

dry, too complex, nothing new. You can get public interest in a book through media, but you can't necessarily sustain it unless people talk to each other and recommend it. This is why I think bookstores remain successful as a source of information, despite the Internet intrusion, because you can have this conversation in the store between the bookseller and the customer and, just as importantly, between customers.

When you have two people in your store, sales will not be as good as if you have five people, not just because having more people in the store gives you more chances of making a sale but because those five people will talk among themselves and say, "Have you read that book?" The bookstore is a great forum for having conversations. Those conversations in turn help books continue to sell.

GAYLE SHANKS, Owner

Changing Hands Bookstore in Tempe, Arizona

What effect do bookstores have on bestsellers?

Independent bookstores play a critical role in causing bestsellers to happen. *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, is an example. We created this phenomenon. Booksellers discovered that book before it was widely known. Their recommendations helped make that book a success. That's how bestsellers are made. I have endless stacks of galleys in my office; I pass them out to everyone who works here. We are always looking for great new books to recommend to our customers.

ESTABLISHING A BRAND IMAGE WITH READERS

ARE AUTHORS "BRANDS"?

AUTHORS' VIEWS ON BRAND IMAGE

HOW TO CREATE A BRAND

CAN BRANDING BE TAKEN TOO FAR?

ARE AUTHORS "BRANDS"?

It may seem rude to describe a great author as a "brand." They are grand artists with words, after all. They have unique gifts, uncommon skill. You can't bring them down to the level of crass commerce and compare them to Budweiser beer or Lays potato chips.

Well, yes you can, because they are brand names, sometimes very powerful ones. Not only that, most popular authors fully understand this and work diligently to build their brand, recognizing branding as the key to long-term success in a highly competitive industry. They accomplish brand building in two main ways:

1. Differentiating their "product" from the work of other writers in their genre
2. Cultivating a loyal customer base, those wonderful repeat customers

The best collegiate training for aspiring authors might be to spend the morning in the liberal arts college, studying literature and creative writing, and the afternoon in business school, mastering the principles of marketing.

At the very top of the successful brand builders in the publishing industry are the authors who started with a book and created an empire. Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen certainly did that with their fabulously successful Chicken Soup for the Soul series, having sold more than 85 million books in 30 countries. This duo is listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for having the most books on the *New York Times* bestseller list at one time.

Their first book spawned a seemingly endless series—*Chicken Soup for the Nurse's Soul*, *The Golfer's Soul*, etc.—all featuring motivational, uplifting stories. Oddly, we couldn't find one titled *Chicken Soup for the Lawyer's Soul*. Wonder why . . .

Then they began licensing the brand name to a wide range of products: collector plates, greeting cards, games, music CDs, wall posters, and calendars. Now there is even a Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover's Soul® brand of dog and cat foods. The authors continue to be popular speakers, conducting workshops and marketing associated training videos.

When they began marketing the first book in 1993, they got the reaction typically faced by new authors: thirty-three New York publishing houses turned them down—the first month. They received such perceptive comments as, "This book is too positive." Their big break came when they attended the American Booksellers Association Convention and found a receptive publisher, and the rest is—very profitable—history. They have even received what is capitalism's greatest honor, showing that they've reached the very pinnacle: a parody of their work. David Fisher published a book titled, *Chicken Poop for the Soul: Stories to Harden the Heart and Dampen the Spirit*.

How can you tell an author has become a brand? One tip-off is to examine the cover of the author's latest book. The author's name is usually printed in very large, very bold type, because the roving eyes of the customer browsing the new releases section of the bookstore will lock onto the author's name, not necessarily the title of the book.

AUTHORS' VIEWS ON BRAND IMAGE

Most of the popular authors we talked to had no trouble articulating their brand image with readers, although some of them believed that creating this image is a partially unconscious process that cannot be planned ahead.

SUSAN ELIZABETH PHILLIPS, Author

How do you go about creating a "brand image" for yourself in such a crowded genre as romance?

I didn't ever try to create a brand image. My books are pretty much who I am. I believe in the importance of all the good stuff in life: family, love, committed sex, being nice to your neighbors, going to the polls on voting day. The wonderful writer and academic, Kathleen Gilles Seidel, once said that my books take place in "SEF Land" [author's initials]. It's a fairly benevolent place, although when I compare my heroes and heroines to those in other romances, mine tend to have a bit of a subversive edge. A hero like Bobby Tom Denton, for example, in *Heaven, Texas*, has a monumental ego. Sugar Beth Carey in *Ain't She Sweet?* isn't really all that sweet. When readers think of my books, I think they know they're going to laugh, maybe cry, and that the book will be sexy. They also know they're going to be with people they want to spend time with.

DR. SPENCER JOHNSON, Author

Let's talk about the unique niche you've carved in the publishing industry. How would you describe your brand image as an author?

I view myself as a practical philosopher. I like what someone once observed: "Good writing is clear thinking made visible." That is my goal as a writer.

My brand as an author is creating simple, short, easy-to-read parables that don't give advice. They simply tell a story and let the reader take out of the story whatever they want. When I was a young physician, I learned that many people not only don't like advice, they don't listen to it.

All of my books have been parables. I had to smile when *USA Today* called me "The King of Parables." The brand image involves offering parables that contain useful truths that are easy to understand, and that can be used by readers almost immediately in their work and their life. The reader watches what happens to the characters in the story. Then they pull out whatever truths they want to use, the truths most applicable to their current life. This really began in 1982 with *The One-Minute*

Your books are unusual in that they can be read in one sitting.

That's how they were designed. This is an increasingly complex and fast-moving world. More and more of us seem to have less and less time. Colby, an 18th-century English writer, had some good advice for us, "Give the reader the most information, and take from him the least time." That has become my motto. This lends itself to people rereading my books easily and often. They tell me they get something a little different out of the same book each time they reread it, depending on where they are in their lives emotionally or intellectually or confidence-wise. The real power of my books is not really what I put into the books but what the readers take out of them. The smartest and most secure people realize that the best answers they've found in life are simple and sometimes embarrassingly obvious once you recognize them.

STEPHANIE LAURENS, Author

When people think Stephanie Laurens, author, what would you like them to think?

I don't want them to think about me at all. I want the words *Stephanie Laurens* to be synonymous with a fabulous romantic story excitingly well told. If readers see the Stephanie Laurens name on the front of a book, I want them to feel certain that, if they buy that book, they are guaranteed a reading experience they'll enjoy. That's the connection I want blazoned in their brains. This is a business, and Stephanie Laurens is a brand name.

SANDRA BROWN, Author

When people think Sandra Brown, author, what would you like them to think?

A storyteller. I'd like to be known as an author who always gives the reader a good story, without being identified by any specific genre. At one point in my career, not being identified with a genre was consid-

don't write "police procedural." I don't write "forensic investigation." I don't write "courtroom." But I have written about all of those topics. It was difficult, initially, for the publisher to tag me and for the booksellers to tag me. To me, not being identified with a specific genre is better, because isn't it the job of a novelist to constantly come up with something new and fresh and different and not be categorized so specifically? The people I like to read don't write the same book over and over. They don't even write in the same field over and over. Those authors go outside the box.

So I would like to be known as a storyteller that you can rely on for a great story, totally different from the last book but written in the same literary voice.

BRAD MELTZER, Author

This young author of legal/political thrillers has written detailed, well-researched, intriguing stories that take readers inside the Supreme Court (*The Tenth Justice*), the White House (*The First Counsel*), and the U.S. Congress (*The Zero Game*). *People* magazine paid him this high compliment: "Meltzer has earned the right to belly up to the bar with the likes of John Grisham, Scott Turow, and David Baldacci." His books have a total of almost six million copies in print, have spent over eight months on the bestseller lists, and have been translated into over a dozen languages. In a delightful and unusual change of pace, Brad also writes *comic books*, including a much anticipated project titled *Identity Crisis* for DC Comics, "a murder mystery involving Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and the rest of the biggest characters in the comic universe."

What do you want your readers to think of when they think of Brad Meltzer?

I think my biggest fear as a writer is to be one of those authors who just churns out the books and all his readers know he's churning them out. There are guys who write a book a year and they're incredible at it—every book they write is really great. I'm not that kind of writer. I just can't do a book a year. It's tempting to do a book a year—my publisher would love me to do a book a year. I would double my salary if I did a

So my goal would be for people to say with each book, "Wow he really did something different—he did something better."

Also, I'd hope that if you took the book jacket off the book, ripped off the cover, and took my name off the pages, that my readers would still know it's my book. I hope they would recognize my voice—and I'm proud of the fact that they think they do.

A few years back, for a charitable event, a group of legal thriller writers wrote a book. Each author wrote one chapter and then gave it to the next author, and so on. As part of the event, the chapters weren't identified by author, and there was a contest to see if readers could tell who wrote which chapter. From all the e-mails I got, people guessed my chapter dead on right. I loved that. I loved that they thought my voice was different from someone else's. It doesn't mean *better*, doesn't mean *more impressive*, it doesn't mean *more literary* or *less literary*. It just means it's mine.

BERTRICE SMALL, Author

When a reader thinks Bertrice Small, what do you hope comes to mind?

I want my readers to know that they'll get a good story and accurate history. I'm noted for writing very sexy historicals, and some books write that way, but some don't. However, I always write a good story, and I believe my readers know that or I wouldn't still be in business.

IRIS JOHANSEN, Author

Iris Johansen is one of several suspense writers who honed her craft and built her audience through writing category romance books. She is now firmly established in the thriller genre, with such bestselling successes as *Final Target*, *Body of Lies*, *No One to Trust*, *Dead Aim*, *Fatal Tide*, and *Firestorm*. One of her most popular recurring characters is forensic sculptor Eve Duncan, though she is equally skilled at presenting men as lead characters. Her characters face life and death situations and are pit-

volve much more than just intriguing plots and dangerous situations her characters have great humanity and vulnerability.

When readers think of an Iris Johansen novel, what comes to mind?

What I hope and what I try for are:

1. Good storytelling
2. Fresh plots. I love to tell a story that has never been told before, or if it has been told, to tell it with fresh new twists.
3. Strong characterization. I work very hard on that.

PETER STRAUB, Author

What do you think your "brand image" is with readers? When a reader thinks of a Peter Straub novel, what do you think comes to mind?

One of the things that comes into their heads is a distinct weirdness or strangeness in the story. A kind of complexity. Good dialogue. Good characterization. And writing that isn't embarrassing.

Note in this sample of authors how very different each brand image is. No two of them expressed their image the same way, except in citing the importance of great storytelling. The author's brand starts out as an extension of the unique voice each of them brings to their work, then takes on additional strategic elements, such as Sandra Brown not wanting to be identified with just one genre or Dr. Spencer Johnson producing concisely written books that can be read in one sitting.

Stephanie Laurens's brand even comes with a "guarantee" that her fans will get a "reading experience they'll enjoy."

JONATHAN GALASSI, President and Publisher,
Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, LLC

Retailers have put more emphasis on "brand-name authors" in recent years. Has that impacted literary publishers?

Brands are part and parcel of the inevitable convergence factor in our mass media commercial culture. Fewer and fewer products receive more and more attention. There can be a reaction to this. In 2002, we all painfully experienced a drop of 30 percent or more in many brand-name bestsellers. There was a lot of soul searching about this shift—what caused it, whether it was to be permanent, etc. I do think readers are more fickle today than they used to be. They're looking for something fresh and new and don't so often go back to the well the way they once did. I also think that the boom of the '90s, which represented a boom in publishing as well, masked the fact of increasing fragmentation in readers' attention. More and more leisure time options, more and more hours spent in front of screens of all kinds—this has to take away from the special, quiet, uninvaded time that a reader spends with her nose in a book.

I'm not sure we'll ever get back to the good old days of the late '90s, when I, for one, felt that the potential readership for literary work was pretty much boundless. I still feel that readers are more experimental today than ever before—we're all more experimental about everything than we used to be—but the world situation, and particularly our involvement in it, is terribly distracting and worrying, and this is certainly having a deleterious impact on the reading of serious fiction.

HOW TO CREATE A BRAND

"There is no denying the fact that writers should be read but not seen. Rarely are they a winsome sight."

EDNA FERBER, *A Kind of Magic*

This opinion by the author who had the number-one bestselling fiction title in 1924, *So Big*, and again in 1930, *Cimarron*, seems rather quaint today. The goal of brand building for a contemporary author is

to have that author seen as many places as possible, in as many different media as possible, as many times as possible.

PAULA EYKELHOF, Executive Editor
Harlequin Books

How does a publishing house go about building brand loyalty for their popular authors?

It does depend on the author. One approach is the creation of an ongoing series, usually based on place or character. Consistency of cover treatment and packaging is another. We're also making increased use of teasers, excerpts, and so on, which can create a sense of anticipation in the reader. Advertising and PR obviously have a role in this, too. And, especially these days, the author can play a part in developing reader loyalty—through Web sites and other forms of direct communication with booksellers and readers.

THERESA MEYERS, President
Blue Moon Communications

Theresa has been a publicist for numerous *New York Times* bestsellers, including authors such as Carly Phillips, Rachel Gibson, Vicki Lewis Thompson, Susan Andersen, Pamela Morsi, and others.

Tell us about the overall goal for your publicity and marketing efforts with a client.

One of the key elements in making a bestselling author is to create an "author brand."

It's not just about the book. You want to get your author to a point where a reader walks into the store asking for the author's name, not the title of a specific book. You want to hear the customer ask, "Can I have the next Carly Phillips book?" If you hear that often enough, you know then that you have created an author brand that will have longevity. That is my goal as the publicist.

What are some of the benefits of a strong author brand?

Strong brands bring in dollars. A strong brand will influence buyers to consider purchasing an author when they have only limited money to buy their books. It will create a loyal readership that will bring an author bigger contracts from publishers. It helps authors win awards, because they stand out clearly against other brands in the same market space.

How do you build an author brand or create one?

First off, let me give you a concept to wrap your brain around. The word *brand* is used to refer to a product or company name or anything unique that identifies something using a logo or trademark. The marketing term or concept grew out of a need to identify products and developed into a serious approach to explain why consumers were attracted to a specific product and how they made their purchasing choices. Author branding is an extension of that effort.

Today, when we talk about an author brand, we are talking about building an image, perception, or identity that is used to create:

1. "Emotional Velcro"
2. A perception of higher quality
3. That little something special that no one else can offer

In publicity, perception is everything. It's the same with your brand. Even if you develop a strong brand and build a great awareness for it, if you don't manage it correctly, it can flop. To manage your brand, you have to decide how you want people to perceive you. You can use publicity and message points to shape and manage how your multiple publics perceive your brand to keep it healthy. At this point, an author might be scratching their head and asking, "Why do I need an author brand anyway? I'm small right now."

The point is, you want to grow big, right?

You can take a long, painful, expensive trip to get to from point A to point B without a road map, or make it there for far less expense, time, and effort with a map. All I am trying to do in creating their brand is build the map first.

How do these three branding steps work for an author?

Step one (emotional Velcro) is achieved because readers love certain stories and are moved by them. This, in turn, leads readers to believe that they have formed a relationship of some type with that author and

willing to purchase a book written by this author simply because her name is on it.

Step two (perception of higher quality) is achieved because this author brand has received accolades from every sector of the industry in the form of awards and top placement on the *New York Times* list. The author has garnered numerous industry or writing awards and is usually considered synonymous with a genre. All of this contributes to the consumer's perception of higher quality of this material. If the writer wasn't good, she wouldn't be getting all this attention, right? (Not necessarily folks, but that's how the perception works.)

Step three (a little something special or distinction) is achieved via the author's voice. Now this is unique to fiction as a product, because in other product fields, certain attributes of your product can be ripped off or copied by rivals. In fiction, it's a totally different ball game. No one is going to write exactly the way you do. It's what's called an author's voice. It's the thing that will make a reader read to the end of your book in the middle of the night, even though they know they have to get up early the next morning for an important meeting.

Wrapped altogether, a brand is an implied promise to the consumer that they'll receive a particular thing consistently from an author. That's part of the reason that publishers don't like authors to change their writing style too much or hop from one subgenre to the next, because it might upset the consumer who feels that the brand hasn't delivered.

But isn't building an author brand and building awareness about a book the same thing?

Not necessarily. Here's the problem. Even if you run out there and create a great buzz and get all kinds of brand awareness, unless you can define what makes your brand unique and different from others in the same product field (books here), you're doomed to failure. That's part of the reason that advertising isn't enough to build a strong brand. Branding is more than a logo, color scheme, tagline, or message points. These are just tools to help you create a solid brand that you can then build and make people aware of.

Because branding at its roots is based first on establishing an emotional connection, publicity often works better than advertising to get your foot in the door. It is used to help you make a connection with people—create word of mouth through reviews, interviews, chats, and workshops at conferences. If you can communicate your brand clearly and consistently, you will go a long way toward developing that emotional

Velcro with your consumer. It's about creating distinction in the marketplace.

How does a strong author brand impact book sales?

Strong brands are created by word of mouth. The process is modeled on the same methods used by the largest corporate manufacturers of consumer goods in the world. By having your brand pop up all over the place—in the case of authors online, at conferences, etc.—you are getting people talking. This is also where media interviews and using your message points come into play. Ask yourself this: what good is it going to do if I see a commercial about a brand new soap that I've never heard of? There's very little chance I'm going to go race out and buy it, especially if I like my old soap just fine, thank you very much.

Now, rewind yourself to before sitting down and seeing that commercial. What if I've heard about it from some of my friends? What if I'd just seen the name of the soap in an article in a women's magazine about great new products? What if I got a sample and liked the smell? Now imagine that I see that commercial again for the first time with all of this experience behind me. I am far more motivated to find out what all the fuss is about and possibly take a chance on the new soap, even if I'm still attached to my old soap. Does this make more sense?

Now you understand why, although advertising is one of the main tools publishers use to help create brand awareness, it isn't the foundation piece for building a brand. You need to create the emotional drive and connection first, then the perception of higher quality, and finally make your point for why an author is unique.

CAN BRANDING BE TAKEN TOO FAR?

The family of V.C. Andrews, author of the bestsellers *Flowers in the Attic*, *Petals on the Wind*, *If There Be Thorns*, and *Seeds of Yesterday*, among others, hired a ghostwriter to continue writing under her name after her death in 1982. It seems they found papers that detailed the plots for 63 further novels. The ghostwriter was recently unveiled as Andrew Neiderman, who has written quite a few novels under his own name as well.

Several bestselling authors of today now write with coauthors; the most well known is James Patterson. His coauthors include Howard Roughan, Andrew Gross, and Peter de Jonge. Why does he do this? In

number of "products" with his brand name on them and occupy more shelf space in the bookstores. Patterson's method here is also interesting, because many authors have more good ideas for novels than they can possibly write. He is able to get more of his good ideas onto paper.

Clive Cussler is considering writing the Dirk Pitt series with a coauthor as well, to keep the series going and to take advantage of retirement at the same time.

The question is whether the author's unique voice can be maintained adequately in collaborative efforts, because the unique voice was one of the attributes that turned the author's work into a distinctive brand. Readers would be disappointed with a watered down version of the author's voice.

Then there is fan fiction, an activity that is growing in popularity, where fans of the author take favorite characters or plot lines from their novels and continue the story in the voice of that author. The bestselling author and his or her publisher take a dim view of this activity, because it violates the copyright to the characters. But it does point out how readers pick up on the subtle differences in pitch and timbre of a best-selling author's voice.

It is difficult to overstate the value to an author of having a widely recognized brand name.

"Almost anyone can be an author; the business is to collect money and fame from this state of being."

A.A. MILNE, *Not That It Matters*