

Doing the Mahi

Common book publicity mistakes made by self-publishers,
by Elizabeth Heritage

I've been working as a freelance book publicist for over a decade now. Simply put, publicity is the work of drawing journalists' attention to your pukapuka. If you're self-publishing, publicity is an essential task if you want people other than your friends and whānau to notice your mahi.

Over the years I've worked with lots of different kaituhi who are choosing to self-publish, and I've noticed a few vital misconceptions about how book publicity works. Here are some common mistakes to avoid.

Starting too late

I'm putting this one first because it's by far the most widespread error I see self-publishers make. If you're not starting your publicity mahi until after your book is published, you're way too late. I generally recommend starting at least 4–6 months prior to the publication date. Journalists want to know what's coming up, not what's already happened, so "I published a book a few weeks ago" isn't going to cut it.

Not understanding your potential readership

Often when I ask self-publishers who their target markets are they say something like "anyone who likes good books". Or maybe they've written a novel about family conflict and think that anyone with a family will want to buy it. It's natural – in fact, necessary – to believe in your own

mahi, but when it comes to publicity you need to back that up with some real-world market-research specifics.

Failing to do basic market research

If I could narrow this rule down to one thing it would be: check that the journalist you're pitching to actually reviews books before asking them to review your book. And then check that they review the kind of pukapuka you've written. If you're asking them to interview you and write a story about you and your work, check that they do that, and that you have reasonable call to believe that their audience would be interested in you. So, if you live in Ōtautahi and your novel is set in Queenstown, don't pitch to the *Waikato Times*.

Radiating a sense of ill-usage and/or entitlement

Many people choose self-publishing after having tried and failed to find a literary agent or publisher, often for many years. It's understandable that feelings of frustration should have built up, but it's vital that none of that makes its way into your publicity mahi. In addition, the work of self-publishing can be long and arduous, meaning that many writers reach the publicity stage desperate for some kind of recognition or payoff. If your pitch contains even a hint of "why won't anyone notice meeeee" and/or "I'm an undiscovered genius you fools!!", it's not going to work.

Making grandiose claims

Your book is almost certainly not a chart-topper. Aroha mai. I don't say that to be mean or to put you off, it's just that, statistically, almost no pukapuka are runaway successes. Claiming that your book is poised to be such isn't going to impress anyone: quite the opposite. Instead, it's going to give the impression that you don't have a realistic handle on your own mahi – which raises the immediate question of whether you're any good at writing and, more generally, whether you're going to be a pain to work with.

Apologising in advance

Other self-publishers have the opposite problem and shoot themselves in the foot by talking themselves and their pukapuka down. You are quite within your rights to pitch to journalists – it's their job to receive and assess story ideas. There's no need to apologise for having done a perfectly normal thing. In fact, being overly self-effacing is off-putting because, as above, it raises questions about what you'll be like to work with.

Sending too few pitches

I generally reckon that if about 20–30 per cent of the pitches I send result in actual published coverage, I'm doing well. So, for a full campaign, I send several dozen pitches, every one of which has to be based on solid market research. This is one of the reasons I recommend starting publicity mahi several months in advance.

Failing to follow up

I often see self-publishers send a pitch and then sit back and consider their job done. This is just the beginning! Ideally journalists will respond promptly to your pitch saying they're interested and requesting a copy of your book, and you



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can take it from there. But it's very likely your email could get lost in their inbox. My policy is to follow up once by email and once by phone.

Refusing to hear the “no”

Some people make the opposite mistake. Do not badger journalists, this is a quick way to get yourself ignored or even blacklisted. I generally leave a week between each follow-up (another reason to start early). My rule of thumb is that if after my two follow-ups there's still no response, I take that silence as a “no” and move on to the next thing. This can be very frustrating, especially if, for example, you've written a book about your niche interest and there's a magazine dedicated to that exact topic and you can't imagine why they aren't thrilled to hear from you. The truth is that there could be a million reasons, many of them budget-related, and none of which you will ever discover. This lack of closure is one of the things people find most difficult about publicity work. ■