

## How to Suck at Self-Promotion

During a book-signing I once did, the store manager approached me with a laugh. “You kind of suck at self-promotion, Tanya.”

Her declaration came after watching me convince two different customers to buy someone else’s books instead of mine. (Both readers had said they needed something funny. Since my novel was a tear-jerker, I recommended some romantic comedies instead.) But that book-signing was an unusual circumstance. I don’t *really* suck at self-promotion. Except for forgetting to pack my business cards at a convention last May. And let’s not talk about how I botched my first ever pitch appointment to an editor years ago. Or how I haven’t logged into my Pinterest account since...

Okay, fine. I kind of suck at self-promotion. Which means I can give you pointers on how you, too, can screw up promoting yourself and your books! Just follow these handy tips to avoid leaving an impression on people or perhaps alienate them entirely.

1. Be unprepared.
2. Blend in.
3. Be memorable—for all the wrong reasons!
4. Be too shy to network.
5. Don’t be shy enough—boldly follow literary agents to the bathroom to pitch your manuscript and angrily explain to online reviewers why they’re wrong.
6. Treat social media platforms like your own personal infomercial.
7. Remain firmly in your comfort zone.

If some of these behaviors sound familiar—and you don’t actually want to join me in the ranks of terrible self-promoters—don’t worry, I have good news. We all make mistakes; most of them are fixable.

### Preparedness

It’s good practice to always have a few small items with you, like business

cards or bookmarks. These aren't just handy for writing conferences and reader events. I've had book-related conversations on planes, in restaurants, and at cocktail parties. When people take an interest in what you write, there's a possibility they'll go home and look up your books online, but that possibility becomes stronger if they have a visual reminder.

Another way to prepare yourself is to have a one-sentence summary for each of your books. Most of us walk into editor or agent pitch appointments with notes about our story. But what if an industry professional or potential reader asks in a more casual setting, when you don't have notes? Do you have a concise, coherent answer ready to give?

Unfortunately, something else you might want to prepare for is negative reactions. If you write romance, there may come a day when someone makes a snide remark in a public setting. How will you handle this? Do you want to share with them impressive statistics about the genre? Do you want to list some of the many subgenres, demonstrating that romance offers something for just about every reader? Or do you want to ignore them and walk away? Thinking ahead may save you from flying into a defensive rage which (even if deserved) rarely makes anyone look good.

## **Getting Lost in the Crowd**

Just as we don't want our books to be like everyone else's, nor should we try to promote ourselves in the exact same way every other author does. If we do, how can we stand out? While it *is* good practice to have promotional staples like bookmarks, I've volunteered at many conferences where it felt like we had to throw away a metric ton of leftover bookmarks and blurb brochures from the goody room. What is it about your piece of paper that will convince an attendee to pick it up when she already has forty similar items in her bag? I personally favor longer-lasting items like pens or jar openers, but there are still ways to make traditional paper items distinctive.

One item that caught my eye was the "Flat Cowboy" (a bookmark in the actual shape of a cowboy, rather than a rectangle with covers on it) promoting B.J. Daniels, author of *Wild Horses*. When I told her how much I loved her idea, she said she couldn't take credit. "One of my editors at Harlequin saw a cut-out bookmark and said, 'B.J. needs those.'" They were a huge hit, which Daniels reported back to her editor. There are now five

different cowboys, and fans upload Flat Cowboy Selfies to Facebook. “It took off!” says Daniels. “Flat Cowboy has been on all kinds of trips...Everyone wants one. I have had readers buy my book because they liked the bookmark so much.”

But as much fun as Flat Cowboy is, Daniels adds that there’s another form of promo she swears by. “Years ago...an author told me to keep snail mail addresses and send out announcements of my books. I took that to heart. I still send postcards when I have a book coming out to my now almost 1500 loyal fans. I know what you’re thinking. All that postage and expense? But I’ve found that because of the Internet, hardly anyone gets real mail anymore.” A number of her readers collect the cards and even take them into bookstores as a reminder to get the new release. “I know it's old school, but...in this competition for attention, emails don’t always cut it.”

## **Standing Out...But Not in the Good Way**

As authors, we aren’t merely promoting a single book, but ourselves. We don’t want readers just to buy the next title; we want them to buy all our releases. And when editors or fellow writers are planning anthology collections or trying to decide which authors to invite into a special project, we want our names to be mentioned. Self-promotion is so much more than the banner ad you place on a website or the box of freebies you give away at a conference. It’s the impression you make every time you interact with others, whether in person or online. Of course, there are times we fear that impression has been less than stellar.

We all have embarrassing moments we’d rather people don’t remember, ranging from getting someone’s name wrong to that time I bumped a hotel painting with my shoulder and it fell on my head while I was meeting my new editor for the first time. The good news is, a humiliating faux pas or case of nervous rambling is not a career killer. If it were, there would be a whole bunch of us no longer writing. As it turns out, I’m not the only one who cringes at the memory of my first editor pitch.

Sophia Henry (*Delayed Penalty*) recalls, “I forgot everything—including my name—and started by saying, ‘Um, yeah, so my book has a hero and, um, he plays hockey.’ The editor told me to take a deep breath and remember that she's just a regular person. Her words helped me calm down and carry

on a regular conversation with her.” Even though Henry still didn’t remember what she’d intended to say, she was able to successfully recover from her rocky start, and the editor requested the full manuscript.

## **Introverts Unite**

Writing requires long hours at the computer, usually in solitude. Some of us spend more time with fictional people than real ones, which can make networking a daunting task. You may be tempted to skip opportunities like crowded conferences.

If you’re naturally introverted, you could start with smaller conferences or writing retreats and work your way up to bigger ones. It may help to travel with a friend or critique partner, but don’t cling to them like a security blanket to the exclusion of meeting other people. Most conferences have more than one workshop being presented at the same time—divide and conquer! Go to a workshop alone, where you can take notes and brave sitting next to a stranger, while your friend does the same. Then meet up later for a snack and swap notes. If you find yourself seated with people you don’t know at lunch, you can always ask them what they’re currently reading. The majority of writers may be introverts, but we’re also booklovers! Talking about stories—whether plotlines of books or our favorite TV shows—is a quick way to break the ice.

Speaking opportunities are yet another form of promoting and networking. As with conferences, if you’re nervous, I suggest starting small. Volunteer to be a moderator (the person who introduces the workshop speaker). It’s a two to three minute job that gives you practice speaking into the microphone and facing an audience. You can also participate in panel discussions, rather than doing a solo workshop. As Natasha Boyd (*Deep Blue Eternity*) discovered, speaking to other writers can lead to unexpected benefits.

“When I was on vacation abroad,” Boyd says, “I reached out to speak with a local romance writers group. I didn’t know a soul, was nervous and almost cancelled several times. But that small meeting resulted in me not only being asked to be on a romance panel with one of the attendees, but also in another lady reviewing three of my books for a women’s magazine.

These opportunities arose simply because I swallowed my nerves and showed up. Put yourself out there, and great things will start happening!”

### **Self-Editing...Not Just for Our Manuscripts**

Seeking out networking opportunities for yourself should never mean bulldozing someone else. Interrupting an editor’s conversation to introduce yourself comes across as rude, and you shouldn’t put an industry professional on the spot by asking in the middle of a publisher workshop why they rejected you.

Then there’s the emboldening power of the Internet. We have at our fingertips dozens of methods for sharing and exchanging opinions, but are you doing so in a way that articulates a viewpoint worth considering, or are you basically just calling everyone who disagrees with you a moron? Make sure that whatever you’re putting out there comes from a conscious decision and not a kneejerk reaction, especially if you’re on deadline and haven’t slept in forty-eight hours.

### **Remembering to Keep the Social in Social Media**

There are many platforms authors can use, but it’s important to remember that a key to using social media is actual socializing. Do you talk with people, or do you talk at them? Is your every post “BUY MY BOOK?” Because that’s boring. If I look at a week’s worth of tweets from a writer and none of them have entertained me, informed me, or made me think, why should I assume the author’s books will do any of those things?

While no one should treat social media like their own personal twenty-four-seven infomercial, you do want to provide pertinent details to interested readers. Among her daily observations about parenting, literature and laundry, debut author Sally Kilpatrick (*The Happy Hour Choir*) excitedly tweeted that she’d just received her first ARCs. “But I forgot to mention the title and release date or include a link for preorders. I even forgot to explain that an ARC was an advanced reader copy.”

## The Double-Edged Comfort Zone

Whatever forms of self-promotion you tackle, you'll get more comfortable with them over time. But don't let yourself fall into the trap of sticking so closely to a comfy routine that you stop looking for outside opportunities. You can be completely relaxed speaking to your local writing organization, but if it's your third workshop in two years to the same twenty-five people, are you reaching anyone new? If you have a great workshop on plot, you don't even have to limit your audience to romance writers—authors of all genres could benefit and you can expand your networking community.

In fact, this article started life as a much smaller piece for my chapter newsletter, where I've happily submitted dozens of times. Fellow writer Maggie Worth reminded me to think bigger. As she put it, "When we fail, we instinctively try something new. But when we succeed, we keep doing what works and too often forget that we have other options."

When it comes to promoting yourself, your options are limitless. Think big. And be willing to forgive yourself if, from time to time, something backfires and you find yourself thinking, "Well. That sucked." I'm told it happens to the best of us.