

When Well-planned Book Marketing Strategies Fail

by

Robert D. Sutherland
Editor, The Pikestaff Press

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The occasional failure of well-planned and well-executed promotional efforts to generate book sales is an issue that perhaps requires more discussion than it normally gets. In marketing my novel *The Farringford Cadenza* I've experienced two such failures which colleagues might find interesting (and even useful). I certainly find them interesting—as well as irksome and puzzling.

It's always disappointing when a well-planned marketing strategy fails to produce sales; and it's particularly frustrating when, to the best of your ability, you've done everything "right": identified the target audience, done the necessary research to design promotional materials for an effective "pitch", and delivered those materials into the proper hands. On two occasions while promoting my mystery *The Farringford Cadenza* (The Pikestaff Press, 2007), I've found that—contrary to logic and counter to informed intuition—my hopefully scattered seeds fell on stony ground.

CASE 1. Since the novel has classical music as one of its chief components, and its main action is organized around the avid pursuit by a number of diverse characters of a missing manuscript of a cadenza for solo piano, it seemed to me that professional musicians would be a logical niche audience to receive promotional materials. These materials consisted of a letter that described the book (briefly summarizing its action), depicted its cover, and provided purchase information. In addition to the book's being well reviewed in a number of venues, two concert pianists and the former principal flute of the London Symphony Orchestra had praised it, and these endorsements were included in the materials.

To obtain my list of professional musicians, I researched the teaching faculties of all the nation's major conservatories and university music departments. I list them here not to be pedantic, but to show the number of schools and their geographical distribution: Boston Conservatory, U. of Cincinnati, Curtis Institute, Eastman, Juilliard, Levine School of Music, Manhattan School of Music, U. of Maryland, New England Conservatory, Oberlin Conservatory, Peabody Conservatory (located in Baltimore, MD, where much of the book's action takes place, and which enters into the story, though under a different name), San Francisco Conservatory, USC at

Los Angeles (Thornton School of Music), Cleveland Institute, Yale, Indiana U. (Jacobs School), Interlochen Arts Academy, Blair School of Music (Vanderbilt U.), Bard College Conservatory, and Illinois Wesleyan University.

From these various institutions, I selected the faculty members who were to receive promotional materials on the basis of (1) their instrumental specialties (piano, flute, trumpet, violin, etc.), (2) their academic interests (composition, theory, musicology, etc.) and performance histories, (3) where they had done their own training (and particularly if they had studied at Peabody), and (4) what their non-musical interests were (writing, reading, collecting). From the twenty schools of music I selected 369 individuals whom I thought would be the most likely to find my promotional materials interesting. I assumed that if they purchased the book (and liked it) they would tell their colleagues and friends, lend their copies out, and purchase additional copies as gifts (a promotional ripple effect). My timing had the letters arrive in early autumn, well in advance of holiday gift-buying. Altogether, I spent almost three months doing research, selecting recipients, and preparing and mailing the 369 customized cover letters. These efforts resulted in *one* sale—an outcome that I found not only disheartening, but *baffling*.

The niche marketing strategy had seemed valid: contacting a carefully selected group of musicians (performers, composers, musicologists, etc.)—teachers all, deeply committed to music, and to nurturing the next generation of practitioners. The flatline response was not only contrary to what I perceived to be the logic of my plan, but counter-intuitive as well. Was I naïve to think that musicians would be interested in my novel? Is it possible they don't read mysteries, or for that matter, any sort of fiction? Are they too busy teaching, performing, traveling, and practicing to read at all? Was there something about my promotional materials that didn't resonate with 368 diverse people? Having carefully crafted my pitch, I'm at a loss to know how I could've improved it. I find this non-response a real-life mystery that I haven't yet solved.

CASE 2. Two years ago I decided that I should make a concerted effort to market the book to public libraries. Because there are many hundreds of libraries in the United States, and my promotional budget is limited, it seemed reasonable to launch an experimental trial run before committing printing and postage money to a broad-based scattergun approach. Since much of the action of *The Farringford Cadenza* takes place in Baltimore and on the island of St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, I focused on a regional effort, targeting public libraries in the State of Maryland and in Christiansted, St. Croix, where theoretically there would be local interest.

While Maryland has some prestigious freestanding libraries like the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, many libraries in the state are housed

in County systems, in which a main library situated in a particular town has administrative jurisdiction over a variable number of branch facilities in other towns. When I was visiting my son's family in Ellicott City, I asked the acquisitions librarian at Elkridge Branch Library (the one near his home) if Elkridge would consider purchase of *The Farringford Cadenza*. The librarian said that she didn't have the authority to purchase books; that those decisions were made at the Central Library for Howard County, located in Columbia.

Using the website < <http://www.publiclibraries.com/> > which lists all U. S. libraries alphabetically by State, with addresses, I compiled a list of Maryland libraries and obtained the address of the public library in Christiansted. I decided to pitch my inquiry to the chief or main library in each of the Maryland County systems. It seemed logical to assume that if the acquisitions staff at a particular main library purchased the book for their collection, they might make a blanket purchase for all the branches in their jurisdiction.

Back in Illinois with my targets identified, I again prepared promotional materials: a letter with a brief description of the book, depiction of the cover, and the endorsements as before, with an order blank for purchasing. But in these materials, I highlighted that the action took place in Baltimore (or respectively, in Christiansted) as a detail that might catch the staff's interest, and included ISBN and LCCN (Library of Congress Control Number). As a special incentive, I announced in large font that libraries purchasing directly from the publisher would receive a discount of 33 1/3% from list price (\$10.63 net for a book priced at \$15.95).

In all, there were thirty libraries on my list. I printed the customized letters and once again stuffed envelopes and affixed first-class postage. Later, in May, 2011, I arranged (free of charge to me) for Association Book Exhibit (ABE) to display the book in Ocean City at the Maryland Library Association convention, in the hope that seeing my book's cover might jog the memories of County acquisitions staff who'd received my materials. How many sales resulted from all these efforts? *Not one*. It was as though a black hole had swallowed everything.

I began my experiment by targeting libraries in the State of Maryland, thinking it stood to reason that interest would be relatively high in the region closest to the scene of action (Baltimore). But even if interest was quickened, it didn't translate into sales.

In both of these cases I did the best I could to frame approaches that would generate sales. My research was thorough, my planning meticulous, my presentation and wording of materials carefully calibrated for specific recipients. In targeting the musicians, whom I saw as a logical and "natural" niche market, I tried to think outside the box. In targeting the Maryland libraries, I employed logic and a systematic approach that simply didn't bear

fruit. The question remains: if my efforts in Maryland were so futile, should I approach other libraries in other states with individualized mass mailings? Would a campaign in Oregon be more successful? Oklahoma? Minnesota? And should I try the Maryland libraries again? Marketing gurus tell us that frequently multiple exposures are required for an advertisement to impact a potential target: maybe on the fifth encounter the target will take notice and act on it. But to balance that, there's a popular definition currently floating about that may be worth considering: "Insanity is when you try something and, finding that it doesn't work, you try it again the same way, confident that the outcome will be different." I'm not inclined to spend the time, energy, and money on continuing the experiment with 49 other states.

The library failure, like that of the musicians' campaign, is frustrating and discouraging. But like many failures in promotion, its cause may lie in variables beyond a marketer's control—external events, a bad economy, shrinking acquisitions budgets, habits of buying in bulk from jobber-distributors rather than directly from publishers. The musicians' lack of response is more problematical.

Though they are disappointing, failures are inevitable accompaniments to marketing. Promoters must be prepared to take them in stride, as bumps in the road, and go marching on. Good marketers must think outside the box, using analysis and imagination to discern potential new markets and to devise innovative and effective ways of reaching them. And in planning strategy, they must strive always to do everything "right" as the best hope for achieving success.

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