

ALTERNATIVE BOOK MARKETING

By Robert E. Gelinis, Publisher, ArcheBooks Publishing

© 2004. All Rights Reserved.

The rules of marketing dictate that in order to sell any new product, specifically one that people have never heard of, and therefore don't know if they would like it or not if they ever tried it, needs to be introduced in a way that allows potential buyers to:

- 1) **Focus upon it** (as opposed to other competing products similar to it), and also
- 2) To have an opportunity to **try it** and see if they like it.

That's simple enough. Right?

So what if our product is a book? A novel, a work of fiction. Where do you suppose the best place to introduce it to the market of book buyers would be? Most first-time authors instinctively respond: "A bookstore!"

To that, I ask the simple question: OK, so assuming your book isn't prominently featured in a bookstore so that no one can miss it (if stores even have it in stock at all—read "Great Expectations for a New Author" for more on that topic), can you think of any other place where you could possibly have *more* competition for the attention of potential buyers? Honestly, other than by scheduling and holding book signings in a bookstore, how is anyone going to have the opportunity to *focus* on a brand new book, if it is by someone who is unknown? The answer is, they won't.

So then let me ask you this: Have you ever bought a greeting card or a CD at a car wash? Or have you at least seen them sold there in the lobby where you wait for your car? Or do you believe that greeting cards or CDs can *only* be sold at greeting card shops or record stores respectively? Ever buy one at the grocery store? And did you notice at the car wash that the greeting card display is typically only one brand, i.e. no competition from any other card makers. Ever see a painting for sale at a restaurant? These are all examples of **Alternative Marketing**.

The counter-intuitive idea behind Alternative Marketing is to reach out to your target audience at an alternative venue other than where similar products are primarily found, and thereby featuring your product at a place where competition is the lowest, not the highest. Remember actor/director Mel Gibson's box office blockbuster, *The Passion of the Christ*, which wasn't even made in English? Yet it's one of the top ten grossing films of all time. Mel was astute enough to market his film via churches, i.e. an alternate venue for movie goers, who just might have an interest in the subject matter.

When it comes to books, you first need to think about all the various occasions for people to read books. The first thought is usually at home, but unless you are talking about online marketing to them via the Internet (which is a good avenue of Alternate Marketing outside of bookstores—just ask Amazon), that's a tough sell. But where *else* to people typically read for pleasure (or at least to fight boredom)?

Answer: Anywhere people end up having to wait with nothing to do. That could be at a doctor's office, at a car wash, at the airport or train station, commuting on a plane or train, sitting at the Department of Motor Vehicles, at the dentist, at the chiropractor, at the hair salon, at the theater before a play, at a truck stop, at a coffee shop, etc. etc. etc. Get the picture? If you think about it, the kiosks at the airport, or actual formal bookstores there now, grew out of enterprising entrepreneurs recognizing this fact. If given the option, people having to wait will purchase more than just a magazine or newspaper or a pack of gum. Why not your book? Disclaimer: Don't go running down to the airport. Most of them are already dominated by book chains that are no different from your local bookstores.

Look, from the perspective of a traditional bookseller, he just wants to make money selling books that he believes will sell. So obviously, he's partial to the titles on the bestseller list, and not some no-name author who wants to take up his precious shelf space with copies of a book that he believes he'll most likely only have to return for credit, until proven otherwise. So why continue to push the rock uphill? It isn't your only option.

Think about it. What does the couple who owns the car wash franchise near the mall think about the idea of offering a few additional impulse items to boost their revenues? It may be a different story. They make most of their money from washing cars. So if they can sell a few books on the side, that's gravy. Is that pitch so hard? "Hello there. I'm a local author trying to get out and promote my new book. I was wondering if I could place a couple of copies with you here in your lobby for your customers to take a look at while they wait. You don't have to pay me for them until they sell. And if they do sell, then you get them directly from my publisher at 40% off of list price and keep the rest."

Granted, in the example above you are making a "consignment pitch," i.e. you float the cost of the first few seed books—but if it works, you have established an alternative marketing venue for your product. You know, if you go to Staples or Office Depot, they even have little counter display stands for books or reports that can even attractively display your book. There are many Internet sites that sell them. Add a bookmark in each one, and maybe a flyer next to it—and *voila!* Not rocket science.

Does your doctor/hair stylist/dentist/chiropractor/lawyer/etc. appreciate your business? Hit them up! Picture yourself at the gynecologist: "Excuse me, Dr. Jones? Look up here please? Hey, we're obviously pretty close, and I've given you a lot of business over the years. How about helping me out?" How could they refuse? If nothing else you should at least be able to leave some bookmarks or flyers in their waiting room.

Here's a novel (pun intended) idea about an Alternate Marketing venue. Talk to your kid's local school/band/team/club/troop/coven/gang about their next fund-raising project. Here's where it helps to have a complete catalog of books (hint, hint, all you ArcheBooks authors who can help out your colleagues as well as yourself). Hey, a \$25 hardcover book, sold at 20% off to a consumer, and 40% off to the fund-raising organization, nets them \$5 a book sold—a lot more than they normally get for a candy bar, wrapping paper, magazine subscription or light bulbs made by the blind (Now there's a cruel product concept, wouldn't you say? How do they know if they work? Is the QA guy the one with burned fingers?). And besides, who can turn down all those

charming little faces at the door trying to raise money for new uniforms, their scout master's liver operation, or for a trip to play in the New Years day parade?

Don't forget the concept of "Subject Linking," like Mel did. One of our author's, K. D. Kragen, author of the two-volume set, *The KillWare Chronicles*¹, had a great example of this when he held a book signing at a motorcycle shop. "Quoi?" you ask with a puzzled frown. Well you see, Dave's book features a classic motorcycle that actually plays a fairly major role in the story. You need to find those linkages in yours. In one of my own novels, I had a major character who loved Samuel Adams beer. That fact actually played a part in one of the plot twists. I sent a copy of the book to Jim Koch, CEO of Samuel Adams. He sent me a nice letter, along with a set of very nice beer glasses, telling me that my book cover is posted on their "wall of fame" at their Boston Brewery. How's that for a little free advertising!

So what elements of your book have potential subject matter tie-ins with other business venues? For you horror authors, is there a "Goth" store in your town where they sell the leather, spikes, obscene candles, and the vampire fangs? If so, I'd go talk to the manager/owner. Does your book have a sports theme? If so, I bet there are plenty of sports memorabilia shops and such to consider. And don't forget your hair stylist! They probably know you as well as your gynecologist (proctologist for you gents). Unless you get your hair cut at the mall, there's a high probability that the salon you go to is independently owned. Talk to the owner—who may be one and the same person who does your hair. They might not have thought of having additional products to sell while their customers wait for their appointments.

Don't be afraid to try something totally off-beat. Where I live in South Florida they just opened up a new post office. Funnily enough, it's a franchise, not a traditional government building. When you walk into the store you see that the back of the store is the post office, and *only* a post office—no FedEx or UPS. But on the side walls between the front door and the back wall are shelves and shelves of nothing but—*wine*. Yes, wine. No beer, no spirits. A fine wine and mail store. Whodathunkit? But someone did. Would someone buy books at a motorcycle shop? Dave proved they will. You really are limited only by your imagination and courage to ask a few strangers some simple questions. Just bolster your courage with the knowledge that every small business owner in the world is always looking for ways to improve their cash flow and generate bigger profits. You just might have something very attractive to talk to them about—if you can just find the linkage, the angle of commonality.

Lastly, let's not forget the good old Internet. Are your books for sale online at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and/or your publisher's website? If so, good, but how do you get people surfing the Internet to go to your product page and take a gander at your book? That's the big trick of all Internet marketing: "How do you drive traffic to a particular site, or to a specific page?" Fortunately, the answer to that question is very well known. There are really only three serious options: 1) A Recommendation or Word-of-Mouth (which could be in the form of a review), or 2) Formal Advertising in one of its many forms, or 3) Search Engines.

Of the three, the first is the most effective, but usually comes after a book has penetrated the market to a point where people are actually talking about it to others. The second one can be

¹ Available from ArcheBooks Publishing (www.archebooks.com/BookIDX/Indexes/SciFi/KWC/KWCDesc.htm)!

fairly expensive if you go the traditional print/broadcast media route. The latter won't help much at all if you are trying to get hits on generic search items like the genre of your book. That is, your page may be so far down on the search that no one ever gets to it before they find what they are looking for elsewhere. That is, if you wrote a Mystery novel, and someone does a search on Mystery novels, how many pages do they have to click through before any mention of your book shows up—if at all?

However, there is an economical alternative that combines the latter two of Advertising and Search Engines—i.e. Advertising *on* Search Engines. The two largest search engines, Yahoo and Google, both offer online campaigns for those “Sponsored Links” you see on the side of the page when you search for anything. Those prominently displayed Sponsored Links work off of keywords. So if your book is a Mystery Book, and you'd like people searching for Mystery Books to find yours on the first page they see, not on page 1,437, then you can simply pay them to have your URL pop up and be seen on the very first results page that is returned.

The way these programs work is that you select a set of key words that you believe a potential buyer of your book might be looking for in the most general terms. It can be just one word or several; it's up to you. The Search Engine will quote you a price on how much they will charge you if someone actually clicks on your link. That's the beauty of the system. You don't have to pay for “impressions,” which is how many times they show your link to someone who has entered your key word as a search term. You are only charged when someone both sees it and actually clicks on it and then comes to your target site. That's more than fair. Compare that with an Ad in a magazine, where you have to pay to put it there no matter how many people actually notice it or bother to act upon it. Prices for Search Engine Ads run anywhere between a nickel a click to fifty-cents or more. It's up to you to decide what that click is worth to you.

You can also set a daily limit of how much you want to spend. If you only want to spend \$2.50 a day, which could be \$75 a month, and if you pick a key word that is going to cost you \$0.10 each, then you will get a maximum of 25 “click-throughs” per day, which would bring you around 750 people a month. The search engine will show your “Ad” to everyone who searches on your keyword and then keep a tab on how many people actually pick it. When the number of actual clicks hits your daily limit, the search engine stops showing it to people until the next day. It's a very efficient system. If you want more traffic coming to your site, you can raise your daily budget accordingly.

Just keep in mind, everyone who sees your Ad and clicks on it doesn't equal a buyer. That part of the process is called the “Conversion Rate,” i.e. converting a searcher to a buyer. All you know is that it was someone who took the time to use a search engine to look up a word or phrase you picked as potentially relating to your book. If nothing else, that at least qualifies them beyond your casual browser.

Search Engine advertising is something worth checking into. Just be sure to do all the math in advance when you are setting your budget. If you decide to spend \$75 a month, per the example above, and you're making \$2.00 a copy in royalties on each book sold, then you need to feel comfortable that you're going to get a minimum of 38 people out of those 750 to buy one, just for you to break even. Granted, if only one in ten actually made a purchase, you'd be selling 75

copies a month at a Conversion Rate of 10%, and thereby doubling your investment, which is 100% ROI! You may even deem it a reasonable risk to “go negative” (i.e. spend more in advertising that you reap in royalties)—but *only* for a short time at the outset of a book launch, just for the exposure. That’s up to you. The important point is for you to be aware of the costs, the benefits, and then to monitor your Conversion Rate to see if it’s a worthwhile Alternative Marketing avenue for you.

If you do choose to give Search Engine advertising a whirl, know ahead of time **how much** you want to spend, and break that down to a daily amount. That’s what you’ll be asked for. Make up your list of **key words or phrases** ahead of time. You’ll need to get quotes on each one from the Search Engine to make your choices. As noted, some are very inexpensive, others can be very expensive, and there’s everything in between. Some word combinations you come up with may even be a waste of time. That is, as a part of the quote, the search engines use their historical statistics to tell you the maximum clicks they would estimate are available to you in a given day for your search word(s). For example if you picked “Fantasy Books,” it might tell you that it could support up to 3,000 clicks a day, and you would then be free to pay for as many of those per day as you wish to receive. But let’s say you happened to pick “The Peloponnesian Wars,” it might say that you could only expect 2 clicks a day. In that case, even if your budget was \$100 a day, you couldn’t expect to get more than two clicks a day from that search term. So you have to play a little trial-and-error with the system when you’re setting it up to find the combination you are comfortable with.

Lastly, make sure you have the **exact URL** of the page you want the person clicking to go. This need not be to a Home Page. It can be pointed right to a product page of your book. In fact, doing that is highly recommended. The fewer number of clicks a potential buyer has to make to get to what you want them to buy, the better. Just make sure that whatever page you send a searcher to has a free sample of the book available, or at least a good thorough description. Otherwise you’re showing someone a book they’ve never heard of, written by an author they’ve never heard of. In that instance, if the cover doesn’t catch them, you’re not giving them a whole lot upon which to make a purchase decision.

What’s undeniable is that Search Engine Advertising does work, is reasonably priced, and is one of the main reasons why Google’s stock was worth so much a their IPO. This is the primary mechanism of how they make their money. Yahoo is even bigger than Google. Even Microsoft is trying to get into the game. Nothing says you can’t use both, or even other search engines, simultaneously. They all work pretty much the same way, although some are more difficult to configure. Google, by far, is the easiest.

It is recommended that you think long and hard before buying any online advertising at Amazon or Barnes & Noble. While they are happy to sell you a prominent listing when someone is browsing their sites, you have to realize that 90% or more of the people who go to Amazon or Barnes & Noble already have a pretty good idea of what they want to buy. Those people are primarily seekers, not browsers, looking for the lowest price they can find for a specific item. Amazon and Barnes & Noble are primarily fulfillment points of sale, and do a good job at that part of the business. However, with the major search engines, the exact opposite is true. Otherwise, the searcher wouldn’t be searching on a generic key word of interest, they’d already be at

Amazon pricing the book they want. To prove this point, go to Google and enter any genre of book with the word “books” associated with it (Mystery Books, Fantasy Books, Science-Fiction, Horror Books, etc.), or just the word “Books” and then look at the Sponsored links that come up. Amazon will be at least one of them, if not more than one of them—and usually the very first one. So if all the book buying traffic were already headed to Amazon, Amazon wouldn’t be spending so much to advertise with Google. The beauty of it is, you can too!

Let us be clear. The whole concept of Alternative Marketing isn’t intended to circumvent traditional booksellers. It is to recognize that, in general, booksellers only want to carry books they believe have an existing level of demand to warrant stocking them. They have no motivation whatsoever to help a new author develop an audience. But after that author has successfully built a fan base and created a measurable level of demand, then the bookseller will be only too happy to feature the author’s products in his store, knowing that people already want to buy them. What Alternative Marketing does is solve the Catch-22 for the new up-and-coming author whose publisher hasn’t committed millions of dollars for a book launch and world tour.

So put on your thinking cap, get out the Yellow Pages, and start imagining which businesses in your town might be ripe targets for some Alternative Marketing idea—*other than* bookstores. And then go find out when the next PTA meeting is, and your next doctor’s appointment. If you want Internet traffic to come to your book page, it’s for sale. You just have to pay for it. Then again, you have to pay for all forms of marketing, one way or another. You just have to decide, as a part of your marketing plan, how much to spend on what. Then go do it.