take you. The only mistake is doing nothing, trying nothing.

(3) COMMUNICATION

There are a plethora of choices in the writer's world for (a) who you need to communicate with, (b) how to communicate with them, and (c) how often.

In terms of the "who", I'm talking about more than keeping in touch with your publisher and editor, agent and publicist (if you have them). But you also need to think about communication with your readers and fans, bookstores (owners, managers, event coordinators), reviewers (magazine, newspaper, online), media (print, TV, radio, online), other writers (critique or writing groups, joint readings, conferences, online groups), professional writer's groups (local, national and international levels)

In terms of "how", the means of communication are proliferating at a dizzying speed: websites, booktrailers (very popular these days), readings, personal appearances, Facebook, Myspace, blogging, online discussion forums, listserves, TV, Radio, Print, email, attending conferences.

Several months ago I moderated a panel at a writer's conference on this topic alone. The four authors on the panel talked about how "time-sucking" managing up communications was. One writer talked about how she would get up in the morning, sit at her computer, check her work email, personal email, website email, do some blogging, check her Facebook and Myspace pages, answer a couple of queries raised in her writers online group, return a few calls and then it was lunch. She'd done no writing at all.

You have to make choices. You have to say no to some things. In the end, you should come up with a comprehensive communication strategy that works for you but does not take over your life. This strategy will not remain static throughout your career, so be mindful of evaluating and changing things up as you and career do.

(4) CAPITALIZATION

Know your strengths and capitalize on them. On the flip side, know your weaknesses and either improve on them or work around them.

Be honest with yourself. Or get someone you trust to be honest with you. Is your only strength writing? Probably not. Are you great at doing readings, coming up with marketing ideas, are you an entertaining blogger, are you better at live interviews or

written interviews, are you good at schmoozing, personal appearances, being on a panel at conferences?

The only way you're going to figure this out is to do them and see. You'll get a sense of where your strengths and weaknesses lie pretty quickly. I think one of the dangers here is to never at least try to move out of your comfort zone. Try different things. You might have a talent you didn't know you had.

One of the best examples of this is a colleague of mine, a terrific American writer. He believes public readings are an important component of his overall publicity campaign. He has a lot of fans who love to come out to meet him in person. When he does these readings, he first gets up and chats with the audience about his life and experiences as a writer. And he is good at this, very personable and engaging. At the end of the evening he does very well too at meeting the attendees one on one and signing their books. The problem was everything in between.

My friend is a lousy reader. He would lower his eyes to the page, read monotone to the end of the passage, then look up. No movement in his voice, no eye contact with his audience. A ten minute reading seemed to last for days. Eventually I think it was his wife who took the plunge and told him. He tried a few things, but couldn't seem to make his performance much better. What he did then, I thought, was a stroke of genius. He still believed in readings as an important publicity tool, but instead of just giving up, he worked around it. Now he simply arranges to have someone else do the reading for him; sometimes the bookstore manager or events coordinator, or a local celebrity like a radio DJ or newspaper columnist, or maybe the president of his local fan club, or, if he can't find anyone, he brings along a friend or sometimes even his wife (who turns out to be much better at it than he is). Brilliant. Great way of capitalizing on strengths and minimizing weaknesses.

(5) CREATIVITY

This is perhaps the most important "C" of all, because it weaves its way through all the others.

This past May I was at a conference in New Orleans and one of the sessions was about how to get bookstores to notice you. The panelists were a couple of bookstore owners who were willing to tell it like it is.

Now I don't know if any of you have seen these postcards that so many writers get made up whenever they have a new book out. Typically the front has a picture of the book cover, the back maybe has a short synopsis of the book; otherwise they look like a normal postcard, with a space for an address and stamp. The idea is that the author mails out a million or so (exaggeration) of these things, with the hope it will convince bookstores to carry their books. They also hand them out wherever they go. It's a very

popular marketing tool. At writers conferences the book tables sag under the weight of these things, delegate goodie bags overflow with them.

Great idea, right? Well, these two booksellers told us postcards had become so commonplace (they sometimes receive hundreds a week), they'd become the bookstore version of junk mail. They said they always – always – threw them in the garbage without looking at them.

You could have heard a pin drop in that room. There were so many open mouths, it looked like a room full of baby robins at supper time. We'd all done it. And we'd just been told we'd spent hundreds or even thousands of dollars and countless hours on lining bookstore's garbage cans.

Now, this isn't to say this is always the case, only the opinion of two booksellers. But my point is, this is a very competitive industry. For every one of you, there are a thousand other writers out there looking for attention. You have to find a way to stand out in the crowd. What is going to get you and your work noticed?

Now, before I go on, this is a good place to discuss the elephant in the Promoting Your Writing room: Money.

Publicity costs money, right? Indeed, there is a wide continuum in the world of promotion, from the full page New York Times ad and 50 city North American book tour, to hauling around a few copies of your novel in your trunk and selling them to your aunts. But I believe creativity can help ratchet up your position on that continuum without having to cost a bundle. The big budget publicity campaigns are the exception in this industry. There are many levels of marketing creatively that can cost a lot, cost nothing, or cost something in between. You have to figure out where you sit on that continuum. You have to find out what your publisher will spend, and decide if you're willing to supplement that, reinvest profits, whatever. Just remember, there is room for you on that continuum, and you may find yourself moving up and down throughout your career—just don't fall off.

At the start of my career, the first (and simplest) thing I did, was to steal an idea from my life as a businessman. How do businesspeople communicate every day? With business cards. I started with a simple design on cheap card stock. The front has my name and contact info, including website and email, the back has the titles of all my books. It's not fancy, but it works. I take them everywhere. I find if you're telling someone at a cocktail party about your work, and they show an interest, it's much smoother to slide out a business card than to pull out a postcard or a stack of bookmarks.

Instead of postcards, I do bookmarks. (At tip: If you're not too demanding about what goes on them, the printer might be willing to produce these gratis when they're printing your book covers.) Whereas bookstore owners may not want to read about your book on a postcard, they do want to give freebies to their customers. Everyone can use a bookmark, so it my-as-well have my book cover and name on it. I fully expect that a

great many of my bookmarks end up in garbage cans or abandoned in a book that is never read, but bookmarks and similar such promotional items are part of the subliminal advertising effect I talked about earlier.

Posters are another comparatively cheap marketing tool. Here again, know how to use the tool. Sending a poster to a small independent store with little or no window space can be worthless. Sending a poster to a big box store (unless you are having a reading there) is probably not going to work. Sending a poster to a magazine reviewer isn't going to do you much good. But having a good quality, eye-catching poster for the right occasion or right location is very useful.

As mentioned earlier, communication is an important tool and even more powerful if used creatively. For instance, before I go to any city for an event or reading appearance, I research that city on the internet. I enter the details of my event onto every online community calendar I can find. I'll send out press releases. I'll send emails to community groups and book clubs that I think might be interested in attending. I'll email my aunt's ex-husband's second cousin removed. I do many readings at independent stores. These types of stores are often part of smaller community neighbourhoods within bigger cities. I research the local neighborhood businesses, like B&Bs, pubs, restaurants, art galleries. I'll send out emails saying: Wednesday night, XXX Bookstore two doors down from you will be hosting a wine and cheese and a reading, maybe you and some of your customers would be interested in attending.

Having a website is important. What is more important is finding ways to use your website creatively. It can be more than a simple depository of information about who you are and what you've written.

A couple of years ago I ran a contest on my website where I partnered with a couple of charities. For every donation to the charity (for which the donor received a tax receipt), the donor's name was entered into a draw for an entire set of personally autographed Russell Quant books. I also have a book club offer on my website. I attend meetings of many bookclubs in Saskatoon and cities I happen to be touring in, but I wanted to find a way to reach out to book clubs in places I couldn't be. So on my website I've publicized an offer that for any club reading a Quant book, I will either answer up to five questions submitted by email or I will call the book club directly for up to 15 minutes to chat and answer questions.

Beginning with my second book, I began using another concept I stole from the business world, called dripping. I later expanded it to something I call focused gifting. Dripping is the idea of identifying key people who are influential in your business success, and instead of doing a big aggressive sell job on them when you have something to sell (i.e. a new book), you just drip on them every so often – maybe with a letter or a phone call or even a little gift – just to remind them that you're around, that you appreciate their role in your success. It's the team approach to being a successful writer – acknowledging that they are part of the team that helps to sell my writing.

I began by keeping track of people or bookstores or organizations or media contacts who'd been particularly supportive or helpful to me. I started with something as simple as a personalized thank you note. For some, no doubt, it was just another throw away, but you wouldn't believe how many booksellers made a point of contacting me to say how grateful they were to be recognized.

As I sold more books and had more access to funds to invest in promotion, I became more elaborate and added the idea of focused gifting. With *Flight of Aquavit* I sent out several bottles of aquavit. With *Stain of the Berry*, before I went on book tour, I sent each bookstore owner a small jar of Saskatoon Berry Jam and cheese crackers. These were signs of appreciation that served double duty as promotion.

With *Sundowner Ubuntu* I took a whole new tack. This was the fifth book in the series. As it turns out, all five of the books take place (in part) in five different wine producing countries. So I put together a gift basket that included copies of each book and a bottle of wine from each country. In several bookstores we ran a month long contest where everyone who purchased a Quant book during the month had their name entered to win the basket. This was a great way for me to have a presence in the store and do something for and with my readers, without having to undertake the expense of the travel to be there in person.

Part of promoting creatively involves stepping out of comfort zones. For instance, it's easy to plan appearances at places you are well known and can expect to draw an audience. It takes a bit more guts to go somewhere you aren't known. But what better way to expand readership? A successful publicity campaign can't always be about preaching to the choir, no matter how good it feels. You need to find ways to reach out to audiences that don't know you yet. This is tougher, and harder to approach, but worth a shot. Every so often it's a good thing to risk rejection and an empty house. A couple of years ago I decided to tour Texas. A brave colleague from Toronto decided to join me. Neither of us had much of a readership in the lonestar state. But now, there are people in San Antonio and Austin reading about my gay prairie detective.

In conclusion, I'd like to leave you with a few thoughts:

- there is no golden bullet - there is no one perfect way to market yourself - create a basketful of promotional tools and keep them juggling in the air
- the more creative your promotional strategy, the better chance you have to stand out from the crowd - it's worth a try.
- sometimes it'll work - sometimes it won't. Oftentimes you won't even know for sure if a promotion has performed.
- having no budget is not an excuse to do nothing.
- The only mistake is not to try