



Q20 Questions answered by Lissa Warren

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publicist



Lissa Warren has worked in the publicity department of
Several prestigious Boston publishing houses including

David R. Godine, Houghton Mifflin, and Perseus Publishing, and is currently Senior Director of Publicity at [Da Capo Press](#), a member of the Perseus Books Group. She teaches a graduate course in book publicity at Emerson College.

It is a perfect fit for Lissa to be associated with [The Perseus Books Group](#), which was founded with the belief that insightful books of quality are both necessary and desirable. That an innovative model is possible, where the power of the group supports editorial freedom, creative energy, and quality publishing. That authors, readers, booksellers -- and books -- matter.

1. Does the approach to promoting a book differ between fiction and nonfiction?

It does, to some extent. The basics are the same—go out with galleys nice and early, try to secure the four major advance reviews (*Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Library Journal*, and *Booklist*), follow-up with the media like crazy. But with non-fiction you have the opportunity to tie in to current

events—which can mean greater exposure. Also, with fiction, the publicity is much more author-focused. You’re promoting a person, not just a book.

2. How many ‘hats’ does an author need to wear from the moment of inspiration to cashing her check?

More than they think—and they need to put them on nice and early. These days, an author really has to start thinking about his or her audience—especially for non-fiction—at the proposal or manuscript stage. You have to have a very clear sense of who your book is for, and you have to show that you know of ways to reach them. At Da Capo, we like to see proposals that have a section on promotional ideas—whether it’s organizations with which the author is affiliated, media contacts that they’ve established, bookstores with which they have relationships, lectures that they intend to give, conferences they plan to attend, or acquaintances who are movers-and-shakers who will help support the book in some fashion. This is not to say the writing and the concept of the book don’t matter. Of course they do. But they’re only a part of the picture.

3. You’ve written [The Savvy Author's Guide to Book Publicity](#), so you know what it is like to be on the author’s side of promoting a book. Most would think that you’d naturally had everything you needed, or were you required to do what other authors have to do to promote their books?

I’d imagine my experience was pretty typical, actually. Yes, I had more media contacts than most, but I also knew enough to let my publicist do the approaching for me since most media people prefer not to be contacted by authors directly. And like other authors, I had to get out there and pound the pavement. I gave talks to a number of different writing organizations—still do, actually. I wrote original articles tied to my book. I created a website (www.savvyauthorsguide.com).

4. Some believe they might as well self-publish because they’ll have to do all the promotional work themselves. So, why not keep all the money? How much truth is there to this school of thought?

If you publish with a reputable house, you won't have to do all the promotional work yourself. You'll have a publicist who is assigned to your book. Their skill-level, their connections, their tenacity, their workload—that'll be a bit of a crapshoot. But they'll still be better than nothing. Also, if you publish with a reputable house, they'll have a sales team that'll work aggressively to get your book in stores and a distribution system that enables them to do so. You're not likely to have that if you self-publish. And "visibility" in the stores, as we call it, matters.

5. What's the usual, if there is one, procedure for pitching a household-name author?

With a well-known author, it's usually all about handling the incoming requests. You don't have to go out and pitch as much because the media comes to you. But there's an element of competition that comes into play when it's a well-known author. *Time* magazine won't want to profile an author if *Newsweek* is already doing so. National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" won't want to have an author on if "All Things Considered" has already done so. NBC's "Today Show" won't open up its studio to an author if she's already been on ABC's "Good Morning America." You get the idea. Everyone wants to be first when it's someone big.

6. What can a new author look for in the way of help getting her book out to the reading public?

New authors have an edge and are also at a disadvantage. The edge comes from the fact that every media person loves to "discover" someone. The disadvantage comes from the fact that they don't have a proven track-record of writing good books.

I feel it's important for new authors to focus on becoming "known" by the bookstores. This can be accomplished by doing author events at the stores—in other words, giving talks—or by doing drop-by stock signings. For drop-bys, you simply swing by a store to autograph any and all copies they have on hand. While you're at it, introduce yourself to the booksellers, because they're in a unique position to help you promote your book via staff

recommendations (in the store's newsletter, on the store's website, or as part of store displays) and via simply suggesting your book to customers who are looking for a good read or a book on a particular topic.

“...their job isn't over when they're done *writing* the book. In fact, it's just beginning.”

7. What is the biggest mistake you've seen authors make when picked up by a publisher?

There are two. They either fail to get to know the people who are going to be responsible for promoting their book (chiefly, their publicist and the marketing person assigned to their book) or they get to know them but become a bull in a china shop and start making demands, expressing unrealistic expectations, or, worse, taking matters into their own hands—riding right over their promotional team by hiring outside help and/or going to the media and the bookstores directly. Authors need to work *with* the publishing team, not against it. Our favorite authors are the ones who feel like *partners* in the process.

8. If you could educate authors about one thing *before* they have their book accepted, what would that be?

That their job isn't over when they're done *writing* the book. In fact, it's just beginning.

9. In your book, you have a couple of sections. One is: What is Book Publicity? And the other is: What Book P.R. is *Not*. Can you give us one point about each section?

From *What is Book Publicity*, I'd emphasize the fact that when we talk about book publicity, we're not just talking about book *reviews*. There are other kinds of print coverage to secure—such as profile pieces, op-eds, columns, feature articles, Q&As, and excerpts. And then there's broadcast publicity to go for—radio and TV. From *What Book P.R. is Not*, I'd say keep in mind that your main goal as an author should be to sell books. As a result, you may be able to command a larger speaker's fee, or get a promotion or tenure, or grow your own company, or sell your own product. But the book has got to come first.

10. Lissa, you have a reputation of combining brains and heart. But, we know there is some frightening 'press,' in general, about publicists at the publishing houses. What can an author do to garner the attention of her publicist?

Get to know her. It's true that most publicists have an impossibly heavy workload and that they have to work hardest on books that are a high priority for the company—books for which big advances were paid, books with high print runs, and books by house authors. That means that many midlist (and smaller) titles could easily get short shrift. The way to avoid that is to establish a relationship with your publicist. Show her that you appreciate her efforts. Make it clear that you're willing to do anything you can to help her promote your book. Offer to work with her on the press material (particularly the author bio, Q&A, and talking points). Email her your photo as a 300 dpi jpg so that she has it if the media needs it, and try to think of any other materials you can send her (such as videotape of a prior interview) to make her job easier and more productive.

11. When is it in the best interest for an author to hire a freelance publicist?

When the enthusiasm of your in-house publicist clearly doesn't square with yours, either in terms of level or in terms of focus. She may be very excited about your book but just not "get it." Or she may "get it" but not care (or not be able to care because of all the other, higher-profile titles on which she's working). But before you enlist the services of an outside publicist, have a heart-to-heart with your in-house publicist. It's the courteous thing to do (after all, you are, in a sense, firing her), plus she may be able to recommend freelancers with whom she likes working and from whom she has seen good results in the past. She may also have thoughts on what, specifically, you need to hire a freelancer to do—tour-city support, local media where you live, radio interviews, national magazine coverage, reviews in major-market papers, bookstore events. Encourage her to be honest about which aspects of the campaign she'll be able to handle and which portions of it are beyond her reach. You may find out that what you really need is a lecture agent or someone to do a Web campaign for you, and not a freelance publicist at all.

**“Hi Oprah, baby, how ya doin’?
Boy, have I got an author for you...”**

12. Is an author's website and/or a blog enough to promote a book, by itself? Please take into consideration that the author may not feel qualified to speak publicly.

An author's website or blog can be a key component of a promotional campaign, but rarely will it suffice as the sole means of getting the word out. If you fear public speaking, consider hiring a media coach. They can help you become comfortable in front of a camera or microphone...or an audience of several hundred. And remember, a lot of interviews are done via phone—or even via email.

13. What are your expectations of an author, to complement your efforts, ensuring the best possible sales?

Well, I always appreciate it when an author educates himself or herself about book publicity. Read my book (or one of the others on the topic) to at least learn the lingo so that we can converse, and to get a sense of the publicity timeline. Take a workshop on book publicity (Bella Stander's Book Promotion 101 is excellent). Talk with your fellow authors to get a sense of what has worked for them—and what hasn't. And please make yourself available to me. If you don't have a cell phone, buy one. If you don't use email, learn to. If you were planning to take a vacation right around pub-date, postpone it so that you're here when I need you. And if you can line up some speaking gigs for around the time your book comes out, that'd be great. They'll be a great opportunity for back-of-the-room sales, and they might even be a means of getting you to cities where I could piggyback media.

14. Speaking of money, do you have a ballpark figure regarding expenditures picked up by a new author, engaged in a healthy promotional campaign?

If you've published with a major or fairly-major house and they're doing right by your book publicity-wise, it shouldn't cost you a dime. But if you decide to hire a freelance publicist, it can cost you up to \$25,000 for a full-campaign. If you want to fund your own Web campaign, it can cost you anywhere from \$2500-\$5000 (double that if you also need them to build you a website). If you want to do a 20-market radio satellite tour or a 20-market TV satellite tour, add another \$3500 or \$15,000, respectively. A media coach can cost you a cool \$5000. A lecture agent shouldn't cost you anything up-front, but they'll take 10-20% of any speaker's fee they get you. And if you want to fund your own tour, figure on around a thousand dollars per city (for airfare, hotel, and meals)...though you can always keep it cheap by driving and staying with friends.

15. What do you like most about working with authors?

I like it when a really good author finally finds his or her audience. I like it when a good book gets a good review—and I like getting to be the one to forward it to the author. I like being able to interact on a daily basis with people who aren't afraid to try to put words on a page—not an easy task, even for those who are truly gifted—and people who stand behind those

words when they're shared with the public in book form. That takes guts, as far as I'm concerned.

16. You have a chapter entitled *Seven Questions NOT to Ask Your Publicist*. We won't ask for all seven, nor a detailed explanation like your book offers, but we'd love to know what the #1 question is.

"Have you tried Oprah?" Now, this question is silly on several levels. For starters, it implies that I have the ability to actually get Oprah Winfrey on the phone ("Hi Oprah, baby, how ya doin'? Boy, have I got an author for you..."). The fact is, I have enough trouble getting one of her *producers* on the phone. But it also suggests that I may never have even thought of trying to get you on "Oprah." Trust me, if your book is even remotely appropriate for this show I've tried to get you on there—because I know what a difference it would make in the sales of your book, and what that would mean for both of us.

17. What have you found to be an author's most common unfounded fear toward book promotion?

They all live in fear of bad reviews. Unfortunately, sometimes it's unfounded and sometimes it's not. The other biggie is heading to a bookstore to give a talk, only to find that no one shows up. Unfortunately, that can happen, too. Like I said, this publishing thing—it takes a certain chutzpah.

18. When you chose to become a publicist, you must have had a clear idea of what you wanted to accomplish. What was that vision and how are you doing, in your eyes?

In all honesty, I kind of just fell into it. I was an English Education major undergrad, with a double-minor in Creative Writing and American Lit. I always thought I'd be an editor, or possibly an English Professor. But my first "job" in publishing was an internship that combined editorial and publicity...and, somehow, I just gravitated toward the publicity. As for how

I'm doing, well...I'm a book publicist. That means I'm far too busy to take a step back and think about it. So you tell me!

19. Last month our [Inspiration](#) column featured five breast cancer survivors that met through having their story printed in an anthology. As we became acquainted, we quickly came to love each one. We knew we wanted to utilize **WOW!** to contribute toward the growing awareness of how many survivors there are and how they have gone beyond surviving and conquered.

[Da Capo Press](#) has published [Nordie's at Noon](#), the personal stories of four women "too young" for breast cancer and their monthly luncheons.

Lissa, how does the process differ from the norm, when working with four authors?

First, hats off to my colleague Kate Kazeniak Burke, who handled the publicity for *Nordie's at Noon* and dealt with its authors. The last time I worked on a title by four authors, it was a book about the Internet called *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. That was six or seven years ago. I can tell you that, in general, having multiple authors does make things more complicated in terms of communication. Also, it can be awkward when the media wants one author and not another, based on their different backgrounds and strengths. But, on a more positive note, it means you can divide and conquer. One author can do west coast events, another can do east coast. One can handle the radio interviews while the other does TV. So, on the whole, it's a good thing—just slightly more exhausting.

20. **FUN QUESTION:** Since our theme is *Authors' Staircase*, and you *are* an author, what would your fantasy staircase look like and where would it lead?

It would be a padded staircase so that, when I get home exhausted from a busy day of pitching, if I trip over my own two feet on the way up to my bedroom it won't hurt.

Lissa's concluding thoughts for WOW! readers:

Thanks for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this subject. I welcome feedback at lissa@savvyauthorsguide.com. Good luck to all of you who have a book to promote.—Lissa

WOW's closing comments:

Lissa, you have come to us highly recommended by one of your colleagues, (thank you, Patty Park) and you've had outstanding reviews from the likes of *Publishers Weekly*, and many more. We appreciate your sharing your heart, time and experience with us. You've made this a "Bookmark This!" column. Thank you and WOW! looks forward to having you visit again.

Lissa would love for you to visit her at:

www.savvyauthorsguide.com

or

Contact:

lissa@savvyauthorsguide.com