

BOOKING BUSINESS

Today, a growing crop of market-savvy authors is using promotional films and audio tracks to grab attention. Books are being given away as prizes in online contests and there are web conferences with readers. Publishers couldn't be happier

SHRABONTI BAGCHI
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Author Amish Tripathi has an unlikely role model, Bollywood actor Aamir Khan. Like Khan, who is as much a savvy marketer as creative savant, Amish (he prefers to use his first name) believes in mixing commerce with craft. He says an author should have an 'end-to-end' vision of his books. Amish's novel *The Immortals of Meluha* has sold over 2 lakh copies, his second, *The Secret of the Nagas*, attracted 80,000 pre-orders before it was launched earlier this month and has sold over a lakh copies by now. Clearly, the 'end-to-end vision' is working and it guides Amish on how to make his books bestsellers. Writers like him are the exact opposite of the legendary authorial persona who believed he wrote books to feed his own creative

demons and didn't care if anyone else even glanced at them. This author believed his job ended with him handing over the precious manuscript to the publisher. He might preen a bit if the book became a so-called bestseller (5,000 copies all told), but not only was that merely a satisfactory side-effect, achieving it was not his business.

The days of such coyness are over. Today's authors — from noobs such as Amish to big names like William Dalrymple — make sure their publishers have a plan in place and that they have a say in crafting that plan. Many go much further, by working the social networks night and day, creating websites and other digital content related to their books, multi-city tours (think 30), optimising Google search results and roping in bloggers to write about their books when traditional media ignores them.

To sell his first self-published book, Amish put attractively packaged copies of the first chapter on the display counters of bookshops in all major cities. On being told his book has a visual feel, he roped in an ad-filmmaker friend and created a trailer-film for the book, which was then uploaded on YouTube and became an instant hit. For the second book, which is published by Westland, slicker promotional films will be shown in theatres before regular movie shows.

There are simpler ways, too. "I've realised that the guys who ultimately sell your books are the store attendants and managers. They sug-



BESTSELLING MANTRA Young authors believe that they have to build their own brand. Communicating directly with readers is the best way, they say, to boost sales

gest your book to a reader. I make sure I have a good rapport with them," says Amish, an MBA from IIM Calcutta who gave up a job in the insurance industry to become a full-time writer.

It also helps to tap the new media. "Newspapers and magazines are rarely interested in reviewing self-published books. So, for the publicity of my first book I targeted non-traditional media such as blogs. I would write to blog owners and offer them a copy of my book if they would agree to review it," says Ashwin Sanghi, whose two books, the self-published *The Rozabal Line* and the second *Chanakya's Chant* (Westland) have done good business. Sanghi also created a three-minute YouTube video for his debut novel and publicised the link on the web.

For his second book, too, Sanghi went the YouTube route. He roped in a young composer to set a chant that is central to the book's narrative to music and put it out there, also making it available for download in MP3 format. "Even before the book was released, the music clip had been downloaded over 20,000 times,

thus increasing the odds that those who had heard the clip would feel comfortable moving ahead with the actual purchase," says Sanghi.

Ideas are in short-supply within the publishing world, believes Sanghi, and most publishers have very little bandwidth to devote to a single title given the number of authors they publish. Creative ideas must necessarily emerge from the writer.

His feelings are echoed by Rashmi Bansal, the best-selling non-fiction writer whose three books enumerating entrepreneurial success stories from India — *Stay Hungry Stay Foolish*, *Connect the Dots* and *I Have a Dream* — have sold 5 lakh copies including language editions, which is more than any other Indian book across categories. "I believe authors must get actively involved in building their own brand," says Bansal. Over last three years, she has given talks based on her books at over 200 colleges and campuses, from IITs and IIMs to colleges in small towns like Kakinada and Belgaum. "I do this because I enjoy speaking to

young people and it also helps the sale of my books," says the author.

Brand, PR, sales, targets: terms that the anguished author of yore would have shrunk from in horrified disgust. Today's bottomline-focused authors, on the other hand, think of the book as a product. "The success of a book is a function of how well it connects with the audience, its pricing, its availability and the amount of buzz it creates," says Arnab Ray, blogger, columnist and author of the non-fiction title *May I Hebb Your Attention Pliss*, whose next is a horror novel, *The Mine*. He adds: "Most authors, unless you have a Booker or a fatwa after you or both, have to do their own PR."

For instance, to promote MIHYAP Ray held a promo contest where readers had to write a post on their blog with their five favourite movie dialogues and link back to his blog with the best entries winning a copy of the book. He also did a live 'meet the author' over the internet using open-source web-conferencing.

Authors don't spare even the publishers when it comes to promoting their work. They are expected to execute the writer's creative promotional ideas and monitor sales figures very closely. "In fact, we encourage authors to do that as we can keep tabs on retail outlets about stocking/displaying and so on," says Anurima Roy, publicity manager, Hachette India.

Lipika Bhushan, head of publicity at HarperCollins India, feels authors have become more active in using online channels. "Using the web is what helps them cut across boundaries... not only the ones who have grown up in the internet age, but also quite a few senior authors are becoming active online," says Bhushan.

Exchange of ideas is not always genial, though. Some authors claim they face resistance from publicity teams who don't understand their ideas or are unwilling to execute them. "There might be a few who are very aggressive, but we understand and empathise since it's their time, energy, heart and soul that they have put into the book and they have every right to go all out helping sell more numbers and grab more eyeballs," says Bhushan. ■

shrabonti.bagchi@timesgroup.com

