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# PRICE *of* PROMOTION

BY ANICA MROSE RISSI



**TAKE  
THESE STEPS  
FOR A  
DIY BOOK  
LAUNCH.**



**L**IKE MANY DEBUT AUTHORS, I spent the months leading up to my book's release date dancing around with excitement, nerves and energy to burn. I knew my publisher was doing lots of work to get the book out there, and I was eager to step up and do my part to help. But what would increase my chances even more for success?

As a former executive editor with more than 13 years of experience at three major publishing houses, I was all too aware that there is no magic formula for making a book a success. If there were, authors and publishers would follow it every time, and all books would sell to expectations. An author

and his or her publisher can pour huge amounts of time, money and talent into a book's marketing and publicity campaign and see little or no effect on sales – and sometimes a book with almost no promotion takes off via an alchemy of its own. I knew the energy and cash I'd be investing to help promote my novel would be only a drop in the bucket, and that it takes a lot of drops to make a bucket overflow – more drops than my budget of “as cheaply as possible” was likely to produce. Yet I still wanted to do *something* – preferably without going crazy or broke.

Instead of thinking of my promotional efforts as the key that might potentially make or break my book (a sure path to insanity), I tried to think of the promotion as part of the celebration and choose expenses that would be worth it to me in other ways – to focus on tasks that I thought would be fun. And because I had more time to spend than money to burn, I took a DIY approach.

My first book was coming out. Hooray! Here's what I did to celebrate, and what it cost.





### Created an author website and established a social media presence

Since I lack html skills, I used Squarespace to build my website, using a 10-percent off promotion code I found through one of the podcasts the company sponsors. I was already on Facebook and Twitter, and joining Goodreads and Google+ took minimal effort. Among these, Google+ seemed to offer minimal return. Twitter, on the other hand, was chock-full of book people. I used FeedBurner to send my occasional blog posts to my Goodreads and Amazon author pages and allow fans (read: my mom) to subscribe to them by email. Should I have joined Tumblr, Pinterest and Instagram as well? Perhaps. But I wanted to leave myself some time to write.

**Dollar cost:** \$182 for the first two years of the website

**Time cost:** About 5 hours for the initial website setup, plus 2-3 hours per month for content updates and obsessive monitoring of visitor statistics. I don't want to think about how many hours I spend on social media, but since I'd have been scrolling through Twitter and Facebook anyway, even without a book coming out, I'm telling myself those hours don't count. Please don't puncture the illusion.



### Coordinated an online cover reveal with a popular kid lit blogger

My author website was up and running, but it wasn't getting much traffic. When my editor sent me the final cover for the book (and I nearly passed out from happiness because suddenly the book was real), I reached out to a blogger whose site I like and asked if she would host a cover reveal.

Cover reveal day feels like a birthday without the stress. I highly recommend doing one, just for the celebration of it.

**Dollar cost:** None

**Time cost:** 30 minutes coordinating the cover reveal, plus a few hours on social media the day it went live.



### Gave my advance copies away

My editor sent me 12 copies of the book's bound galley, also known as advance reader copies. After hugging each one and taking several photos, I was tempted to share the ARCs with my family and friends, but instead I kept one for myself, gave one to my parents and used the other 10 strategically. I sent nine with handwritten notes to booksellers, authors, librarians and bloggers (most of whom I knew only through Twitter) who I hoped might like and champion the

book. I used the last one for a Goodreads giveaway, which is an easy and cheap way to bring a book to the attention of a whole lot of people who like to read. That giveaway went so well (about 1,000 people entered, and several hundred added it to their TBR lists) that I asked my publisher to help do another giveaway leading up to the book's on-sale date. I posted that giveaway for five signed hardcovers, and my publicist provided and mailed the books.

**Dollar cost:** \$14 in postage

**Time cost:** 45 minutes signing and mailing the bound galleys; 16 minutes posting the two giveaways.



### Designed and printed shelf talkers to share with independent bookstores

I am a local bookstore nut – the kind of tourist who seeks them out in every place I visit – and one of my dreams as an author is to have my book sold in lots of independent bookstores. While browsing in one of my favorite Brooklyn indies, I thought of a way to help spark booksellers' interest.

Several months before publication, my editor had shared the book with two best-selling authors who kindly wrote praise quotes, also known as "blurbs." My publisher printed the blurbs on the book jacket, shared them with retailers and posted them online. I asked if I could use them to make shelf talkers – signs that call attention to a book – for my publisher to send to independent bookstores. My editor liked the idea and the marketing team agreed. They helped me write a letter introducing myself and the book to the 200 booksellers who would be receiving the mailing.

When my publisher said yes to the shelf talkers, I cheered and then panicked. I didn't actually know how to make shelf talkers or have any idea how much printing them might cost. After an hour of Internet research, my heart rate slowed and my breathing returned to normal. Although it's possible to spend hundreds of dollars on fancy laminated signs in custom shapes, I found I could get standard sizes with a non-glossy finish for cheap. I recruited a friend with some Photoshop skills, peered over his shoulder giving directions for an evening and sent in my order. They turned out great.

**Dollar cost:** \$97

**Time cost:** 5.5 hours



### Visited my publishing house to give thank-you cookies to the team

Most authors get to have contact with their editor and publicist and the editor's assistant, but behind every book is a whole team of people – from designers and production



editors to marketing managers, sales reps, subsidiary rights managers and more – who nurture, feed and support the book throughout the publishing process. I'm genuinely grateful for all those people, and it never hurts to be the author who brings sugar and says thank you. When I visited my publishing house for a meeting with my editor, I brought 50 packages of ginger-molasses cookies, tied with ribbons and thank-you notes.

**Dollar cost:** \$14 for cookie ingredients and packaging

**Time cost:** About 9 hours – for baking the cookies and packing them beautifully. Note: If I had realized how time-consuming dog bone-shaped thank-you notes would be to create, cut out, color in and tie up, I might have designed the packaging a bit differently – and two hours to deliver.



### Created a book trailer

Book trailers get a bad rap for being time-consuming, expensive and unlikely to have much impact on sales, but I wanted to create one anyway. I thought it would be a fun way to show off the book's interior illustrations and give me something of substance to post on social media.

I scoured YouTube for kid lit book trailers to get a sense of how others approached them. The best-looking ones I found were all partially or fully animated, which I knew I could not do myself. I decided to start in on the parts I *could* do and worry about the rest later.

I borrowed some recording equipment, wrote a script for the voiceover and coaxed my 8-year-old niece into repeating the words into the mic. After selecting which images from the book to use, I requested the files from my editor and did a rough mockup of how it might look if I plopped the art as-is into iMovie. (Answer: very, very bad.) A friend gave me a tutorial in sound editing using the free software Audacity, and I painstakingly pieced together the voiceover. (This part took forever, but I love that it uses my niece's voice.) I added music I composed and plucked on my violin. In the meantime, I looked into hiring someone to "pretty up" the visuals, but the friend-of-a-friend I reached out to was on deadline, and by the time he'd sent recommendations of who else to hire, I'd spent enough time learning how to do it myself that it seemed like I might as well finish the task. Ten more hours of hack-job movie-making later, I finally had a trailer I felt happy with.

I sent it to my editor and publicist, and the publicist reached out to an influential children's librarian and arranged for him to host the premiere on his blog. This resulted in substantially more views and tweets (especially within the teacher and librarian community) than I could have generated on my own, and made all the time spent feel worth it – once I finally caught up on lost sleep.

**Dollar cost:** None

**Time cost:** 34 hours. Now that I have all these skills, I could probably make a new video in a third of the time, which was how long I'd originally thought it would take.

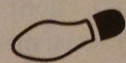


### Designed and printed bookmarks

I was skeptical about the value of printing custom bookmarks for events, until an author friend pointed out that it's nice to have something to sign for the kids who can't afford to buy a book. Since my book is the first in a series, the bookmark is also a good way to showcase the covers of the other books. I called in another favor from my Photoshop-proficient friend and placed an order for 2,000, which seemed like too many but they're cheaper in bulk. Now I have enough bookmarks to give three to every human I encounter. Too bad I forgot to put my website on them. Whoops.

**Dollar cost:** \$187

**Time cost:** 1.5 hours



### Sent myself on an East Coast book tour

It doesn't make a whole lot of economic sense to send oneself on a book tour, but it made a ton of sense, fun-wise, to take this party on the road.

For the first stop on my tour, I took a road trip with my mother to a small-town literary festival, where I made my first author appearance in front of an audience of my mother, my godmother and exactly three children. I sold 10 copies of the book and considered it a great success. I've heard of author signings where no one shows up, and this was a low-pressure way to try out my presentation. Plus those kids were terrific, as is my mom, and the festival paid for my lodging.

The next weekend, I flew from New York to Atlanta, where my best friend lives. She had a book coming out that week, so we did a school visit together and had a joint release party at an independent bookstore we love. The next day I flew to D.C. to visit my brother and his family, did an event at their local bookstore and gave two presentations at my nieces' elementary school, which I think made all three of us feel famous. Then it was home to Brooklyn for another bookstore event, to an audience full of my friends (the best). I brought drinks, snacks and games to each signing, which made the tour more expensive, but the parties more fun.

**Dollar cost:** \$413 for planes, trains and automobiles; \$8 for crayons; \$29 for a computer display port to VGA adapter; and \$136 for wine and other refreshments.

**Time cost:** 7.5 days traveling and events, 5 hours coordinating logistics, 8 hours preparing my presentation and slideshow and 2 hours baking cookies and shopping for cheese and prosecco.



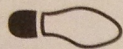


### Did a few blog interviews (but not too many)

Many authors do extensive blog tours to celebrate their books' release dates, but that can get very time-consuming for someone who writes as slowly as I do. I decided to mostly focus my energy elsewhere. The three interviews I did do were fun, and helped me think through the ways I wanted to talk about my book and myself when fielding questions from kids at events.

**Dollar cost:** None

**Time cost:** 10.5 hours (about 3.5 hours per interview)



### Staged a funny photo to post on release day

It's trendy in the Twittersphere to call a book's release date its "birthday" – and the amount of time, pain, hope and love poured into a book's creation can feel akin to pregnancy and labor – so I thought it would be funny and apt to stage a photo of myself in a maternity ward, cradling my book baby, to share on the day of its "birth." My father works in a hospital, and the night nurses there were wonderful about helping this silly dream come true. They

dressed me up in a hospital gown and bracelet, gave me a blanket for swaddling my newborn, and encouraged me to look both joyful and exhausted as I gazed from the book to the camera. I don't know if tweeting or posting my book's birth photo sold copies, but it made me laugh, amused my friends and got some attention on social media.

**Dollar cost:** None

**Time cost:** 3 hours



### Wrote some essays to pitch

Not all my essays are related to my book (and not all have been published), but when the title appears in my bio, it helps get the word out. Plus, I like writing essays, and for some of them I get paid. Most important, these shorter projects help distract me from drafter's malaise when I'm stuck in the murky middle of writing the next book.

**Dollar cost:** None (\$1,000 gained, not including taxes)

**Time cost:** About 120 hours (10-50 hours per essay)

**Total cost, in dollars:** \$1,080

**Total cost, in time:** Immeasurable. **W**

Anica Mrose Rissi is the author of *Anna, Banana, and the Friendship Split*. Her personal essays have been published by NYTimes.com.

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