THE BEST BOOK PUBLICITY YOU CAN DO YOURSELF

Crafting companion pieces to get the press your book deserves.

BY SUSAN SHAPIRO

After struggling with rejections for 20 years, I was exhilarated when a Random House editor made a flattering offer to buy my first book. I imagined a whirlwind publicity tour filled with TV and radio appearances, great reviews, and book signings. How misguided I was. "Today Show" and NPR interviews were scheduled, then cancelled last minute. Articles that were promised never saw print. I soon learned it's rare when the publishing process goes the way you hope, especially when it comes to publicity.

Less than one percent of books coming out from mainstream publishers become bestsellers and 90 percent of traditionally published books sell fewer than 2,000 copies. Most authors I know blame disappointing sales on a lack of press. Of course, being on "The Today Show," NPR, or having your title picked by the Oprah, Jenna, or Reese's book clubs provides an enormous boost, and lots of favorable media coverage is the best way to sell more copies. But not all small presses have publicists—even though it's rare that a writer can pitch these major outlets successfully themselves. Big publishers have in-house publicity people in charge of getting the word out. Unfortunately, these PR pros are often young, overworked, poorly paid, or juggling multiple projects at the same time. Lead titles by bestsellers and social media influencers often get the most attention, as well as superstars who put out "ooks," as the literati label junkie celebrity memoirs, with much less time and space for debuts and follow-ups by non-famous writers. As a V.I.P. in the biz once confided, "People think publishing is a business, but it's really a casino."

So, what's an author to do? It's a good question, especially if—like me—you spent 20 years getting rejected before breaking through with your first hardcover. It's an important conundrum to solve if you hope to stay in the business, since getting another book deal is usually contingent on how many copies your previous book sold and what press or awards it garnered. You have several options to consider.

You can be a team player and hope for the best with the official PR team assigned to you, making sure to be charming and eager to help any way you can. Alas, this doesn't necessarily translate to any media coverage. Some authors arrange their own launch events and do a tour on their own dime. Others leverage their social media contacts, whether it's followers on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X, or LinkedIn, or amass a following on a newsletter, Substack, Medium, Reddit, or Goodreads. Those who can afford it hire large outside publicity companies, more apt to get results. Yet the top tier in the field charges at least $15,000 minimum for a 6-month pre-publication campaign, and unfortunately, those less expensive have fewer connections and thus can't compete. But no kind of PR is ever guaranteed, so you could actually spend your entire advance on PR and get *bupkes* ("nothing" in Yiddish).

Making myriad mistakes over the course of publishing 18 books, I finally found the best solution that's in my power to control, no matter what else does or doesn't happen: crafting and publishing short companion pieces for newspapers, magazines, journals, and webzines. They work at any stage of the writing and book publication process and can be an enormous boon to your project and to your career. It has certainly worked for me. There are numerous benefits to selling short pieces in conjunction with your book, not only financial.

Craft-wise, it is so much easier to perfect three pages than 300. After toiling on a tome that might take years, it's fulfilling to spend just a day or a week on a short spurt that greatly expands my outreach, without requiring another huge time commitment. I get to create little pieces of art from a topic I know well, love, and already get Google Alerts about. Newspaper and magazine editors will often let you mention your book in your bio and even attach a link to buy it. So, you're basically getting paid to write your own book PR.

Some authors are content to land a byline or two on their expertise and call it a day. Not me. As a longtime freelancer and teacher specializing in essays, I was able to publish more than 40 short pieces to accompany my recent memoir, *The Forgiveness Tour*, in *The New York Times, Washington Post, Salon, Slate, HuffPost,*

SELF Magazine, AARP, Well + Good, Tablet, and *Next Avenue*, paying anywhere from $100 to $1,000. A few won essay contests, enhanced my social media numbers (adding as many as 300 Instagram followers a few hours after my bio included my Insta handle), and increased book sales. Once, I went from an Amazon ranking of 200,000 to 200 overnight right after my clip went live. And several times, people who saw the short piece contacted me to do book events, podcasts and lectures, both in-person and online.

In my experience, this strategy of creating and marketing short pieces to support your book works well with most literary genres—fiction, nonfiction, self-help, essay and short story collections, kid lit, and even poetry. A well-known poet friend once argued it would be useless for her to try publishing an essay to support her collection—until her NYT op-ed on a poetry scandal went viral and wowed her publisher.

HERE'S WHAT NOT TO DO:

1. **DON'T CONFUSE A "COMPANION PIECE" WITH AN "EXCERPT."** A companion piece is a short, separate essay or op-ed on the topic of your book. That is not anything like an excerpt, which is a word-by-word passage taken directly from the book itself. If your publisher owns "first serial rights" or "excerpts rights," they control the contents of your book and often keep or share the fees paid, whereas short stand-alone new material usually belongs to you.
2. **DON'T BE LAZY:** Even if you, as the author, own the rights to all excerpts, don't email a copy of your manuscript to your newspaper or magazine editor to let them choose a few pages to run rather than writing something fresh instead of figuring it out yourself.
3. **DON'T BE A BLOWHARD:** If you don't have a publishing deal yet, don't pitch a short piece by showing off that it's from your yet-to-be-sold book. That might make it seem like your only motive is to use their publication for book publicity. Pitch or submit the piece first. Then, *after* they express interest, ask if there's room to mention in a bio that this is from a book-in-progress or one coming out. If they say yes, subtly mention it in a two-line bio at the end of your pitch. Starting your correspondence by shouting "I'm trying to write a book on this topic" could be a turn-off.
4. **DON'T WRITE ABOUT WRITING YOUR BOOK:** A few places like *Writer's Digest, Lit Hub*, or *The Brevity Blog* might be interested in your creative process. Yet often these ponderous discourses are too insider-baseball and come off blatantly self-promotional. I rarely even mention writing or my book in the short essays I've done supporting it for more general publications (saving that info for the bio).
5. **DON'T SIMULTANEOUSLY SUBMIT:** The newspaper and magazine editors I know only want work you are submitting to be exclusive to their publication and require it to be original material, not something that's already run elsewhere. However, you can sell varied types of pieces on your topic to many different outlets.
6. **DON'T PLAGIARIZE YOURSELF:** It's OK to repeat a few of your favorite lines or stories from your book in your short piece, but do it sparingly. My long-time weekly writing workshop members have declared a moratorium on certain jokes and phrases I've repeated too often. Instead of using lines you've already used in short pieces, try to paraphrase as much as possible.

HERE'S WHAT WILL WORK BETTER

1. **REFRAME:** Although you can repeat and revamp some material that's in your book, nobody wants to read a piece that feels like it's just the middle of a longer story. So, be sure to add a new lede and ending to your piece to make it stand alone.
2. **FOLLOW THE FORMULA:** It's easier to write whatever you want at the length you prefer, but paying attention to what an editor is looking for will yield better luck. For example, when I pitched *Slate*'s One Thing column a piece showing how the One Thing that changed my life was my learning how to give a complete apology, my first draft was 1,200 words on my own specific falling out and forgiveness story. Upon learning that the editor of this particular section preferred 300–600 words with a more universal takeaway, I revised and shortened to nail the byline.
3. **VARY FORMATS:** Personal essays connect seamlessly with a memoir, but I also pitched and penned op-eds, self-help, roundups, and timely researched articles, which increased my potential placements.
4. **EXPAND YOUR SUBJECT MATTER:** While my memoir told a story about falling out with a mentor and

finding forgiveness, I sold many related topics like unforgiving, apologizing, eliciting and accepting apologies, healing, therapy, and mental health.

5. **KEEP IT SHORT:** No newspaper or magazine editor I know wants 2,000–7,000-word unsolicited pieces from writers they don't know. I've had the best luck selling 400–900 words. Instead of sending completed essays, I often submit short 100-word pitches to gauge an editor's interest before completing the entire piece, always willing to take their suggestions on angles they'd prefer.
6. **KEEP IT CURRENT:** Nothing will interest a newspaper or webzine editor faster than using a timely lede and connection to something hot on the front pages of newspapers and magazines. So, even though *The Forgiveness Tour* was motivated by a story that happened to me in 2010, when I read in 2021 that Justin Timberlake belatedly apologized to Janet Jackson and Britney Spears, I pitched a quick op-ed to NBCNews.com that ran as "The Britney Spears Effect: Is Justin Timberlake's Janet Jackson Apology Too Little Too Late? Why even the delayed confession of sins and desire for repentance can be healing."
7. **USE HOLIDAY PEGS:** Along with using news as ledes, remember that most editors schedule work around annual public celebrations. Since Yom Kippur is about atoning and forgiving, I used it to pitch my *Salon* piece: "The Forgiveness Tour: When the only thing better than hearing 'I'm sorry' is saying it. On Yom Kippur we ask each other for forgiveness. I became obsessed with the one apology that wouldn't come." For Valentine's Day, my *Washington Post* piece was called "When love isn't in the air: How to move past a broken heart."
8. **KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE PRIZE:** If a nice newspaper, magazine, or literary journal editor allows for a short bio, don't list all the places where you've published, worked, or gone to school. You are most likely to get a boost on your book if you keep it to one clear, concise sentence: "Jane Doe is the author of TITLE OF BOOK, just out from PUBLISHER," and double-check that it's included. Some wonderful editors will even allow you to include a link to buy the book from your publisher, Amazon, or Bookshop.org.
9. **CONSIDER WRITING GRATIS:** As a seasoned freelancer and writing teacher, I never advocate writing for free. Yet sometimes exposure in the right venue is worth it. The HarperCollins editor for author Jen Rudin's debut *Confessions of a Casting Director* pushed her to do a monthly column for **Backstage.com** for two years to target the audience who'd buy her book. It wound up increasing Rudin's sales, leading the book to be reprinted several times. I published unpaid op-eds in *Newsweek* and *The Daily News* because the editors agreed to link *The Forgiveness Tour* in the bio. And for my addiction book *Unhooked*, I was encouraged to do a *HuffPost* column and *Psychology Today* blog that didn't pay upfront. Yet both gigs paid off big time when the book became a *New York Times* bestseller.
10. **SHARE GRATITUDE:** When I encounter authors complaining about all the things not happening with their book, I remind them how many writers' books never see print, and if they can make a clip happen, they'll magnify their own readership. I post all the short pieces I've published on Facebook, X, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, Bluesky and Threads, making sure to thank the editor who ran the piece, as well as my agent, book editor and PR people. Why? Because it's free and being generous is great for public relationships and publishing karma. **WD**

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Susan Shapiro (SusanShapiro.net) is the bestselling author of the writing guide *The Byline Bible*, the coauthored *American Shield* and the memoirs *The Forgiveness Tour* and *Five Men Who Broke My Heart*, which has just been optioned for a movie. She's a long-time writing professor now teaching online.