

How to formulate a marketing strategy

The successful sale of *anything* begins with a clear understanding of the product being offered and the way in which it benefits a buyer. You have to know ‘em (your prospective readers) to sell ‘em (your books). You need a marketing strategy.

Marketing should persuade your audience to take some kind of action (in this case, buy your book – or at least visit your website or to Amazon.com to look inside the book and consider buying it). To formulate an effective marketing strategy, you’ll want to complete a series of analytical steps.

- **Define your target market** - Identify the kinds of people who make up the primary audience for the book.
- **Select the appropriate media channels** - Determine which forms of media the people in your target market pay the most attention to.
- **Clarify the book’s distinctive selling points** - Examine exactly what makes this book unique, and causes it to stand out from the tens-of-thousands of other books that exist in the same category and genre.
- **Develop traction statements** - A traction statement is one part advertising slogan (designed to grab your target audience’s attention), and one part a succinct answer to the question, “*What’s your book about?*” (designed to stimulate your target audience’s interest).
- **Assemble a list of key contacts** - This is a list of the actual people (including their mailing addresses, e-mail addresses, or telephone numbers as appropriate) who are affiliated with the media channels you selected (the people you must contact to spread the word about your book).

Completing these steps will help you craft and present messages that will get attention and cause readers, viewers, or listeners to take the action you want them to take.

Defining Your Target Market

In our current economy, it’s crucial to have a well-defined target market. You can’t afford to market to *everybody*. Self-publishers can most effectively compete with major publishers by targeting a specialized or niche market. Targeting a specific market does not mean excluding people who do not fit your primary criteria. Instead, it means focusing your marketing message on the people who are most likely to buy.

With a clearly defined target audience, it is much easier to determine where and how to market your book. Here are some tips to help you define your target market:

- **Study your “fan” base** - Who already likes your book or your writing? What characteristics or interests do those people have in common?
- **Study your competition** - Who are the publishers of other books (that are similar to yours) actively marketing and selling to, and (more importantly) who are they missing with their books and marketing messages that you might be able to reach with yours?
- **Analyze your product** - What do you and your book give the reader in terms of benefits? Entertainment, suspense, inspiration, education, help with a problem . . .? Write out every benefit you can think of, then try to identify the kinds of people who would need or want each of those benefits.
- **Examine demographic or psychographic traits** - Demographics include age, gender, race, location, occupation, income level, etc. Psychographics include values, behaviors, attitudes, lifestyle, hobbies, etc.
- **Evaluate the selected target** - Verify that the target audience you’ve identified (1) actually needs or wants your book, (2) can afford to buy it, and (3) can be reached in some way (so you can let them know it exists). If so, then you’re ready to select the appropriate media channel(s) for marketing to that audience.

Selecting Media Channels

There are essentially three categories of media:

- **The Traditional Media** - Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Getting coverage from these media channels takes time and (possibly) “connections.” Usually, the traditional media requires a lead time of 3 to 6 months before a book’s release date to consider it for review. Advertising via these channels is rarely cost-effective unless your niche market is exactly the same as that of a specialized magazine or a television channel/program that is watched almost exclusively by the individuals you are targeting.
- **The New Media** - Born out of the Internet, these media channels include blogs, e-zines, and websites. These outlets crave immediacy, so the ideal time to connect with them is from 1 to 2 months before and after the book is released. As with the traditional media, new media advertising is rarely effective unless a website has a large number of regular visitors, all of whom closely match your target criteria.
- **The Social Media** - Built on word-of-mouth that’s documented over the Internet and mobile platforms. This includes sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter as well as on-line communities for special interests. The social media is all about what’s happening right now. Getting the word out about your book via these channels is a continual process.

In addition to all the media channels in these three groups, the self-publishing author should always consider the use of direct marketing channels. Again, the traditional approaches like direct mail are rarely cost-effective, but in-person promotions (book signings, readings, speaking engagements, event selling, etc.) present huge opportunities.

Distinctive Selling Points and Traction Statements

With your target market (and the channels you’ll use to reach them) in mind, you can clarify your book’s distinctive selling points and develop one or more traction statements for use in your media communications.

Remember the benefits you listed earlier (when *analyzing your product*)? Which one does your book do *best* – or alternatively which one does your book do *better*, or radically *different*, than any competing books? For example, a recently self-published YA novel set in the American frontier is not only exciting, it is geographically and historically more detailed and accurate than similar books, which is a distinctive selling point with school librarians and with modern day residents of the locale in which the story is set.

Obviously, you need to have actually *read* your competition to be able to answer this (something a lot of aspiring authors haven’t done enough of). After all, if *you* can’t identify anything special about your book, why would a total stranger buy it?

As suggested previously, a good traction statement grabs your target market’s attention and sums up the essence of what the book is about, why it is different, and therefore worthy of a closer look. Imagine you’re at the mall and run into a colleague who would be in your target market or knows other people who are. You should be prepared to say, “*Hey, I have a new book called [Your Title] coming out next month. It’s . . . [and this is where you’d use the traction statement].*” The better that statement is, and the more times people hear and share it, the more traction your book gains in the marketplace you’re targeting. When you develop a good traction statement, you may find that a phrase within it makes a perfect subtitle or an ideal back cover headline for the book.

Assembling a Key Contacts List and Drafting a Marketing Strategy

You know your primary target market, the channels through which you can reach that market, and the messages you want delivered. All that’s left now are the comparatively simple tasks of assembling a list that contains the points of contact for each media channel or direct marketing opportunity, and then mapping out when and how you will make those contacts.

Unless your book release date is already set in stone for some reason, it’s best not to use actual dates in this planning process, but rather measure time by the number of days before or after the book’s release that you need to have made a certain contact to be most effective. For example, if you’re planning a release party on the day the book is published (Day 0), you might want to make key contact announcing that event thirty days in advance (Day –30), and post news and photos from the event within the next

three days (Day +3). That way, if other tasks associated with the publication of the book cause the release date to be moved sooner or later (it's usually later), you don't have to regenerate the entire plan.

Conclusion

Defining your target market is the hard part. Once you know *who* you are targeting, it is much easier to figure out which media you can use to reach them, and what marketing messages will resonate with them. Most self-publishing newbies skip this exercise, and then post complaints in various self-publishing communities that their books aren't selling. If you've already published and failed to formulate a marketing strategy, it's never too late. You might just breathe new life into your sales.