



Image Building:

How To Communicate a Savvy Image and Impress Agents, Editors, and Booksellers

BY RENEE HAGAR

You've polished your manuscript. Refined your synopsis. Your query letter shines so brightly you have to wear Gucci sunglasses in order to read it. But what about you? What about your image? Does it shine with the same brilliance?

Are you as polished as your novel? Or just a diamond in the rough?

If you aren't sure, or are afraid you might be more cubic zirconia than true gemstone, then this article is for you.

You Never Get a Second Chance...

In this technology-driven 21st century, experts say you only have three seconds to make a good first impression. Three seconds! But, you think, I'm a writer, not Jennifer Lopez. I spend most of my time tucked away behind a keyboard wearing sweatpants.

Why should you care about making a good first impression? Your writing is all that matters, isn't it?

Consider this: in the time it takes to read this paragraph, an editor, bookseller, or reader would have already decided whether

or not they thought of you as well-kept, confident, approachable and competent. And a negative reaction may possibly cost you a sale.

Rachel Dee is a Denver-based image consultant who has been in the business for nearly 20 years. She thinks first impressions are vital. "People tend to hold onto their initial reactions to another person and frame that person through that initial contact."

The first encounter lingers in a person's mind, Rachel believes. "Whether it is right or fair, we hold that first impression and it actually gets cemented in. And in the professional world, it almost anchors you."

It's a fact—in business—image matters. And in the modern world your image applies to the Internet as well as face-to-face meetings. But how does it specifically relate to authors?

Why Should You Sparkle?

How important is an author's image to her career? RITA nominee and *New York Times* best-selling author Eloisa James says, "I would love to say that a romance writer can live in a cave and remain mysterious and unavailable to readers. And, obviously, they can do that, and if they write well enough, they will garner an audience. But it will take time to build that audience. I think

that's the real difference between writers 20 years ago and now (with the Internet): our ability to project an image to readers that acts as snowballing self-promotion and allows a career to grow much more quickly."

Red Dress Ink author of *Sex, Murder and a Double Latte* Kyra Davis agrees. "Obviously being an author isn't like being a movie star. The paparazzi aren't hiding in darkened corners trying to get a

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—Karen Docter

picture of me eating fatty foods or hugging someone else's husband. On the other hand, it is extremely important that an author be personable with booksellers, media, and fans. If they like you, they are much more likely to sell/promote/buy your book."

But building an image can be intimidating to an introverted author, who would much rather worry about the written word than the clothes on her back. How can a writer learn to embrace image building?

Rachel Dee says, "It's a resource: utilize it, play with it, enjoy it. Beyond our talents, beyond the ability to write, we have a resource in just showing up and how we present ourselves. There's more to how we're being received than say, as a writer, the written word. I look at all this as vocabulary, vocabulary that speaks to us before we even open our mouths."

But best-selling *Silhouette Desire* author Juliet Burns thinks of image more in terms of branding. "I'm not sure if I think of image the same way others might, but if you mean her (the author's) brand, I think it's very important. Even if you write for category, which has a built-in readership, your author image gives your readers an idea of what to expect from your books. My favorite review of *High-Stakes Passion* said that my characters were not like the typical 'Desire' characters. So, I've been trying to build on that."

But how about unpublished authors? Are they allowed more leeway?

Not according to four-time Golden Heart finalist and business owner Karen Docter. "I believe an author's image is as important as the books she writes. As a businesswoman in the corporate world for more than 30 years, I've always known my image is a critical asset. As an author, I have to treat it the same way. I may live in the creative world as I write my stories, but

publishers live in the corporate world."

Karen adds, "Image is about more than how we dress or how we wear our hair. It's about our willingness to hone our craft, to make deadlines, to accept criticism and suggestions. Image is about having a professional appearance and a professional manner."

While aspiring chick-lit author and creator of the Chick-Lit Yahoo Writer's Loop, Deanna Carlyle, agrees image is very important, she doesn't believe an unpublished author should spend all her time working on it. "All the hype in the world can't make a story stick in a reader's heart and mind. Prepubbed authors run the risk of putting the proverbial cart before the horse—the cart being the marketing machine and the politics of publishing. In the end, it's the horse, the story, that must find its rightful place at the forefront of

our mind and the center of our heart."

Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall

I'm certainly not implying we should all be as chic as Oprah Winfrey, have the body of Halle Berry, or the graceful good looks of Charlize Theron. And while it isn't likely Joan and Melissa Rivers will be standing in the hotel lobby commenting on our dresses for the RITA/Golden Heart awards any time soon, appearance counts. Big time.

"Figure out a style that works for you and reflects your strong points."

—Eloisa James

Dressing professionally can give an author an edge up. Albeit as writers we have a bit of creative freedom and aren't expected to show up at a conference wearing a plain dark suit. A jogging outfit won't cut it either.

Chapter president and creator of the on-line class "The Fashionista's Guide To Looking Fabulous," Julie Mensch says, "Every editor is looking for a great book, but they're also considering other factors that could sway the success of their lines. For instance, what authors might be good for promotional activities or materials? Will they present a good impression at a signing or event? Editors and agents are very forgiving of our introverted gaffs, but good grooming and a professional appearance can go a long way!"

