

TUTORIAL

Online Bookstore Displays

By Steve O'Keefe

Last month, I had the pleasure of interviewing Peter Workman, proprietor of Workman Publishing, for an article in Publishers Marketing Association's newsletter. Workman is an innovator in packaging for publishers — and I don't mean just book covers. His catalog is filled with brightly-colored, creative counter boxes and floor displays. These are known as "dumps" in the trade, and they have made a big difference in Workman Publishing's merchandising success.

For several years now, I have been creating and deploying "virtual dumps" — online bookstore displays. This work started as a syndication campaign, where I asked high-traffic web sites to install a feature article about a book. I noticed how these sites gradually added Amazon Associate and Barnes & Noble Affiliate stores to their sites. There are thousands of these stores online now, and they make it much easier to get web sites to feature books since there potential for revenue from the placement.

The Concept

Today, whenever I conduct an online promotion for a book, it includes an Online Bookstore Display Campaign. First, I take an excerpt from the book and work it into a Feature Article. I add artwork, pad it with sales copy, and format it as a single web page. I upload the page to the publisher's web site, or the author's web site, or my own web site. Then I search for high-traffic sites related to the topic of the book and I pitch the editors of those sites, asking them to feature the book in the bookstore or, if they don't have a bookstore, to use it as a feature article on the site.

The success rate for placement requests is about 25 percent. If I pitch 20 sites, I expect to get about five placements. Five placements may not sound like much, but if you get the top venues for your target audience, it can

make a big contribution to awareness and sales.

The number of successful placements varies substantially with the content of the article. I've had as few as two placements and as many as 18 (out of 20 pitches). Articles about computers, business, careers, and travel are easy to place. Fiction, on the other hand, is a tough sell. For any non-fiction subject, you can usually get five placements at niche sites. I've been successful with books dealing with even very obscure subjects such as radionics (remote healing) and packaging laws.

This article contains a brief tutorial on creating and deploying online bookstore displays. You can find samples of displays at the Patron Saint Productions web site, along with a free, downloadable template for tracking your results.

Assembling the Text

Start with a short excerpt from the book. For fiction, it should be something that grabs readers from the first sentence, and leaves them anxious to find out what happens next. For non-fiction, look for top-10 lists, quizzes, or a passage that quickly demonstrates the author's prowess for dealing with a difficult issue or problem.

Next, add sales copy. I usually add a section about the author(s) with standard bio copy, and a section about the book. For the book copy, I start with jacket or flap copy, then add descriptive language about the production standards for the book. People who read this article won't be holding the book, so I do my best to describe any unique physical characteristics with words. Then I add trade language, soliciting rights inquiries or suggesting special markets uses, and I make sure all possible language for ordering the book is included: ISBN, price, phone, fax, e-mail, wholesalers, distributors, etc.

The display is formatted as a simple web page. My displays are dowdy, but there's a reason for that. Web site

editors who agree to use the display have to adjust the design to fit the look of their sites. If you create a beautiful but complicated web page, you're creating more work for these people stripping out your codes and putting in theirs. They will decline the placement if it looks like too much trouble.

Keeping the coding simple means not specifying any fonts, colors, indents, or unusual formatting. Acceptable codes are bold, italic, centering, and larger point sizes for display type. Try to keep most of the coding at the beginning of the file, and minimize design codes in the middle of the file.

Adding Artwork

Most of my online bookstore displays have two graphics: the book cover and an author photo. I often grab book covers from Amazon. Clicking on the cover on an Amazon page usually brings up a full-size version of the cover art. I add a border to make sure it stands out, then shrink it to a more standard size — about two inches wide.

With author photos, I scan the art or grab it somewhere online, then embed a caption in the photo, add a border, and shrink it to final size. Use a color photo if you can — the ability to use full color without paying a fortune is one of the benefits of online marketing. Make sure you have permission from the photographer to use the photo this way. Most contracts for jacket photos allow this use, but a photography credit often must appear in the caption.

I use a different approach when promoting art books that are based on their visual appeal. I've used as many as seven images in an online bookstore display. Creating graphic-intensive displays requires a deft touch, and I've learned a few tricks I'll share in a future column. Don't use any more images than are necessary in an online bookstore display, because they make it much more

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difficult for web editors to use your displays and lead to increased rejection to placement pitches.

Pitching Displays

Once the display is ready and has been approved by the publisher and/or author, I write a generic e-mail pitch to use as a template when seeking placements. Here's a sample pitch letter:

I'm working with John Wiley & Sons on a promotion for Linda Mead's new book, "Investing With Giants: Tried and True Stocks that Have Sustained the Test of Time." I wonder if you would be interested in featuring an excerpt from the book at your web site?

Mead was the co-author with Suze Orman of "You've Earned It, Don't Lose It." Her new book is timely for those who are jittery about the stock market. It profiles 10 Blue Chip companies that have weathered major crises in the past 100 years, yet kept growing for their shareholders. The excerpt would work well on your [BLANK] page:

<http://URL.of.the.page.here>

I've already formatted the excerpt in HTML for your convenience. You can view it at the URL below. Feel free to grab the source and the two small images and install them on your own site. You're welcome to adjust the purchase link to your own bookstore. The excerpt is temporarily located here:

<http://www.patronsaintpr.com/samples/IWG/iwg-obd.htm>

Please let me know if you plan to use the excerpt, or have questions, or if I can help in any way. I'd be happy to send you a free review copy of the book, "Investing With Giants" — just let me know where to send it. Thanks for your consideration.

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All pitch letters should state exactly where you believe the feature should go on their site. If they have a bookstore on the site, ask for the article to be used as a feature in the bookstore, and insert the URL for the bookstore page. If they don't have a bookstore, but they have an archive of articles, ask for the feature to be used in the archive. Notice that the pitch letter ends with a subtle bribe: it's amazing how many web editors will say yes to a placement if you offer them a free copy of the book. For a couple bucks, you could end up with hundreds of dollars worth of free advertising.

I look for four things before pitching a site: 1) Has the site been updated in the last 60 days? 2) Is there a logical place to put the article? 3) Does the site belong to a competitor? 4) Is there contact information for the person who is in charge of the content on the site? If I don't get the right answers to any of these questions, I quickly move along without pitching. It's a waste of time to pitch sites that aren't maintained or that really have no place to put the feature.

For most books, I need to visit about 50 sites to find 20 good prospects. I often start my search at [DMOZ.org](http://DMOZ.org) — also known as the Open Directory Project. It is a far better directory for finding top quality web sites than Yahoo. Google searches result in too many substandard matches, but I will turn to Google if I can't find enough sites at DMOZ.

The key to a speedy placement campaign is finding the supersite — a site that has an up-to-date set of links to all the major resources in the book's topic area. For example, I recently did a campaign for a book about religious possession, and found a site with a good set of links to cult information web sites. I bookmarked the supersite, and returned to it a dozen times, working my way through their links to other sites. I found a site recently that had a great set of links to online financial resources for women. It made my

placement work much easier than wading through Google looking for top sites.

### Tracking Your Progress

When you find a site worth pitching, log it onto your Bookstore Display Placement Report — you'll find a template for this report at the Patron Saint Productions web site. Your entry should include the name of the site, the URL, the date a request was made, who the request was sent to, and the section of the site you requested placement in. Here's an example:

#### Worldwide Travel Library

<http://www.travel-library.com/>

7/3/02 — This is an enormous travel information portal, used as homebase by the Rec.Travel newsgroup. Asked for feature to be used in "Round The World" section. Request to: (lucas@travel-library.com)

You'll find this report very handy for seeking placements for similar displays in the future. You can also use the contact names to for news releases or to solicit chat appearances or online seminar hosts.

You'll get all kinds of responses to your pitch letters. No response is the most common, but about a quarter of the people pitched will say, "Great — we'll install it. Send me the book." Some will ask you to pay for placement, which I've never agreed to. Others will ask for a link from your site to theirs. Several times, I've had web editors ask for changes to the feature — most often, cutting the amount of sales copy.

When your features start appearing on these web sites, do yourself a favor and document them with screen captures. On PCs, you can use the Alt-PrintScreen function key to capture a screenshot, then edit it in PhotoShop or a similar program. On Apple computers, you get a screen capture by hitting these three keys at the same time: Apple-Shift-3. Authors like seeing these screen shots — so do publishers and trade buyers.