

Advance buzz for Plug Your Book!

“I don’t care if you’re writing a computer book, a science fiction novel or the next great self-help guide, you need to get your hands on a copy of Steve Weber’s *Plug Your Book!* ... I highly recommend this one to every author out there.”

— **Joe Wikert, executive publisher, John Wiley & Sons Inc., professional/trade division**

“An amazingly rich collection of cutting-edge promotional tactics and strategies. Makes most other books about online publicity look sickly.”

— **Aaron Shepard, author: *Aiming at Amazon***

“In-depth information about using Amazon as a marketing platform.”

— **Christine McNeil Montano, Amazon Top Reviewer**

“...I have launched online campaigns for more than 1,000 books. I’ve worked with most of America’s largest book publishers, helping many of them build online marketing departments. The book you’re holding now is the new training manual.”

— **Steve O’Keefe, author: *Publicity on the Internet***

“Practical, pragmatic, low-cost ideas for promoting the heck out of your own book, whether it’s fiction, nonfiction, technical, business or anything else.”

— **Dave Taylor, author: *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Growing Your Business with Google***

“The first comprehensive guide to Internet book publicity.”

— **Morris Rosenthal, publisher, Foner Books**

“A wealth of ideas for making your book stand out, including many techniques for Internet buzz you won’t find elsewhere.”

— **Jane Corn, Amazon Top Reviewer**

About the author

Steve Weber is a former newspaper reporter and veteran of the U.S. Air Force. Since 2000, he has been an online book dealer, specializing in hard-to-find fiction and nonfiction books. He has been one of the most successful and highly rated booksellers on the major networks such as Amazon Marketplace and eBay.

In 2005, Weber wrote and published *The Home-Based Bookstore*. He generates awareness of the book by mentoring novice book dealers on his bookselling blog:

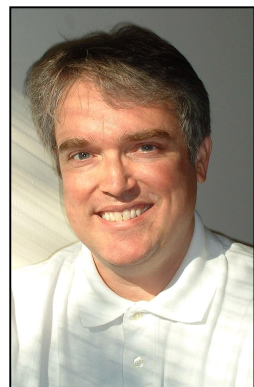
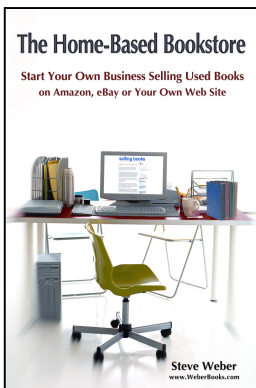
www.WeberBooks.com/selling/selling.htm

Weber holds a bachelor of science degree in news writing from the Perley Isaac Reed School of Journalism at West Virginia University. He is a member of the Publishers Marketing Association and the International Association of Online Communicators. A native of Charleston, W.Va., he resides in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., with his wife and their young daughter. Write to him at:

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For additional information regarding Internet book promotion, please visit:

www.PlugYourBook.com



Plug Your Book!

Online Book Marketing for Authors
Book Publicity through Social Networking

Steve Weber

Plug Your Book!

Online Book Marketing for Authors

Book Publicity through Social Networking

Weber Books
Falls Church, Va.
www.WeberBooks.com

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This book is not completely comprehensive. Some readers may wish to consult additional books for advice. Additional sources of information are identified in the appendices of this book.

This book is not endorsed by any of the companies mentioned in the text.

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- **Jane Corn**, one of Amazon.com’s top book reviewers, contributed to the sections on amateur reviews and the use of MySpace as an author platform. Jane is an expert on Internet social networking and operates the eBay bookstore “Rare and Unique.”
- **Aaron Shepard** of Shepard Publications helped refine this manuscript, drawing on his unmatched experience in leveraging Amazon.com to focus attention on specialized books.
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Dedication

Most importantly, I thank my wife and daughter, who tolerated the many late nights and weekends I spent working on this book. Thanks also to my parents, who enabled me to grow up in a home filled with good books.

Foreword

***If your book is your business,
this is your book.***

I have enormous sympathy for authors. Imagine spending months or years putting everything you know into a book, polishing every page to get it *just right*, and just when you thought you were finished—surprise! Now you have to learn everything you never wanted to know about book publishing and marketing.

Today it's not just self-published authors who face this daunting challenge. If you are lucky enough to land a contract with a mainstream book publisher, surprise! The marketing plan is in your mirror—go take a look. That's right, you are responsible for promoting your own book. If you don't, your publisher won't hesitate to replace you on the roster with an author who hustles.

So here you are, book in hand or about to be published, and you're presented with a task that makes writing the book look easy. Your dilemma: How can you connect your book with readers?

Fortunately, the truth is on your side. All marketing boils down to one happy conclusion: in all voluntary transactions, both sides win. I value your book more than my money; you value my money more than the book. We trade. We both walk away richer for the experience.

What that means for marketers is you don't need to con people or hard-sell them. All you have to do is show people the value, and they will gladly trade their dollars for your book.

I've been promoting books online since 1992. In that time, I have launched online campaigns for more than 1,000 books. I've worked with most of America's largest book publishers, helping many of them build online marketing departments. The book you're holding now is the new training manual.

I've worked for dozens of self-published authors, too. Faced with the enormously time-consuming process of online marketing, they usually ask me, "If this were your book, what would you do?" Now here's what I tell them:

First, read Steve Weber's *Plug Your Book!*

Second, make a copy of the table of contents.

Now, cross off each chapter as you complete the task or pass over it.

When you're finished, you've done everything that can reasonably be done to launch a book on the Internet.

If marketing is all about communicating value, what makes Steve Weber's *Plug Your Book!* so valuable? Like publishing gurus Dan Poynter, John Kremer, Judith Appelbaum, Jeff Herman, and John Huenefeld, Steve Weber drills down into the nitty-gritty with the best of them. For example, when he talks about marketing on MySpace, I tingle as he reveals exactly how to process "friend" requests.

That level of detail—such as explaining the difference between Amazon's "Best Value" and "Better Together" programs—is carried through every chapter. Weber has used most of these techniques several times and reports honestly on the results. Yes, marketing your book online is going to take time—you can't phone-in a blog tour—but following Steve Weber's map will save you time. And improve your results. And that adds up to *value* to me.

Steve Weber is hip to what is happening online today—such as social networking, amateur content, and reputation management—and he's got a keen insight into what's coming: swarms of tag clouds devouring video profiles and spitting out serendipitous links. His excitement sharing these techniques is palpable. His section on Amazon marketing programs is like an M.R.I. exam, poking into every corner of the giant retailer's vast apparatus and finding promotional opportunities at every turn, such as Omakase, Mobipocket and Amapedia.

Weber's honesty is also commendable, as when he warns marketers against plumping pages with phony reviews, and when he exposes the shortcomings of Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

Steve Weber's *Plug Your Book!* won't spare you the plight of all modern authors—having to get out there and push that book. But it will make your time online more productive, more pleasant, and at times fascinating as all get out!

STEVE O'KEEFE

Seattle, Washington

O'Keefe is president of AuthorViews, Inc., a pioneer in providing online video for the book industry. An entrepreneur, writer, and university professor, O'Keefe is the author of five books, including the

much-anticipated *Publicity on the Internet* — Tenth Anniversary Edition (2007). He is co-founder of the *International Association of Online Communicators (IAOC)* and teaches *Internet Public Relations* at Tulane University. Find more information about O’Keefe’s projects, books, and classes at www.AuthorViews.com.

Foreword.1

The classic disconnect between authors and publishers is over who does marketing for books. Most authors erroneously think that once they've finished their manuscript, they're done and the book will magically sell itself. Meanwhile, publishers are convinced that they're just supplying production and distribution facilities, and their marketing program is typically, "We'll add you to our catalog."

Steve Weber's *Plug Your Book!* offers a way out of this dilemma with its practical, pragmatic and low-cost ideas for promoting the heck out of your own book, whether it's fiction, nonfiction, technical, business, or anything else.

My opinion? You'd be crazy to publish a book and not grab a copy of *Plug Your Book!* to learn the many ways that you can ensure it's a bestseller rather than a sleeper destined for the overstock or remainder shelves.

DAVE TAYLOR

Boulder, Colorado

Taylor is the author of 20 books, including The Complete Idiot's Guide to Growing Your Business with Google. He's an award-winning speaker, sought-after conference and workshop participant, and frequent guest on radio and podcast programs. Taylor maintains three Web logs: "The Intuitive Life Business Blog," focused on business and industry analysis, the eponymous "Ask Dave Taylor," devoted to technology and business, and "The Attachment Parenting Blog," discussing topics of interest to parents.

Introduction

No matter what kind of book you have, its success depends on two things: It must tell a good story, and you must find an audience for it. Easier said than done, but you might take a page from master storyteller Hans Christian Andersen.

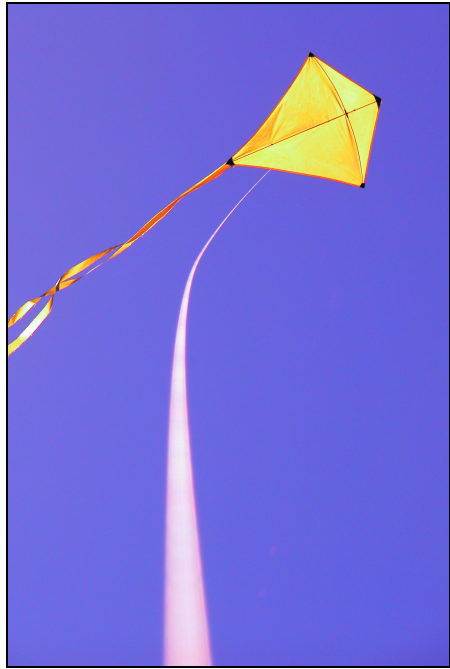
As legend has it, schoolchildren in Andersen's 19th-century Danish town played hooky from school just to hear him spin his tales. Each time he felt like

telling another one, Andersen signaled his desire by flying his kite. When the kite rose, word spread quickly, and the crowd gathered.

Can it be that simple in today's world? Can the modern author build an audience solely through community word of mouth?

Yes, you can, and you don't even need to leave your backyard. Today's authors can launch their kites to potentially huge audiences by participating in Internet communities. The big difference is, your online community isn't limited to your neighborhood—it can span the globe if you invest in some string.

More than ever, authors and readers are networking, even collaborating on books as peers. With simple Internet tools, determined writers—even beginners working on obscure projects—can find their audience. Using online communities, authors can bond with readers intimately, inspiring deep loyalty.



Internet social networking has handed authors their most powerful tool since the invention of paper. In the Networked Age, the stock of gatekeepers is going down, and the power of authors and readers is soaring.

Word of mouth is the only thing that can make a book really successful. And this has always been the challenge: How can the author break through? Until recently, it usually required “pull”—connections with powerful allies in the publishing food chain. Today, creative writers can connect with readers directly. The only requirements are a link to the Internet and the will to plug in.

Taking control of your book sales

This year, 150,000 authors will finish their masterpiece, but most of them will be horribly disappointed with their sales—only about one-third of new titles sell more than 100 copies. Most books fail in the marketplace simply because they never had a chance: Nobody ever heard about them.

Traditional marketing and advertising is less effective than ever; people aren’t paying attention to it. But *free* advertising is alive and well. The catch is, you can’t manufacture free advertising; you must get it the old-fashioned way—by earning it.

Now for the first time, authors and readers can ignite word of mouth using online communities to spread the word about good books. Anyone with the skills to write an e-mail can publicize their book worldwide, effectively and economically.

Internet publicity isn’t the only way to promote your book, but it’s a great way to start—it can open doors you never dreamed of. The real value of online publicity is that it endures, and spawns more publicity, the kind that can’t be bought. More than ever, journalists and producers of radio and television programs use the Internet to find expert commentators and new story ideas.

One big caveat

Not every song is a hit, and not every ballplayer makes it to the Hall of Fame. Likewise, an online campaign won’t make a bad book successful.

On the Internet, word of mouth is amplified and accelerated. Thanks to online communities, it's getting easier to sell good books, but it's getting harder to sell mediocre ones. Word gets around. For the strategies in this book to work, your book needs to be strong, because your best competitors are online, too.

Internet word of mouth depends on an educated consumer. You're asking the reader to help promote your book, and this requires a *very good* book, according to your audience. *Bad* word of mouth will hurt your sales. Online marketing only helps a bad book fail faster.

How to use this book

The beginning sections of this book explain the basics of online book promotion, techniques that provide the most bang for your effort. As we proceed, some of the methods will be more complicated, requiring more skill and resources. Perhaps not everything discussed here will be practical for your book.

Your job is to select which promotional techniques might work best with your audience, and then use them aggressively and tirelessly. Online publicity works particularly well with nonfiction, but can be applied to fiction, too. The more techniques you try, the better your chances of success. A single strategy won't work, but a combined effort will produce results, and the effect will be cumulative.

Many author Web sites are mentioned in this book. Take time to view these sites, instead of skimming ahead. Consider what you like and don't like about what other authors have done, and apply the best ideas to your own efforts.

This book is not a quick-fix plan; there is no such thing as overnight success. It might require a year or more of steady work to see appreciable results. If that seems like a gamble and lots of work, it is. But I assure you, it's nothing compared with what it took to write your book.

Read through this entire book once. Then read it again, selecting and prioritizing what you'll tackle first. Mark on a calendar when you'll start each phase of your plan. Then get to it. Evaluate your progress after three months. Determine what's been successful, and redouble your efforts there. Then try something new.

Your freedom to use all the techniques described here might depend on how your book was published. Self-published authors who own the

ISBN and online rights for their book can promote it however they please. Trade-published authors should confer with their publisher's marketing department and get approval for their plans.

One more bit of housekeeping: Just in case anyone is curious, I have no personal connection or financial interest in any of the companies, services or persons mentioned here. There is no advertising or product placement in this book.

Staying current

The techniques and tools of authorship and online promotion are changing at warp speed. By the time you read this book, several of the details will be out of date—Web addresses change, companies go out of business, and new tools emerge. That's why I publish a companion Web site and blog for this book:

www.PlugYourBook.com

There you'll find a link to [Book Updates](#) in the right column, a free reference to additions and changes that didn't make it into this book. While you're at my site, I hope you'll stay for a while to see what else is new, and post your own comments about how future editions of this book can be improved.

If you have questions about this book or anything else related to book marketing and publicity, please write to me at:

Feedback@WeberBooks.com

I look forward to hearing from you.

STEVE WEBER

Falls Church, Virginia

Electric word of mouth

In 1988 a first-time author, British mountaineer Joe Simpson, wrote of his disastrous climbing accident in the Peruvian Andes. His book, *Touching the Void*, got good reviews, but wasn't too popular outside England. It sold modestly and then, like most books, began fading into obscurity.

A decade later, another climbing book was penned by Jon Krakauer, an American journalist who scaled Everest on a harrowing expedition that claimed eight lives. *Into Thin Air*, with a boost from its conglomerate publisher, was an instant No. 1 bestseller and worldwide blockbuster.

And then something really interesting happened. Bookstores started getting requests for the earlier book, *Touching the Void*. Weeks before, stores couldn't give it away, and now the book was sold out. Library copies went missing. The original hardback, if you could find one, was going for \$375. Harper Paperbacks rushed a new edition onto shelves, and *Touching the Void* started outselling the new "blockbuster" by two to one.

What happened? Was it a stroke of brilliance by some publishing mogul? No, it was Joe Six-Pack, reacting to book recommendations from Amazon.com. The online store began suggesting the older book to millions of people whom it knew liked climbing books, based on their buying history. If you've shopped on Amazon, you've seen these recommendations yourself: **People who bought *this book* also bought...**

Many of the new readers liked *Touching the Void* so much, they wrote rave reviews on Amazon's site. These "amateur" book reviews, written by real climbers and armchair explorers, resonated deeply with the next wave of shoppers. More sales, more good reviews.

Ten years after the book's launch, Internet-powered word of mouth did something that no team of marketing wizards could do—it landed *Touching the Void* on the bestseller lists. The story was adapted for an acclaimed docudrama. Simpson, his writing career turbocharged,

followed up with four successful adventure books, a novel, and lecture tours.

And this is only the beginning, for Simpson and all of us.

Readers are finally able to find the books they want, even in the smallest niches. Readers are finding their books at Amazon and other Web stores because they offer unmatched choice and convenience. All this is a godsend for authors, who finally have a way to build their audience effectively and inexpensively. Never has it been so practical, so straightforward, for writers to earn a living at their craft and build a following.

Today book *readers* are helping decide which books sink or swim. As an author, you can hope to be swept along with the tide. Or you can take advantage of this new environment, using the techniques described in this book.

Riding the big river

In just a few years, Amazon has demolished the barriers to book sales. No longer are new authors summarily locked out of the bookstore. Whether your book was trade-published or self-published, Amazon will not only stock it, but *rearrange the whole store* when a likely reader arrives. And if your book sells modestly well, Amazon will do lots more—like displaying your book right inside the door, at the end of each virtual aisle, on eight different category shelves, and smack-dab in front of the cash register. Think your local bookstore might do this? Maybe if you're William Shakespeare, but the rest of us are out of luck.

Book sales over the Internet now account for 15 percent of the average publisher's business, up dramatically from 1 percent in 1997. But the real impact is far greater—it's not just the 65 million readers *buying* their books on Amazon, it's the untold millions more using Amazon's catalog and book reviews to inform their buying choices elsewhere.

Amazon is ground zero for your online campaign. It provides free worldwide exposure—exposure to *those readers most likely to buy your book*. Simply having your book properly listed for sale on Amazon can create demand for it everywhere. Whether you're a famous author or an unknown, Amazon is essential because it has a critical mass of buyers using its search engine, recommendations, and reader reviews.

Amazon.com: Recommended for You

http://www.amazon.com/yourstore

Amazon.com: Recommended for You

These recommendations are based on [items you own](#) and more.

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by Ellen Finkelstein
In Stock
Publication Date: April 8, 2005

Our Price: \$17.24
Used & new from \$13.21

I Own It Not interested X|☆☆☆☆☆ Rate it

Recommended because you rated Buzz Marketing with Blogs For Dummies ([edit](#))

Book Row: An Anecdotal and Pictorial History of the Antiquarian Book Trade
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Usually ships in 2 to 5 weeks
Publication Date: January 1, 2004

Our Price: \$28.00
Used & new from \$7.50

I Own It Not interested X|☆☆☆☆☆ Rate it

Recommended because you rated Memoirs of a Book Snake and more ([edit](#))

Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction--and Get It Published
by Susan Rabiner, Alfred Fortunato
In Stock
Publication Date: August 1, 2003

Our Price: \$10.61
Used & new from \$8.78

Book recommendations at www.Amazon.com/yourstore

Amazon's 'long tail'

Amazon helps create demand for niche books that have a widely dispersed audience that can't be targeted effectively through traditional marketing. These are the books readers often can't find in their local

bookstore, or even the library—but they’re easy to find on Amazon. Twenty-five percent of Amazon’s sales come from obscure books that aren’t even carried in a Barnes & Noble superstore stocking 100,000 titles. And the percentage of these “long tail” sales grows every year.

Sure, part of Amazon’s appeal is its discount pricing and free shipping offers. But the real value for book buyers is being able to find exactly what they want, says Chris Anderson, author of the 2006 business bestseller *The Long Tail*:

“ It’s not enough that things be available, you need to be able to find them. The big problem with brick-and-mortar stores is, all shoppers experience the same store. But the problem of findability is solved when you go online. You have searching, recommendations, and all sorts of narrow taxonomies—things can be in multiple categories at the same time.

For 50 years, publishers have been chasing blockbusters—the bestseller hits. They had to, because with limited shelf space, bookstores had to focus on the stuff that moved fastest. Today, chasing blockbusters is obsolete. Authors and publishers have a wide-open opportunity in serving niches.

These niche books are the ones people care about most, and the ones Amazon is most effective in recommending, says Greg Greeley, Amazon’s vice president for media products: “The Web site is designed to help customers find books they didn’t know existed.”

Getting recommended

Book sales are a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially on Amazon. The more people who buy your book, the easier it becomes for the next reader to discover it. When Amazon notices your book is selling, it automatically displays your book higher in its search results and higher in its category lists. And most importantly, Amazon starts plugging your book into book recommendations on its Web site and in e-mails to customers.

Book recommendations are Amazon’s biggest sales engine, after keyword searches. Sixty-six percent of sales are to returning customers, many of them acting on automated recommendations for books popular with customers with similar buying histories.

Because they are personalized, Amazon's book recommendations are network-powered word of mouth—more effective than a highway billboard seen by everyone in town. And as long as your book keeps selling, Amazon continues recommending it month after month, year after year, to its likely audience. No longer are books sentenced to the bargain bin three months after publication. Online word of mouth can keep your book alive as long as it satisfies readers.

Personalized bookstores

Each of Amazon's 65 million customers sees a unique store. The layout is personalized, based on which books the customer previously viewed or purchased. Each customer has a recommendations list, based on which books are bought most frequently by other customers with similar buying histories.

If you have an Amazon account, view your recommendations here:

www.Amazon.com/yourstore

As an author, here's how Amazon recommendations work for you: Let's imagine you've written the book *How to Grow Organic Strawberries*. It turns out that one of every five Amazon customers who buys your book also purchased an earlier book, *Healthy Eating With Organic Fruit*. Realizing this, Amazon starts recommending your book to customers who bought the earlier book but haven't yet bought yours. Why? Amazon knows the odds are good that once these readers discover your book they'll buy it, too, and Amazon makes another sale.

Buyers see book recommendations in several places:

- On Amazon's home page, where it says, **Hello, [NAME], we have recommendations for you.** Click here to view all your book recommendations.
- In e-mails titled **Amazon.com Recommends ...** and **New for You**, periodically sent to Amazon customers.
- In the **Gold Box** treasure chest icon at the top right of Amazon's home page. Clicking the box reveals special offers on books and other merchandise on your recommended list.

- In a book's **Also-Bought** list. Every book's detail page on Amazon includes a list with the headline **Customers who bought this item also bought**. The Also-Bought list shows the five other books bought most frequently by customers who also purchased the displayed book.
- An extended Also-Bought list that includes many more titles is accessible from each book's detail page at the link [Explore similar items](#). Buyers can view the same list during the checkout process by viewing **Customers who bought [Title] also bought...**

The wisdom of crowds

Amazon's recommendations aren't just a computer talking, it's the collective judgment of millions of people acting independently in their own self-interest. Amazon is the biggest and most effective word-of-mouth generator for books because it measures not what people *say*, but what they *do*. People don't always recommend their favorite current book to each of their friends and acquaintances. But Amazon factors each buying decision into its recommendations for like-minded customers.

Just as a well-programmed computer can defeat a master chess player, automated recommendations can suggest just the right book, including books that would never occur to a brilliant bookstore clerk, says Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos:

“ I remember one of the first times this struck me. The main book on the page was about Zen. There were other suggestions for Zen books, but in the middle of those was a [recommended] book on “How to have a clutter-free desk.”

That's not something that a human editor would ever pick. But statistically, the people who were interested in the Zen books also wanted clutter-free desks. The computer is blind to the fact that these things are dissimilar in some way to humans. It looks right through that and says, “Yes, try this.” And it works.¹

¹ Bezos was speaking at a luncheon hosted by The Technology Alliance, a Seattle-based trade group, on May 15, 2006.

Bubbling to the top

The more your book sells on Amazon, the more frequently it's shown and recommended. Books that sell well on Amazon appear higher in search results and category lists.

Let's imagine your book *How to Grow Organic Strawberries* outsells a competing title, *Idiot's Guide to Growing Organic Strawberries*. When Amazon customers search for the keyword "strawberries," your book will appear on top—customers will see it first, and notice it before the competition.

More benefits result from your Amazon sales: Your book moves up in category lists, providing another way for potential readers to discover it. For example, your title on organic strawberries would appear in this Amazon subcategory:

Home & Garden > Gardening & Horticulture > Techniques > Organic

This subcategory list is like a bestseller list for your niche. Amazon has 35 top-level categories (like Arts & Photography; Business & Investing) divided into dozens more subcategories. Unlike general bestseller lists compiled by the *New York Times* or *USA Today*, Amazon's subcategory lists show what people care about at the niche level, where passions run deepest.

Amazon's subcategories are discrete enough that just a few sales can push your title near the top, exposing your book to more people who care about that topic. In our example subcategory **Home & Garden > ... Organic**, your book could claim one of the top three spots with only two or three sales per week on Amazon.

Once you've bubbled up to the top of your subcategory, you're firmly inside the positive feedback loop. Amazon acts as a huge funnel, sending thousands of readers to your book. That's why some authors encourage their Web site visitors to buy books on Amazon—each additional sale boosts their exposure, prompting yet more sales.

"Simply put, the more customers you send to Amazon who buy your book, the more visible it will be on Amazon, and the more books Amazon will sell for you," says Morris Rosenthal, publisher of Foner Books.

If your book continues selling for six months or so, Amazon can assign it to more categories, making it even more likely browsers will find you after browsing in related categories. Books that sell moderately

well eventually can be assigned to 12 or more categories, the same exposure as your book being shelved in a dozen different sections of a brick-and-mortar bookstore. The big difference is, Amazon is the world's largest bookstore.

To see your book's subcategory assignments on Amazon, find the section on your book's detail page headed **Look for similar items by category**. Clicking on those links takes you to a list of the subcategory's bestsellers.

Sometimes persistent publishers can talk the folks at Amazon into assigning their books to additional categories, or removing the book from inappropriate categories. Research other books in your niche, and see which categories they're displayed in.

Narrow a list down to 10 categories and send your list, ISBN, and contact information to Amazon. You can send your message, along with any other typographical corrections for Amazon, by using this form:

**[www.Amazon.com/gp/help/contact-us/
typographical-errors.html](http://www.Amazon.com/gp/help/contact-us/typographical-errors.html)**

Recommendation effectiveness

Online recommendations are more effective with certain categories of books and price points, according to a 2006 study, *The Dynamics of Viral Marketing*. Researchers at HP Labs and two universities reviewed millions of book purchases resulting from online recommendations.

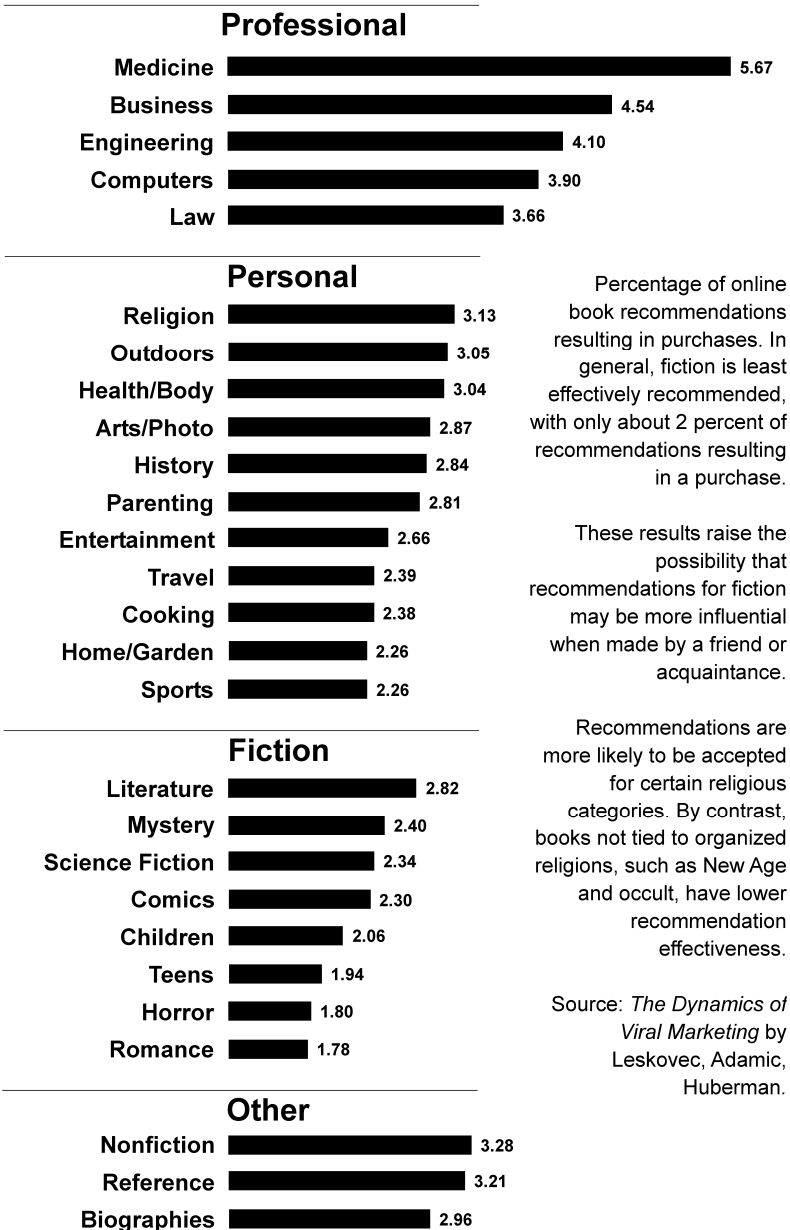
Recommendations for medical texts tended to be most effective—nearly 5.7 percent of them resulted in a purchase, almost double the average rate. The researchers attributed this to the higher median price of medical books and technical books in general. A higher book price increased the chance that recommendations would be consulted and accepted.

Recommendations were moderately effective for certain religious categories: 4.3 percent for Christian living and theology, and 4.8 percent for Bibles. By contrast, books not connected with organized religions had lower recommendation effectiveness, including New Age (2.5 percent) and occult (2.2 percent).

Recommendations for fiction books were usually the least effective, with only about 2 percent resulting in purchases. Recommendations for nonfiction books dealing with personal and leisure pursuits were slightly more effective, resulting in purchases about 3 percent of the time.

Figure 1.1

Recommendation effectiveness by category



Percentage of online book recommendations resulting in purchases. In general, fiction is least effectively recommended, with only about 2 percent of recommendations resulting in a purchase.

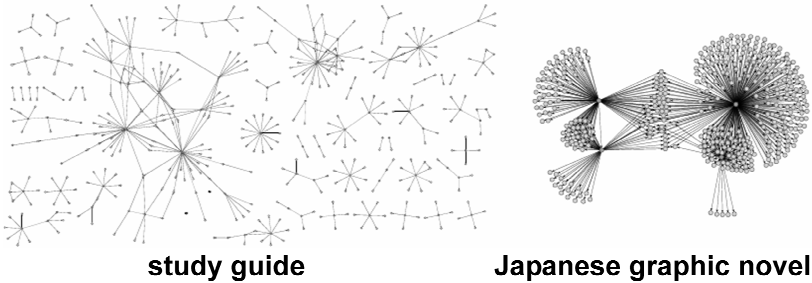
These results raise the possibility that recommendations for fiction may be more influential when made by a friend or acquaintance.

Recommendations are more likely to be accepted for certain religious categories. By contrast, books not tied to organized religions, such as New Age and occult, have lower recommendation effectiveness.

Source: *The Dynamics of Viral Marketing* by Leskovec, Adamic, Huberman.

Figure 1.2

Extremes in book recommendation networks



Two book recommendation networks. The left shows how recommendations for a study guide were ineffective and ignored by consumers. On the right, recommendations for a graphic novel were effective, resulting in frequent purchases.

The book on the left is the study guide *First Aid for the USMLE Step 1*. The book on the right is *Oh My Goddess!: Mara Strikes Back*. Recommendations for this graphic novel prompted bursts of connected sales represented visually by the linked patterns. The opportunities for networking are vast: Japanese comics have a wide following in the United States, are popular with children and adults, and are vigorously supported by online communities. By contrast, suggestions for study guides usually originate outside online communities, from an instructor or employer. Choice is restricted, online connections are sparse, and no word of mouth occurs. For a variety of reasons, readers are rarely passionate about textbooks.

Generally, though, fiction recommendations are least effective of any book category, resulting in purchases only 2 percent of the time, while recommendations for expensive medical books are most effective.

*Illustration from The Dynamics of Viral Marketing
by Leskovec, Adamic, Huberman.*

Recommendations from family members or personal friends were much more effective for fiction and religious books than online recommendations, the researchers concluded.

Some book categories, such as gardening, have different recommendation effectiveness depending on how specialized the text and how widely the topic is supported by online communities. For example, books on vegetable or tomato growing had only average recommendation effectiveness compared with other nonfiction. However, recommendations of books on orchid cultivation, which tend to be more specialized, had double the recommendation acceptance.

Customers are more likely to buy a book if they receive the same recommendation twice. After that, customers tend to ignore the recommendation.

The study is available in its entirety here:

www.hpl.hp.com/research/idl/papers/viral/viral.pdf

Amazon Sales Rank

As your sales on Amazon increase, you'll see a corresponding move in your title's Amazon Sales Rank.

Amazon's rankings show how each book is selling compared to every other title in the catalog of nearly 4 million. Updated hourly, the system assigns a unique rank to each book relative to each other title's sales—the top-selling book is ranked 1, and the slowest-selling book is ranked over 3,500,000.

The closer you get to 1, the more often your book appears in Amazon recommendations. For this reason, many entrepreneurial authors and publishers concentrate on driving as many sales as possible to Amazon during a book's launch. Enlarging your book's footprint on Amazon can pay dividends for years to come.

Your book's Amazon Sales Rank is public evidence of how successful your book is. Many booksellers, publishers, and agents pay close attention to Amazon ranks. So if you manage to pump up the sales rank of your book, it can prompt brick-and-mortar stores to order more copies. Publishers looking for a complementary title might ask you to write the book for them.

Amazon Bestseller Campaigns

The Internet has become an effective marketing tool for authors because it enables your audience members to find *you*, instead of you finding *them*. With online word of mouth, you gently reel your audience in, instead of blasting an advertisement to a crowd that isn't listening.

Let's face it, traditional advertising is dying, and it never worked with books anyway. More than ever, people are tuning out commercials, junk mail and spam.

There is no shortcut for getting word of mouth for your book. And as we'll see, not only are shortcuts ineffective, they can backfire.

One shortcut many new authors are trying these days is "Amazon Bestseller Campaigns." And who can blame them: What author doesn't want to have a No. 1 book and millions of loyal readers?

Amazon doesn't endorse these campaigns, but doesn't really discourage them either. Independent marketing consultants charge \$2,700 for their Bestseller Campaign courses, and to a new author it might seem worth every penny. According to advertisements by these Bestseller consultants, one author racked up more than \$35,000 in book sales during the first 48 hours of her campaign. Could it happen to you? You bet—you'll have a "guaranteed" bestseller within "38 days."

So go ahead, dream a little. Once your book tops the chart at Amazon, you'll be on the red carpet. Lunch with publishers. Bookstore tours. Agents calling. Movie deals, foreign rights sales. And next, you'll be on the *real* bestseller lists: *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

So what's wrong with all that? The bestseller consultants say they're simply applying good old-fashioned marketing to the digital age. But critics say these campaigns are just smoke and mirrors. These consultants don't discuss whether the book needs to be any good. Apparently anyone who coughs up \$2,700 is guaranteed a bestseller.

Is it too good to be true? Are these programs worth it, or just a waste of time and money?

Let's boil it down to three essential questions:

1. Are Amazon Bestseller Campaigns profitable? Do they generate more income for the author or publisher than they cost?
2. Do these campaigns enhance the reputation of the author and the book?
3. Most importantly, does the bestseller promotion provide enduring word of mouth for the book, or do sales evaporate quickly?

Making the list

We're list-crazy these days. Everything is ranked: books, movies, radio and TV shows, Web sites, video games. The lists are dutifully reported in newspapers, magazines, and even mentioned on news broadcasts. Who's No. 1 today? Who's up and who's down? How many gazillion dollars did the latest Hollywood blockbuster rake in last weekend?

Actually, this stuff matters a lot: Most of your sales happen *after* you're on a list, because that's how lots of people discover you. For years, big publishers have used every trick in the book to break onto lists like the *New York Times* Best Sellers. One way is to offer huge discounts to certain retailers who place big orders, making demand appear strong.

For struggling authors, Amazon is the most democratic list because *everyone* gets on it, whether they sell tons of books or just a few. Each author who has sold at least one copy of his or her book on Amazon is ranked somewhere in the 4-million-title

It's easy to check the Amazon Sales Rank of any book. Scroll down the book's product page to the section labeled **Product Details**. The Sales Rank is at the bottom of the section.

Product Details

Paperback

Publisher: McBride Pub; 6th edition (January 1

ISBN: 0930313062

Shipping Information: [View shipping rates at](#)

Average Customer Review: ★★☆☆ based on

Amazon.com Sales Rank: #49,486 in Books

catalog. The top dog has an Amazon Sales Rank of 1, and is racking up thousands of sales a day. The worst laggard is ranked 3,500,000-plus, selling perhaps one copy every few years.

Just for kicks, plenty of authors buy a copy or two of their book on Amazon, just to watch their Sales Rank spike a few thousand notches higher toward No. 1. But your Sales Rank slides right back down unless someone else buys another copy pretty soon.

Whether an author is No. 5 or No. 539,000, many simply can't resist checking their rank several times a day. And since Amazon's bestseller list is recalculated hourly based on the preceding hour's sales, the list changes 24 times a day. It's so dynamic, a short burst of sales can shoot a book toward the top. And that's what makes it fairly easy to create a bestseller on Amazon—or *rig* one, depending on your point of view.

True, Amazon is the world's biggest bookstore. But you'd need tons more sales to make the *New York Times* list, which is based on weekly sales from 4,000 bookstores and wholesalers serving another 60,000 retailers. With an Amazon Bestseller Campaign, however, you might simply line up 250 people to buy your book at 3 a.m. next Sunday, and you're No. 1. Sure, it's only for an hour, but you can put "bestselling author" on your resume for the rest of your life, right?

Well, let's get real. "Ranking high on Amazon certainly feels good, but it doesn't take many sales to achieve that," said Jacqueline Deval, publisher of Hearst Books and author of *Publicize Your Book*.

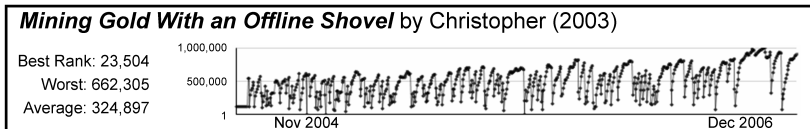
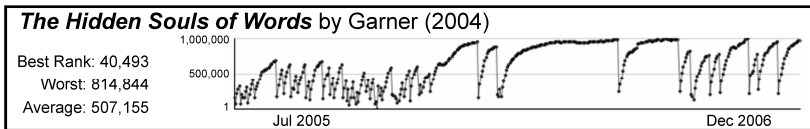
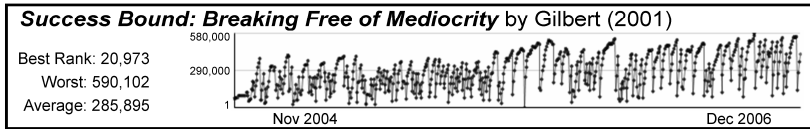
The problem is, Bestseller Campaigns are a seductive "quick fix" for authors who feel they don't have the time, energy, or know-how for real grass-roots marketing. It's frustrating to pour your heart and soul into a book for months or years, and then nobody buys it. Amazon Bestseller Campaigns can sound like a good solution, simply because they promise instant success.

How Bestseller Campaigns work

The core of an Amazon Bestseller Campaign is an e-mail advertisement blasted to thousands of people; some practitioners say it requires at least 300,000 messages to make any difference at all. People who get the e-mails are offered a one-time deal: a long list of "valuable free bonuses" like e-books, audio files of seminars, and other digital goodies, but only if they buy your book at Amazon on the day of your campaign.

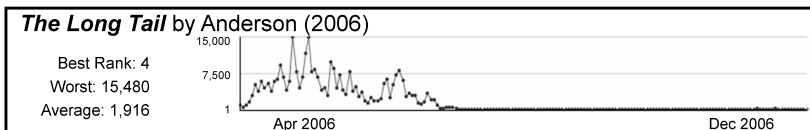
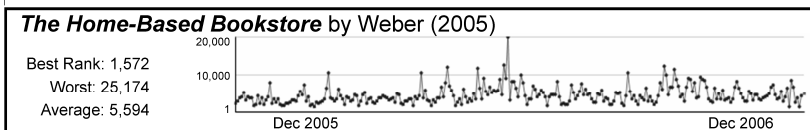
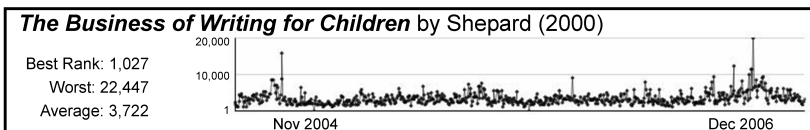
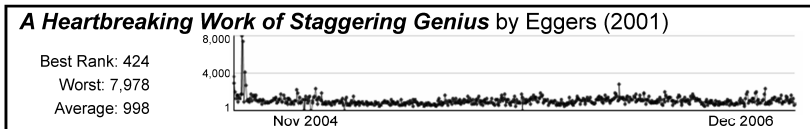
Books pushed with ‘Bestseller’ Campaigns

These books are touted as “Amazon Bestseller” success stories by the marketing consultants who helped launch the books. However, this look at their Amazon Sales Ranks reveals poor sales that became even weaker and more erratic over time. Peaks on the chart show periods of weak sales, valleys represent strong sales. **Conclusion: Sales can deteriorate badly for books marketed with special gimmicks.**



Books plugged with online word of mouth

Word of mouth for these four books was established by the authors, using a Web site or blog. Notice the long-term trend is flat, indicating steady sales. **Conclusion: Books with Internet word of mouth can sell strongly year after year.**



Charts provided by TitleZ.com, reprinted with permission. In some cases, charts don't extend all the way to back to the date of publication, when sales might have been strongest.

With some Bestseller Campaigns, buyers are offered many more freebies if they buy two, three, or even 20 copies of your book at the same time. The bonuses are advertised as being worth hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

The e-mail blasts are sent to registered subscribers of e-mail newsletters, so the messages aren't illegal spam. But just in case things don't go as well as planned, some consultants suggest you also pester your family, friends, and coworkers to buy your book on the special day to ensure it has enough sales to move up.

... and this is success?

The marketing literature for Bestseller Campaigns give plenty of references that seem to back up the promises. Dozens of earlier Bestseller Campaign books are listed as success stories. But a quick check of their actual sales on Amazon reveals that several of these books haven't been successful at all.

As shown in Figure 2.1, the sales charts for these books zigzag all over the place, a sure sign the book is going nowhere. Further, look at the sales ranks—they're a long, long way from No. 1. Obviously, these books are selling only a few copies a year on Amazon.

And these are the success stories? The flameouts must be spectacular.

On the other hand, look at the three bottom sales charts in Figure 2.1, the ones for books promoted with Web sites and blogs. Their sales ranks are much stronger, and the trend lines are flat, meaning steady sales. These books probably sell more copies each day on Amazon than the "Bestsellers" rack up in a whole year.

Haywired recommendations

What goes wrong with the Bestseller Campaign books? Some of them are probably wonderful books, but nobody's buying. Meanwhile, books with genuine word of mouth can have strong, steady sales for years.

A bit more digging into these Bestseller Campaigns shows the real reason they can collapse. When readers follow their own curiosity, they tend to buy lots of the same kinds of books. For example, the Amazon

customer who buys *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times* tends to buy the following books, in precisely this order:

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln

The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln

1776

His Excellency: George Washington

The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey

Easy to see the connection, isn't it? These five titles are the Also-Bought list, the guts of Amazon's recommendation engine. (You can see the Also-Bought list for any book on Amazon under the heading **Customers who bought this item also bought...**) Customers who've bought only some of the books on the list soon receive recommendations for the rest in personalized e-mails or on the Web site. This results in tons of sales, and Amazon has it down to a science.

Bestseller Campaigns, however, throw a monkey wrench into this recommendation process. Instead of Amazon recommending similar books, it spits out unrelated books. For example, one Bestseller Campaign book, *Hidden Souls of Words*, is categorized Religion/Spirituality but its Also-Bought list includes completely different kinds of books:

The Attractor Factor: 5 Easy Steps for Creating Wealth...

How to Be Wildly Wealthy FAST: A Step-by-Step Guide...

Turning Passions into Profits: Three Steps to Wealth and Power

The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness...

Life's Missing Instruction Manual: The Guidebook You Should...

What's the connection? There isn't any, except they're all Bestseller Campaign books. They were all pitched, high-pressure, perhaps to the same lists of people, no matter what their tastes in books. A few people bought, but some of them may have wanted the "valuable free bonuses," not the book.

And now we see the real problem: Amazon isn't recommending *Hidden Souls of Words* to anyone who actually might want to read it—

people who like Religion/Spirituality books. This book's best chance at word of mouth is gone.

To be fair, a few of the Bestseller Campaign success stories really are bona-fide successes, including books by Gary Renard, Gary Rebstock, Dr. Bruce Lipton and Joe Vitale. Books by these authors sell year after year on Amazon, but is it because somebody ran an Amazon Bestseller Campaign? Or is it because these authors energetically promote their books year after year by blogging, writing articles, and giving interviews?

To be doubly fair, the consultants who advertise Amazon Bestseller Campaigns would surely tell you that a single technique doesn't support a book for long; steady sales depend on continuous promotion. Still, the question remains: Why do their clients actually fare so poorly?

Authors who ignite real word of mouth using techniques described in this book can draw a real audience who buys and recommends their book. But don't expect to hit the jackpot next month, if ever. Nothing in publishing is simple, easy and guaranteed.

Another problem with Bestseller Campaigns is the increasing unreliability of e-mail blasts. Despite laws against spam, junk e-mails are a growing problem. Increasingly, Internet Service Providers are deleting some e-mail blasts, even legitimate ones.

Is it worth it?

It's pretty easy to do the math on Bestseller Campaigns. If you assume a cost of \$2,700 and a profit on each book of \$5, you'll need to sell 450 books to break even. (That's if you do the campaign yourself after taking the classes; if the consultant does it for you, it costs \$15,000.)

The bigger question is, could your time and money be better spent sparking real word of mouth for your book?

If it's important to have a stellar Amazon Sales Rank for a day, you can do it much faster and cheaper by simply buying a few hundred copies of your book from Amazon yourself. Have a copy shipped to each member of your high-school class, your neighbors and in-laws, and every newspaper and magazine editor in your region. That would spark some *real* word of mouth for your book.

Beating people over the head isn't going to create demand for your book. Instead, create a way for readers to find you on their own. *That's* when you'll have an audience, and that's what this book is all about.

Amateur book reviews

Keith Donohue had an idea for a book, a story rattling around in his brain for years. But he could never find the time to write it. With a full-time job and a family with three young children, putting it off was easy.

Then Donohue turned 40, and a short time later came the events of Sept. 11, 2001. He decided, “It’s now or never,” and the red-haired Irishman began writing. He wrote on scraps of paper on the subway to work in Washington, D.C., and scribbled during his lunch hour sitting on park benches.

Finally, after several months of rewriting and polishing, the story was finished: *The Stolen Child*, a fantasy inspired by the W.B. Yeats poem and what Donohue knew of the changeling legend.

And that’s when things got really hard. It took Donohue two years to find an agent to shop the manuscript to publishers, nearly causing him to give up. He received 10 rejections, and was considering self-publishing. Then Donohue got a call from an agent who’d had the manuscript for a year but misplaced it. Soon, publisher Nan Talese, who runs an imprint at Doubleday, took on the book, and it seemed success was at hand.

By 2006, Donohue’s book was finally in print. But then another hurdle, seemingly worst of all: The critics weren’t impressed with *The Stolen Child*. In fact, they completely ignored it; not a single major newspaper reviewed it. Ask any big publisher, and they’ll tell you: Any novel stiffed by the critics has no chance of becoming a bestseller.

But the story wasn’t over. A review copy of the book ended up in the hands of Linda Porco, Amazon.com’s merchandising director. She passed it among her office mates, and it was unanimous—everyone loved it. So Porco tried something new. She got more copies of the book and mailed them to Amazon’s most active customer reviewers. They review books on the site as a hobby, assigning five stars to the books they love, one star to the books they hate, and an essay explaining why.

Within weeks, 13 of these Amazon Top Reviewers posted a rave review. Promptly, *Stolen Child* became Amazon’s bestselling fiction

book, and reached No. 26 on the *New York Times* extended bestseller list, an unbelievable climb for a novel with no big newspaper or trade reviews. Now the book is in its eighth printing and the story is being shopped to Hollywood. And—oh yeah—now *Stolen Child* has plenty of professional reviews.

All this caused quite a stir in publishing circles, but it didn't surprise the folks who actually buy books. Increasingly, readers turn to online reviews written by peers to find out if a book is worth it. Talese, the publisher, says a traditional function of professional critics—building awareness of a new book—is practically obsolete in the Internet age:

“ We're trying to reach readers. [Professional reviews] have been a way of announcing that a book exists that readers might be interested in, but they are being given less and less room in the newspapers.

Critics argue that amateur reviews are meaningless, that they don't apply the professional critics' intellectual rigor. But when was the last time you ran out and bought a book after seeing it reviewed in a newspaper or magazine? The truth is, many “professional” reviews are simply rehashes of publisher-generated publicity. Most of the time, professional critics don't tell readers the one thing they want to know—whether they'll like the book. Today, all it takes is a quick skim of customer reviews on Amazon, and you've got your answer. Whatever the amateur reviewers lack in highbrow sensibilities, they make up in credibility and relevancy.

Credibility through peers

Successful books have lots of positive reviews on Amazon, and it's no coincidence. It's another point in the positive feedback loop: Good books garner good reviews, which leads to more sales. Good reviews on Amazon are particularly crucial for books by new authors and niche books.

Positive reviews on Amazon boost your sales not only on Amazon, but everywhere people are buying books. What percentage of buyers at brick-and-mortar bookstores actually made their choice by reading Amazon customer reviews? There's no way of knowing exactly, but rest assured it's a substantial and growing number.

Amazon's reviews are effective because they're often written by people who are knowledgeable and passionate about the book and its topic. They're seen as an objective evaluation from someone with no ax to grind. Sure, many inept and biased reviews appear, but they're easily ignored and far outweighed by the good ones.

In the case of a niche book, an amateur reviewer with the right expertise in the topic can critique it better than any professional reviewer can.

Getting more Amazon reviews

Traditional book marketing strategies call for mailing hundreds of review copies to reviewers at magazines and newspapers. But for a new author with a niche book, chasing print reviews can be more of a distraction than a strategy. A better way to launch your campaign is by finding 100 to 300 readers in your target audience and *giving them your book*. Ask them to post an honest critique on Amazon. This costs nothing more than mailing review copies to traditional book reviewers, but will likely have a bigger, more immediate impact. Here's where to find review candidates:

- From Amazon's list of Top Reviewers who regularly post reviews of books similar to yours.
- Amazon users who have reviewed related titles, or books by authors with a writing style similar to yours.
- Acquaintances and colleagues interested in your book's topic.
- Participants in Internet discussion boards and mailing lists relevant to your book.
- Registered visitors of your Web site or readers of your blog.

You can find more prospective reviewers by posting a message on Amazon's discussion board dedicated to customer book reviews:

<http://forums.prosperotechnologies.com/n/mb/listsf.asp?webtag=am-custreview>

Will giving away several dozen copies of your book hurt its sales? Perhaps you'll lose a sale or two, but you'll gain much more from word of

mouth. The initial readers who enjoy your book will recommend it to friends, and those new readers will recommend it to more.

Don't ask for reviews from people who haven't actually read your book, even your mother. The result will be an unconvincing review that will detract from your book's credibility rather than bolster it.

Amazon Top Reviewers

The Stolen Child author Keith Donohue was lucky that Amazon Top Reviewers helped make his book a bestseller; it wasn't part of his plan. But you don't need to depend on luck. Seek out Top Reviewers yourself and ask them to read and review your book. This takes some legwork, but if your book is a good one, it will be well worth the trouble. Reviews from some of Amazon's Top Reviewers can seriously boost the credibility of your book.

Amazon's Top Reviewers are listed here:

**[www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/
top-reviewers.html](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/top-reviewers.html)**

Top Reviewers have a special badge accompanying their pen names, such as *Top 1000 Reviewer*, *Top 500 Reviewer*, *Top 50 Reviewer*, *Top 10 Reviewer* or *#1 Reviewer*. Having one of these badges displayed among your book's reviews isn't the same thing as an endorsement by Amazon—it's better. It's a vote by a recognized community leader—someone who takes reviewing seriously, and has earned a reputation for helpfulness.

Rankings of the Top Reviewers are determined by a point system based on the number of reviews written and the number of positive votes those reviews receive when people click **Yes** in response to "Was this review helpful to you?"

Top Reviewers are regular Amazon customers who simply enjoy reading and critiquing lots of books. Many of them review several books per week—sometimes at the invitation of an author or publisher, but usually by just following their personal interests. Despite receiving no payment for their efforts, Amazon Top Reviewers compete furiously to climb the rankings ladder. The longtime No. 1 reviewer, Harriet Klausner, has posted more than 12,000 reviews and, not surprisingly,

says she's a speed-reader. It's not unusual for Klausner to post 10 or more reviews in a single day.

Contacting Top Reviewers

Clicking on a reviewer's pen name takes you to their Amazon profile containing biographical and other information they've posted about themselves. Some reviewer profiles will explain what types of books they prefer. For example, some reviewers stick with fiction; some review only movies or music. Some profiles indicate whether the reviewer accepts unsolicited books, and some provide a postal or e-mail address.

But Amazon gives you a way to reach reviewers who don't display any contact information on their profiles. At the top right of the profile page, click the link [Invite to be an Amazon Friend](#). This generates a pop-up form where you can enter a message, and Amazon will forward it in an e-mail. This maintains the reviewer's privacy, and if they aren't interested, they may simply ignore your message.

A soft-sell approach works best when approaching Top Reviewers. Offer a complimentary book in return for their *considering* to review it, no obligation. Most Top Reviewers don't want to commit to a review until they've seen the book. Don't ask reviewers to return the book.

Here's a sample script you might use to approach Amazon Top Reviewers:

Dear John Doe:

I got your name from the list of Amazon Top Reviewers. I've written a book, "How to Grow Organic Strawberries." I noticed from your Amazon profile that you frequently review gardening books. If you think you might be interested in reading my book and posting an honest review of it on Amazon, I'll gladly send a complimentary copy if you'll reply with your postal mailing address. There is no obligation, of course.

Best Regards

Carefully screen out reviewers whose profile indicates they aren't interested in your book's topic. For example, don't send your fiction title to a reviewer whose profile says, "I review only nonfiction."

Some Amazon Top Reviewers make it a practice not to review a book from a new author unless they can honestly recommend it to others and give it a rating of at least three or four stars out of five.

Only a small portion of Top Reviewers are likely to respond to your offer. Some are inundated with review copies from publishers who already have their mailing address and know their reading preferences. Other Top Reviewers are skeptical of books sent directly from authors, after having received poorly written self-published books. Some busy Top Reviewers disable the Amazon Friend invitation system by adjusting their profile's privacy settings.

Etiquette in approaching reviewers

Naturally, every author wants good reviews. And although it's perfectly ethical to seek reviews, don't do anything to suggest you're expecting favorable treatment. If you succeed in getting lots of reviews, you can expect some negative ones.

"I see a fair number of books that I don't like, and I say so—including those sent to me as review copies," says Jane Corn, one of Amazon's Top 150 reviewers. "Anything else seems unethical to me."

You can safeguard yourself a bit by requesting that Top Reviewers not post a review if they simply hate the book. But it's the reviewer's call. Sometimes reviewers are willing to give prepublication feedback, providing valuable advice on fixing a book's weaknesses. Don't expect that, though, and don't ask for it.

You might want to avoid sending your book to reviewers who usually post harshly negative reviews, but don't shy away from those who offer frank criticism. These voices lend credibility to your book, Corn says:

“ Readers are smart. They can figure out who to trust, and those are the reviewers you want to reach. Always be clear about your willingness to have a fair, honest review. Anything else is self-defeating.

Finding more Amazon reviewers

Another valuable source of potential reviewers is people who've posted Amazon reviews for previous books in your topic or genre. You can contact them using the same techniques mentioned above. Click on the pen name displayed with their review to reach their Amazon profile, then use the Amazon Friends invitation to send a personalized message:

Dear John Doe:

I got your name from the Amazon book review you posted of the 2003 book "Complete Guide to Organic Fruit." I recently wrote a book that appeals to the same audience, "How to Grow Organic Strawberries." If you think you might be interested in reading it and perhaps reviewing it on Amazon, I'll gladly send a complimentary copy if you'll respond with your mailing address. There is no obligation, of course.

Best Regards

These readers might not be frequent Amazon reviewers, but may consider it a treat to discover a new book in their field of interest. And there's another benefit of getting reviews from these specialized readers: Positive ratings from them can surface your book in Amazon's recommendations to buyers of similar books.

Finding volunteers to read and review your book is a long, tedious process but can be well worth the effort. If you spend two or three days inviting about 300 potential Amazon reviewers, you can expect to receive about 40 to 50 responses, and wind up with perhaps 35 reviews, a quite satisfactory result.

Remember that many folks are rightfully suspicious of e-mails that seem to promise something for nothing, and contain links to a Web site. Most users are still unfamiliar with the "Invitation to be an Amazon Friend," and often these messages are mistaken for spam, or simply deleted unread.

More ways to get reviews

Once your book is selling, you'll have a steady stream of potential reviewers. Whenever you receive e-mails from readers with praise for your book or requests for further information, you might conclude your response this way:

Thank you for the kind words about my book. If you ever have a spare moment, it would be a great help if you could post a review of it on Amazon and let other potential readers know why you liked it. It's not necessary to write a lengthy, formal review—a summary of the comments you sent me would be fine. Here's a link to the review form for my book:

<http://www.Amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/write-a-review.html?asin=ISBN>

The link at the end of the message takes the reader to Amazon's Web form for book reviews. To customize the link for your book, replace the last four characters, **ISBN**, with your book's ISBN numerals.

Amazon Spotlight Reviews

Popular books on Amazon can draw dozens or even hundreds of reviews. But no matter how many reviews a book gets, two reviews have a special impact by design—a pair designated Spotlight Reviews. Amazon displays Spotlights above all others, sometimes permanently. Because they're usually the first bit of independent information buyers see about your book, Spotlights are crucial. Many browsers read only those two reviews before deciding whether to buy.

Spotlights don't appear until your book has several reviews posted. When your book is new, the first reviews appear about midway down your book's detail page. New reviews appear on top, bumping earlier reviews down a notch. When the sixth review appears, Amazon selects one review as a Spotlight and places it on top. After your book receives a few more reviews, another review is selected as the second Spotlight.

The selection process for Spotlight Reviews is automated. The review with the most "helpful" votes by customers usually gets the top spot,

although reviews written by Top Reviewers carry more weight. Subsequent reviews appear in reverse chronological order below the Spotlight reviews. A maximum of six reviews appear on your book's detail page, along with a link to all previous reviews.

Negative reviews

Positive reviews certainly help your book, but negative reviews on Amazon can have a bigger impact, according to a 2003 study published by the Yale School of Management. Multiple glowing reviews for a book tend to be dismissed by shoppers as “hype” generated by the author or publisher, the study found. Negative reviews, however, are taken more seriously because buyers usually believe they represent honest criticism from disappointed readers.

Buyers understand that no book pleases everyone, and that any book reviewed often enough will get an occasional thumbs-down. But in some cases, a single detailed, critical review can devastate sales on Amazon, particularly with nonfiction how-to books.

The study, *The Effect of Word of Mouth on Sales: Online Book Reviews* examined random titles from *Global Books in Print* and bestsellers from *Publishers Weekly*. You can read the entire study here:

www.WeberBooks.com/reviews.pdf

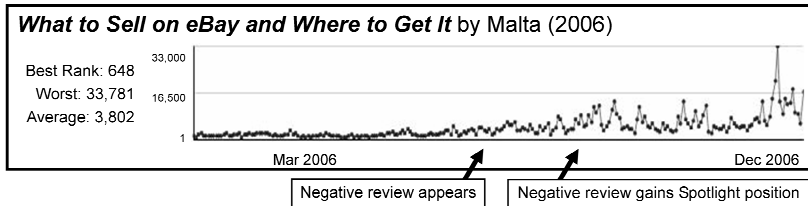
Early on, Amazon's decision to allow readers to post negative book reviews infuriated publishers, chief executive Jeff Bezos recalls:

We had publishers writing to us, saying, “Why in the world would you allow negative reviews? Maybe you don't understand your business—you make money when you *sell* things. Get rid of the negative reviews, and leave the positive ones.”

Yes, negative reviews can hurt sales in the short term, but over the long term, allowing criticism builds credibility and helps shoppers decide what to buy, Bezos says: “We don't make money when we sell things, we make money when we help people make purchase decisions.”

Figure 3.1

How one negative review can hurt book sales



This how-to book, published in January 2006, had very strong sales and overwhelmingly positive customer reviews on Amazon for its first six months. Then, a harshly negative review appeared in June 2006 that seemed to effectively question the book's value. Immediately, sales slumped, shown here by the rising line indicating a worsening Amazon Sales Rank.

Over the next several weeks, Amazon users who read the negative review consistently voted it "helpful," causing it to rise to the top Spotlight Review position. This made the negative review much more visible to casual shoppers and bolstered its credibility. Sales weakened further.

Certainly, it's not unusual for sales to taper off three to six months after a book's publication. In this case, however, sales began deteriorating immediately after the negative review and worsened as the review gained visibility.

What's the lesson for authors and publishers? Ask for reviews. The more often your book is reviewed, the less likely that a minority opinion can dominate. Numerous authentic reviews lessen the chance that a single review can overtake and monopolize the Spotlight position.

Niche nonfiction and instructional books seem particularly vulnerable to a single, devastating review. Other books are less review-driven, especially political and religious tomes. Conservative pundit Ann Coulter's books are clobbered daily with nasty reviews but sell like hotcakes. Kevin Trudeau's book *Natural Cures* has had monster sales on Amazon for nearly three years, even though many reviewers attack the author and argue that his book is merely an advertisement for his subscription Web site.

Countering malicious reviews

Amazon polices its book review system but depends on community members to report abuses. Because Amazon reviews can be posted anonymously, nothing prevents the occasional malicious review or practical joke. In one well-known case, a prankster ridiculed Microsoft, then signed the review "Bill Gates," the name of the company's founder.

Familiarize yourself with Amazon's guidelines for acceptable reviews so you can request that its Community Help department delete inappropriate reviews. Generally, Amazon requires reviews to critique

the book itself. Reviews that focus on the author or outside topics are often deleted.

Amazon also deletes reviews deemed “illegal, obscene, threatening, defamatory, invasive of privacy, infringing of intellectual property rights, or otherwise injurious to third parties.” It also prohibits “political campaigning, commercial solicitation, chain letters, mass mailings, or any form of ‘spam.’”

Reviewers are prohibited from impersonating other persons or using profanity, obscenities, spiteful remarks, phone numbers, mail addresses, URLs, product pricing and availability, alternative ordering or shipping information, or solicitations for helpful “votes” for reviews. Amazon has also been known to delete negative reviews posted by competing authors, reviews that contain inaccurate information about the author or publisher, and off-topic reviews.

You can request deletion of an inappropriate review on Amazon by sending an e-mail to **community-help@amazon.com**. Specify the book title, ISBN, the pen name of the reviewer, the first sentence of the review, and the date it was posted. State why you believe the review is inappropriate, and you should receive a reply within a few days.

Sometimes authors themselves abuse Amazon’s review system. More on this later.

Old-media book reviews

Most newspapers and magazines have reduced space for book reviews in recent years, even as the number of books published has skyrocketed. Many of the remaining review columns are syndicated by national writers, leaving little opportunity for new authors to get reviewed, even in local media.

The long odds of getting reviewed don’t deter many authors, and traditional media outlets are being bombarded with self-published books. However, most old-media reviewers simply won’t consider a book unless it’s from a major trade publisher.

Sometimes feature sections of newspapers—such as the Lifestyle, Home, or Business sections—are more likely to feature a book, particularly one by a local author.

One drawback to distributing review copies of your book is that many of them will quickly appear for sale on Amazon Marketplace, even if you stamp “Review Copy, Not For Sale” on the front cover. Although

Amazon's policies prohibit the sale of review copies, it still occurs, and of course you'll receive no revenue from those sales.

You certainly don't want to refuse a legitimate request for a review copy. But a more realistic strategy for obtaining reviews in print media is to target specialized magazines and trade publications in your niche. You can find such publications by consulting the *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*, available in many larger libraries. Another valuable resource is the Gebbie Press *All-In-One Media Directory*, which lists 24,000 outlets, including newspapers, magazines and radio stations. You can purchase and download lists of contacts at **www.GebbieInc.com**.

If more than three months remain before your book's publication date, you can submit it for consideration in these trade review publications:

Booklist:

Ala.org/booklist/submit.html

800-545-2433

Kirkus Reviews:

www.Kirkusreviews.com/kirkusreviews/about_us/submission.jsp

212-777-4554

Library Journal:

www.LibraryJournal.com/info/CA603906.html

212-463-6823

Publishers Weekly:

www.PublishersWeekly.com/index.asp?layout=submissions

212-645-9700

Midwest Book Review:

www.midwestbookreview.com/get_rev.htm

608-835-7937

Self-published authors get special consideration from Midwest Book Review, which also gives special preference to small presses and members of the Publishers Marketing Association. If your book is

selected, its review will be posted to online retailers, relevant Web sites and forums, and included on an interactive CD-ROM provided to corporate, academic and public library systems.

Posting trade reviews on Amazon

Amazon licenses prepublication reviews from major trade publications, so if you have secured these reviews, ensure they appear on your title's Amazon detail page. For reviews published in newspapers or other publications for which Amazon doesn't license reprints, you can condense the review to 20 words and Amazon will republish the summary on your book's detail page relying on the "fair use" exemption of copyright law.

Amazon will display a maximum of 10 published reviews on your book's detail page. For information on submitting reviews and other descriptive content about your book to Amazon, see:

www.Amazon.com/publishers

Fee-based book reviews

Considering the work involved in getting book reviews, more authors than ever are willing to pay for them. Several fee-based review services have popped up in recent years, primarily to serve self-publishing authors who are effectively locked out of traditional book reviews.

Many publishers believe paid reviews are ineffective and unethical, but that hasn't stopped a variety of companies from offering them, even publishers of respected library journals such as Kirkus and Bowker. Reviews on Bowker's BookWire site cost \$295. The review is posted at www.BookWire.com and you receive a PDF copy of the review, which you can submit to newspapers or enclose in other promotional materials. For information, e-mail **charlie.frischia@bowker.com**.

Kirkus Discoveries reviews cost \$350 and are sent to the publisher as a PDF and posted at www.KirkusDiscoveries.com. There's also Kirkus Reports, a compilation of paid reviews sent via e-mail to anyone who subscribes. Publishers pay \$95 per title. You can sign up to receive this and other Kirkus newsletters at:

www.Kirkusreviews.comkirkusreviews/

newsletter/email.jsp

Another fee-based review service is operated by Foreword Magazine at **www.ForewordMagazine.com/clarion**. An online review costs \$305, and the company makes it available in key databases used by booksellers and librarians—Bowker’s Books-In-Print online, Baker & Taylor’s Titlesource 3, and Ingram’s iPage.

Critics argue these paid reviews aren’t read by consumers, and that their supposed target audience—booksellers and librarians—pay no attention to paid reviews.

“I feel that paying for book reviews is a bad idea,” says self-publishing guru Dan Poynter. “There’s a compromise there. And people can see right through it—they know it’s a paid review, so it’s an ad.”

Jim Cox, editor in chief of Midwest Book Review, puts it this way:

“ Any reviewer that wants money from you for any purpose whatsoever is operating a scam, engaging in unethical behavior that is in violation of the publishing industry etiquette and norm.

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