

To Be, Or Wannabe

Shortly after my book, *The Art Of Table Dancing: Escapades Of An Irreverent Woman* debuted last Spring, my 14-year-old daughter informed me that she also wants to be a writer. She showed me a design idea she had for a T-shirt, limited edition of one. It read MY MOM SPENT MY COLLEGE TUITION ON BOOK PUBLICITY, AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY T-SHIRT.



UNIVERSITY of
DAYTON
Erma Bombeck
Writers' Workshop

Having been a PR major in college, and spending more than 25 years in selling packaging—mostly empty boxes—I was confident (OK, annoyingly smug) about my ability to sell boxes filled with books. After all, I had a marketing plan and a budget for my newly published memoir. (In my book proposal to the publisher, I committed to spend \$10,000 of my own money on publicity.) In school I learned that advertising is what you pay for and publicity is what you pray for. I figured between the 10 Gs and God, I'd be dancing on the Ellen DeGeneres show in no time.

Then my sister Sherry emailed me an ad from PW Daily. WANT TO BE FEATURED IN AMERICA'S BIGGEST MAGAZINES AND INTERVIEWED ON TOP TV SHOWS? Was this legitimate, or was it a scam geared toward shameless opportunists like myself? The curiosity that killed the cat apparently now controlled my computer mouse. I paused, and I clicked. Would it be hello Oprah, or bye-bye bank account?

The website further explained that the best way to get publicity is to personally meet editors and producers. **The National Publicity Summit** was just the place to do that, according to the pages of testimonials from people who'd previously attended the four-day event.

You could sign up for a free teleconference to hear more. And yes, one of the people on the teleconference was a previous Oprah producer! There was one caveat bank-emptier disclaimer printed in bold: **This is not an inexpensive event.**

The teleconference was hosted by Steve Harrison of Bradley Communications—the inventors of the event. Verbal testimonials from previous Summit attendees claimed this: You do not need a publicist when you can gain access to the media yourself. This was confirmed by participating TV producers, who said that there is virtually no other method (legal, I'm guessing, 'cause that stalking David Letterman thing never works) to get direct meetings with high-level media.

The cost of the **not inexpensive event** was \$6,000—more than half of my PR/Ad budget (this didn't include airfare, hotel or meals). Steve created a sense of urgency to sign up, by explaining that not all applicants would be accepted. There was a limit of 100 wannabees, and professional interviewers would screen for “quality” candidates, i.e.; kick out the crazies. I submitted my online application within 20 minutes.

Each wannabe was assigned a coach to help us craft our media pitches. So, at the age of 46, this old broad who never played baseball got herself a pitching coach.

Stacy, a producer of the Montel Williams show, told me the first rule of pitching: It's not about your book. It's all about your hook. Develop an interesting angle for a magazine article where they quote you as the expert. Or, come up with a hot show subject that will have the women on *The View* talking to you. Don't just give them a copy of your book—throw them a hook to reel 'em in.

Following my four half-hour phone sessions with Stacy, I arrived in the Big Apple. So atwitter in anticipation, I could barely choke down six dollars worth of my \$18 corned beef sandwich at Lindy's.

It's not about the money.

Writers write because we have a defective gene and a compulsive disorder, which causes us to grab a Bic and to poke and prod veins until all of our gruesome truths are bled onto the paper. And we'll do it at whatever cost. Because we **HAVE TO WRITE**. Some of us further suffer from a neurotic need for validation—getting our words “out there” as in “published.” The question is, are you masochistic and narcissistic enough to put yourself through the proverbial corned beef slicer in the name of book publicity? I can only answer for myself. Yes.

The first two days, we wannabees—a collection ranging ranging from doctors, political activists and investment experts to a self-proclaimed Tooth Fairy—hunkered down in the great-hall of the Pennsylvania hotel. We were instructed, and sometimes—as in my case—deconstructed, as we practiced our pitches. My shaky show pitch, “Are you still stuck in high school 25 years later?” was a train wreck of circus proportions. Luckily, with the help of experts like Alex Carroll—who has probably been featured on more radio programs than anyone in history—my pitch and my confidence were reconstructed.

If writers must become “hookers” to get show-bookers, there must be some pimping going on. I couldn't help but think Bradley Communication's concept was nearly as genius as Tom Cruise's character in *Risky Business*—who hooked up hormonal young men with “professionals.”

With the Bradley Bunch coaching, we each developed a “One Sheet,” a short bio, a summary of our expertise, and a list of show topic ideas or story hooks. You leave it with the media after you pitch them (and hope they don't just pitch it). According to my One Sheet, I am an expert on fun and its by-product, trouble. I am also an expert on rejection, surviving high school datelessness, and finally, moving up the dating food chain.

As I read some of the other One Sheets, my hope tanked. One guy, Mike Shiley, faked press credentials, was embedded with our troops in Iraq, became a trained civilian gunner, and produced a documentary with footage from his experience. That evening,

contemplating who the hell I thought I was, I went to the bar alone and decided to get Two, maybe Three Sheets.

After a night of pep talks with other wannabees, we came up with new credentials, penned on bar napkins. I added an M.B.S.A. to my resume: A Masters in Bullshit Administration: tuition price \$6,000.

The next morning, we heard more expertise. Mega publicist Rick Frishman informed us that 4,000 radio and TV shows book more than 10,000 guests every day, and radio expert Alex gave us the top 20 talk radio topics. The top three are, 1) Terrorism 2) Sex and relationships 3) Saving Money—consumer scams. An image consultant and a media consultant fed us small samples of their wares, too, as part of the Summit buffet. Then they each described separate feasts—available for additional fees. (I opted out, since my mother offers imaging advice for free: blue makes you look pale, for God’s sake don’t slouch, and go easy on the eye liner or you’ll look like a tramp.)

We were awash in information and agog to hear success stories and how we could achieve that same success—with the help of The Summit, as well as the additional products or programs we should purchase. This is called up-selling, or cross-selling. Informative? Yes! Annoying? Kind of. Like a timeshare presentation without the closers.

We learned that our book should act as only our business card or our brochure, and that the difference between rich authors and poor authors is that the rich ones understand this principle. Did you know that Jay Conrad Levinson, best-selling author of *Guerilla Marketing*, made \$10 million, but only \$35,000 came from book sales? The rest came from seminars and spin-offs and, I’m betting, cross-sells and up-sells. (Although a not-so-rich author, I decided I’m an above average cynic.)

Some other things I learned:

- The **money** is in your **list** (database).
- We have some really good lists you can buy.
- There is a proven formula to become a bestseller on Amazon.
- We are affiliated with the folks that offer this—and can sign you up for the program, at a nice discount.
- When it comes to pitching, it helps if you have some balls.
- We have some to spare (for an additional cost).

After all our coaching we were ready—or not—to pitch. The first media session began with a parade of producers and editors, amidst our wannabe cheers. Led to a tiered stage for an introduction and Q & A session, they included radio producers, freelance writers, an editor from *People* magazine, and a producer for *Regis and Kelly*.

I only had two warm-up pitches prior to meeting with *People* magazine. Barely a half-a-minute into my spiel, their editor was waving me on, like I was fruit on the dessert tray and she was in search of the cake. Was that a look of disinterest or disdain? I can’t say I

was surprised by the rejection. After all, *People* writes only about extraordinary people, like alleged sex partners of B list celebrities.

I thought I had a unique idea for the Regis and Kelly producer, pitching a combo beach/dancing theme show, with me getting the hosts dancing on tables. “You know, Kelly loves the beach, and fun books,” I nearly begged. “Kelly doesn’t have time to read or go to the beach anymore. She has three kids and two TV shows,” said the producer. “Next?”

I ran into Mike Shiley, the Iraq documentarian. He said HE also got shot down by the *People* editor. Cautionary tales and urban legends began to spring up around camp, including the idea that to get a story in *People* you’d first have to catch fire and levitate.

Defeated, exhausted, yet oddly enraptured by the intensity of Day One, I had dinner with a few other wannabees, including Mike Shiley and Mike Ball. I had met Mike Ball at the 2004 Erma Bombeck Workshop. He’d won the writing contest in 2003—a fact he’s so proud of, it’s printed on his business card. He reviewed my pitches with me and gave me some suggested changes. He also cautioned that to get national publicity, “you need a nationally compelling story.” Which I probably didn’t have. We reminded each other that we had two more BIG days, with different members of the media. I looked at that as both the good news and the bad.

With revisions and resolve in hand, I launched into my final two days with the media:

- My first pitch to *The View* went afoul, as I pitched a show about making the most of “girls’ trips.” The female producer wanted to know, “What’s a girls’ trip?” Perhaps I’d gotten a hit if I’d invited her along, expenses paid, on my next trip to the beach.
- Another set of producers from Regis and Kelly were somewhat more interested, when I opened with “Although Kelly has three kids and two shows, I’m guessing most of your audience does not.”
- Several radio programs said yes, they’d book me, and to follow-up. None of them were national, but some like Clear Channel’s *The Ron and Casey* show broadcasts reached well-populated markets, like Cleveland and Pittsburgh.
- I received a lot of great advice and magazine market leads from some very nice freelance writers I pitched.
- I got really good at reading eye-brow language—up means “go on, I’m interested.” Down means, “who let this feral cat in the house?” One fashion magazine editor’s expression had me stumped. Was it ambivalence or Botox?

More than eight months has elapsed since I climbed Mt. Summit. Although I didn’t make it to the top, this was a unique and professionally run event. And, I do believe Bradley Communications are nothing short of PR and marketing geniuses.

Some ‘bees did indeed create a lot of buzz, cross-pollinated with the Bradley Bunch—and went full-bloom.

Lisa Whaley, president of Life Work Synergy, was booked on the Montel Williams show, was featured in Black Entrepreneur Magazine, received a free cruise and cover story from Odyssey Couler (sp?) magazine, and now hosts a weekly internet radio program. She also got a publisher for her second book: title

Another busy bee, Cornelia Flannery and her business partner Rory Cohen, landed stints on The View, CNN and a cover story for Entrepreneur Magazine. Cornelia said that even without the mega-media coverage they received, “The cost of the Summit was well worth the investment, because of the incredible education it provided us—about marketing and publicity.”

Shelly Stockwell, a hypnotist from a previous Summit, got a gig on Fox and Friends, and says she still gets 8-10 radio interviews a week when she advertises in the Bradley Communication publication, Radio, Television Interview Report. I have another writer friend who says this is THE publication that radio and TV producers go to for guests.

When my book finally came out, I realized I had shot too high and missed, and my timing couldn't have been worse, with most national TV talk shows going on summer hiatus. So, I ended up hiring a publicist for local publicity—which cost me a couple of thousand dollars. However, I did get a lot of interviews, including newspaper, radio and TV. Plus, my beach party-book signings in bars tour also got excellent local press—including a front-page story and photo in the Life section of the Cincinnati Enquirer.

For my part, I believe the money invested in internet marketing, regional publicity and innovative book-selling, like my beach party-book signings, gave me more bang for my buck. And making connections with the right nice people can happen without any high fees attached.

While attending the Erma Bombeck Writers Workshop (with a friendlier price tag of \$350 for the entire three-day event, which included meals and even some wine), I hobnobbed with Craig Wilson from USA Today. He emailed me the day after the event (before I had the chance to email him) to say he looked forward to reading my book. That talented, but cracked southern belle, Susan Reinhardt has become my new best friend, and has written several columns—nationally syndicated—that included me as a new “character.” And Erma conference director Tim Bete asked me to write this article.

When it comes to publicity, you have to ask yourself a few questions:

- What (and how much) are you willing to give up to get it?
- What are your goals, but also, what is your motive (that old passion vs. ego thing, again)?
- Can you still look at yourself in the mirror, even the one hanging in the green room?

What Would Erma Do faced with the same dilemma (WWED), she'd probably shake her head and say, “It's not about the money. It's about the funny.”