

Beware of the book buzz

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

May 22, 2014

The book publishing world depends on buzz. The best kind of book buzz is created by readers who tell their friends about the books they love. Anyone who is part of a circle of reading friends knows that, despite dire predictions about the demise of book publishing, the appetite for reading books is alive and well. But readers have to find out about a book somehow, and that is where promotion comes in—either by publishers or by the authors themselves.

I understand the growing need for writers to promote their own work. Publishers not only expect it; they demand it. This is especially true with small publishers that have very limited marketing budgets. Thankfully, social media make it easier than ever for authors to promote their own books.

Some authors have discovered clandestine means to get the word out. As the *Century's* book review editor, I'm on high alert for reviews or offers for the same from friends of authors. And it's a [well-known fact](#) that some authors get their friends to post glowing reviews on Amazon, or even use pseudonyms to do it themselves.

A more sophisticated scheme was devised by Mars Hill Church in Seattle to inflate the sales of *Real Marriage*, co-authored by Mars Hill pastor Mark Driscoll and his wife Grace. [A firm was paid more than \\$200,000](#) to devise a strategy to inflate the book's sales and get it on the *New York Times* bestseller list for Advice How-to books. The strategy included, among other things, the church purchasing a substantial number of books themselves to pump up reported sales. Driscoll has since [apologized](#) for the marketing strategy, as well as for some plagiarism in the book itself.

In a way, I'm less concerned about these devious tactics than I am about the subtler consequences of authors functioning as their own promoters. Some authors are better at it than others. Some find it quite repulsive to have to push their own work, and their writings are obviously not going to get as much attention as those of authors who are more naturally entrepreneurial. This can be a real loss to readers.

I worry too about some authors who not only write their own press releases but also seem to be impressed by them. It gnaws at me when authors use superlatives and other accolades to describe their own work—accolades that are sometimes a stretch. “Best seller.” (On whose bestseller list?) “Internationally regarded writer.” (What, someone in Canada took notice?) For Christian authors especially, it seems like some measure of humility should come into play.

Information has to get out there, of course. It is a service to the public. I cite one positive example: a friend recently posted on Facebook that he has a chapter in a new multi-author book. His post was rather matter of fact—no explicit self-promotion that I could detect, no superlatives or accolades about his own work. Just the facts. I had been aware of the book's release, but I really didn't think I was interested in it until he made this announcement. Now I want to read what my friend has to say. He did me a positive service with his simple, straightforward notice.

There's a lesson there somewhere.