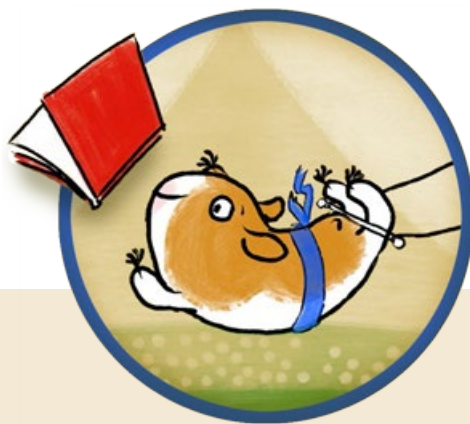


Starting a Book Co-Marketing Group in 5 Easy(ish) Steps

by Kirsten W. Larson



SOARING '20s
HIGH FLYING
PICTURE BOOK
D E B U T S

Logo Illustration by Julie Rowan-Zoch

Introduction

Got a book on the horizon? Want to scream and shout about it? Feel a bit weird and/or nervous about marketing? Guess what! You don't have to go it alone. Consider starting or joining a book co-marketing group.

But first, what's a co-marketing group and why do I need one?

A co-marketing group is a team of book creators (authors, illustrators, and/or author/illustrators) who want to reach the same audience. These creators work together to help market each other's books.



Illustration by Abi Cushman

Let's face it: sometimes we're far more comfortable talking about our friends' books than promoting our own. A co-marketing group gives you a structured way to promote other creators' books and have them do the same for you, while sharing marketing tips, opportunities, and resources.

Bringing a book into the world can be a terrifying and lonely business if you have to go it alone. Recently, the Soaring '20s surveyed published book creators informally about their experiences with co-marketing groups. Almost every single person mentioned the camaraderie and support they received as perhaps the greatest benefit of being in a group.

Gathering a network of creators at a similar point in their careers in a private place to ask questions and raise concerns was a huge benefit. As one member of a debut book group put it, "There are certain aspects of a debut year that no one will understand unless they've been there or they are there."

The Make-Up of a Co-Marketing Group

The key with a co-marketing group is that members' books should be targeted at the same broad audience. So, for example, a group might consist of

- middle grade authors, who want to reach teachers, librarians, parents and readers of books for ages 8 to 12.
- picture book authors/illustrators, who want to reach same as above but for younger readers
- young adult authors, who market to teens and segments of the adult audience
- romance writers

Though books for first-time book creators, known as debut groups, are quite popular, they aren't the only way to go. Debut groups are typically composed of first-time authors or illustrators, at least in the group's category. For example, in a debut picture book group, this would be the creators' first picture book, though they may be published in middle grade, chapter books, etc. The thinking is that debut authors aren't household names and therefore must work harder to market their books.

But sometimes mixing new and established creators could benefit the whole group. Newer authors gain access to the audiences of established authors. And established authors benefit from the energy and enthusiasm of debut authors. Recently new groups that include authors and illustrators who have pubbed before have formed, such as 20/20VISIONPBs and 19PBbios. (Note: KidLit411 maintains a list of co-marketing groups in the kidlit space on its website. See the appendix for a list of resources.)

Organizing around publication dates – pros and cons

Often co-marketing groups organize around specific publishing dates in a calendar year, for example, middle grade authors with 2019 book releases. Because co-marketing takes a lot of effort, this approach provides a concentrated period of time for marketing activities. Activities might start three to six months before the publishing year and extend three months after the year's end for 18-21 months of total effort. If you are paying for a domain name or web hosting, this limits the duration of expenses, too.

With that said, *publishing is a persnickety business*, and publishing dates often slide. People whose pub dates move often leave their co-marketing group and have a hard time getting accepted into a new group so late in the game. Groups fill up and close to new members six to nine months before the publication year. And when creators are accepted into a new group late in the process, they can feel like the new kid in class playing catch up. Consider at the outset what your group will do when publishing dates change, because it will happen.

Those Five Steps We Promised

Step 1: Form the core

Starting a group is easiest with a core group of members, say three or four. Many of us move in the same publishing communities and know other authors/illustrators with book deals. If you can't think of anyone off-hand with a pub date in the same timeframe as yours, ask your writer/illustrator friends and critique buddies. Or search *Publishers Marketplace* (or *Publishers Weekly*) for deal announcements and reach out. Often you can contact authors and illustrators via their websites, DMs on social media, or even through their literary agents. Google the author or illustrator's name plus the word "author" or "illustrator" to find links to their websites and social media profiles.



Illustration by Abi Cushman

Step 2: Set the ground rules/goals

Once you have a core group, set your initial goals/expectations and refine your ground rules. These will evolve as new members join and the group makes decisions. But you need a place to start, so think carefully about the ground rules for membership.

What types of creators will your group include?

- Big Five-published books only? Small presses? How small, and how will you define your limit? Self-published creators?
- Debuts only, authors previously published in your chosen space, or a mix?
- What publication date(s) will the group include?
- What genre/category?

- Is the group open to U.S.-only creators or an international crew?
- How will you ensure your group includes a diverse group of creators reflective of all readers?

Be as specific and upfront as possible with your expectations so you don't waste people's time. No one wants to fill out an application form (if you choose to have one) only to find out they are ineligible for membership. Plus you only waste your own time reviewing applications that don't fit the bill.



Illustration by Julie Rowan-Zoch

A note on deal announcements and publication dates



Illustration by Julie Rowan-Zoch

You might consider asking people to hold off asking to join until they have a book announcement in Publishers Marketplace or Publishers Weekly. Though pub dates change, a deal announcement represents a level of commitment to a specific year/season, creating a hedge against books slipping. For example, with picture books, deals aren't typically announced until both author and illustrator are assigned to the project, and due dates have been set. Picture book publication dates are iffy at best before the illustrator is on board with the schedule established.

What are your initial marketing commitments and expectations?

These will change as your membership grows and evolves to reflect the interests and passions of your members. You should have basic expectations at the start for what your group might do together, how much time members should expect to commit, and what participation should look like. Here are some ideas for marketing tasks a co-marketing group might undertake, which were mentioned in our survey:

- Boosting/posting on social media
- Reviewing each other's books on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Goodreads, etc.
- Submitting library purchase requests for each others' books
- Creating a website, blog, and/or e-newsletter

- Giveaways
- Joint presentations, events, and panels at bookstores and conferences
- Reaching out to book bloggers and influencers
- Joint marketing materials (flyers, bookmarks, etc.)

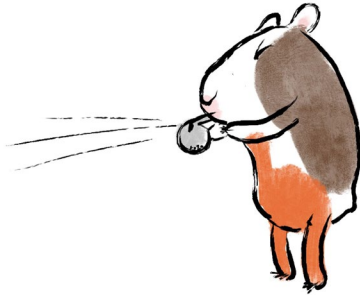


Illustration by Julie Rowan-Zoch

Some groups operate on social media only, amplifying members' posts or hosting Twitter chats, for example. Others are very busy. Make sure the expectations are set and communicated before people join so they can decide if the group is a good fit.

Also consider how you will ensure all members are active in the group. In our survey of co-marketing group members, ensuring equal participation was a frequently stated concern.

One person shared that their group didn't spell out group rules ahead of time, so some people benefited without helping or fully participating. Another mentioned that they felt fall book releases didn't receive the same amount of attention as spring releases.

So as you think about the activities your group will pursue, also consider how you can spread the workload for more buy-in, perhaps giving individual members ownership and leadership of specific tasks, be it spearheading the blog, managing the Twitter feed, overseeing the review program, etc.

Here are some questions you might ask as you form your expectations:

- How much time should members be willing to spend on marketing activities each month?
- How much money should each member commit to fund a joint website and/or joint promotional materials like bookmarks?
- What communications platforms will we use? (Note: A full discussion of options appears in the Appendix.)
- What assets and skills are we looking for in our members, including social media, web design, graphic design, blogging, teachers, educators, booksellers, organization, etc.?



Illustration by Julie Rowan-Zoch

Step 3: Recruit

Application

Once you've set some initial ground rules and expectations, it's time to recruit. You might consider developing an application form. It's pretty easy to do using Google Forms, which will dump all the answers into a spreadsheet. This makes creating a membership roster much easier. For reference, we've included our Soaring '20s application in the Appendix. No sense reinventing the wheel if we can save you a few steps. Amirite?



isabellakung.com

Illustration by Isabella Kung

Advertising

Think about how you will promote your group to solicit members. It's fairly easy to call for applications on social media, especially Facebook writers' groups and Twitter. However, consider that, at least in the kidlit space, Facebook writers' groups are overwhelmingly female, white, straight, and cisgender at a time when the kidlit community is trying to create more books that reflect the experiences of ALL kids and provide windows into a wider world.

How will your group reach out to diverse creators who may not be on the same social media channels? You might consider scanning deal announcements and reaching out to creators outside your social circles to get broader representation in your group.



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Illustration by Isabella Kung

Size

As you recruit, consider how many creators and books you want on your team. If the group is too small, it will be easy to manage but may lack marketing/signal-boosting power.

If the group is very large, you have a lot of potential marketing power, but it may be harder to manage. For example, it's hard to get consensus on group decisions if your group is very large. In addition, having a

very large group adds to the difficulty of scheduling blog posts and updating the web site and other marketing materials as covers are revealed and pub dates shift. It also increases the individual workload of participants when it comes to reviewing books and requesting library purchases. If you are just signal boosting on social media, a large group size may be beneficial. But, if you are reviewing each others' books, you wouldn't want a group of 100 novelists, for example.

Some survey respondents who were part of larger groups (membership in the 40s) mentioned they would have preferred a smaller group. One member of a group of debut authors from a specific literary agency wished for a larger group (this group averages 10 or fewer members).

Step 4: Create your internal infrastructure



Illustration by Rob Justus

Communication platforms

As your group forms, you'll need to figure out the best way to communicate. Options may include social media platforms like Facebook, Google Groups (a threaded discussion forum), email, or productivity tools like Slack.

You may find that your group's needs evolve as your activities expand. At least that's what the Soaring '20s have found. A full discussion of some of your options appears in Appendix B.

No matter what communication platform you choose, realize that you will always have a few holdouts to whatever method you choose. And some members will be more involved with day-to-day activities than others. For the Soaring '20s, that is often the blog team, which needs to talk to the Twitter and Instagram teams on an ongoing basis. And when there's a giveaway, things get really busy.

As long as your most active teams are all on the same platform and getting the information they need, then you've made the right choice.



Illustration by Rob Justus

Google Tools

Our group found it very beneficial early on to create a shared Google drive for group documents like our blog plan, marketing task list and assignments, and membership document, as well as headshots, book covers, and other graphics used on our website and social media.



Illustration by Rob Justus

We also created a shared Google calendar. This has everybody's book birthdays as well as the dates for our blog posts, guest posts we'll be doing on influencer blogs, newsletter deadlines, giveaways, and other activities. We set reminders, which help keep folks focused and on task. And when it comes to boosting activities on social media, we know which blog posts and book birthdays are on the horizon, allowing us to schedule posts.

The role of your "Wrangler"



Illustration by Rob Justus

If your group has a number of activities planned, you'll probably want to break up into subgroups organized around specific tasks. To make sure the workload is distributed fairly, for example you might want separate teams for a blog, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, giveaways, reviews, library orders, influencer outreach, and more. With that said, most groups do better with an administrator. A moderator. A team lead. We'll call this person "the wrangler."

Whether groups operate informally or formally, somebody has to make sure everyone is heard, decisions are made, communication is happening, and work is moving forward.

Ideally, your wrangler would moderate the discussions on your communications platform, bring issues before the group, ensure decisions get made, and check in with team members periodically to ensure deadlines are being met. Whereas some members may serve on only one or two teams, the wrangler, by nature of the job, is involved in all aspects of the group to keep things on schedule and coordinated. So find yourself a Type A person or two to wrangle your group. You won't regret it.

Step 5: Build your external infrastructure

Twitter. Instagram. Websites. Newsletters. It can all be overwhelming. So psssst. We're going to tell you a little secret. You don't have to do everything. Let the expertise and interests of your group guide you. Have someone who's an expert pinner? Great! Set up some Pinterest boards for your books. Have someone who wants to learn Instagram? Let them post away!

Here are a few thoughts about what you might want in terms of infrastructure. But again, these are just suggestions. Do what your group wants.

- At a minimum, you probably want a website. It doesn't have to be fancy – focus on your book covers, bios, and headshots. Your website serves as a landing spot. Any group social media accounts should list the website in the profile section. It can be very frustrating to discover a group of creators on Twitter, want to learn more about them, but find no website listed in their profile. You wonder "Who are these people?" "What books do they have coming out?" If you wanted to follow them individually as creators, how would you figure out who they are (especially if they haven't built a list)? All things to consider.
- If you're feeling ambitious, consider integrating a blog, where you can create content to leverage on social media. If you decide to blog, define your intended audience (fellow creators? Teachers? Librarians?) and strive to provide them information with helpful takeaways. You can just as easily seek out blogging opportunities on other people's sites, so decide what works best for your group. The last thing you want is a blog that's never updated.
- You might want to add a newsletter using a service like Mailchimp or Constant Contact, and host a sign-up form on your site. Let's face it, social media posts are easy to miss. An email newsletter sent to an inbox is harder for your audience to overlook. Regular, opt-in communication also cultivates an audience of core supporters, creating more buy-in. It's a more intimate conversation ensuring your message reaches your core group every time. A newsletter doesn't have to be difficult. It can be a roundup of significant social media posts, or it can highlight blog content. It can capture significant news related to your group, like starred reviews, new book deals, and guest appearances on blogs and news media. All of these add to your credibility as creators to watch.
- Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, etc. Again, let the interests of your group be your guide. Social media platforms are a good way to generate interaction

with followers and fans. They provide a way to leverage content created elsewhere (like on your blog or newsletter). And, if you add your social media to your website, it keeps your content fresh. These platforms work best when they signal boost, too—for example, the group Twitter account retweets individual creators and vice versa. Social media boosting was a major activity cited by different co-marketing groups. One survey respondent mentioned they saw their own individual social media following grow as a result of group activities.

Need some guidance on what to have in place when? We've put together a timeline on Google Sheets, which you can find in the appendix. Enter your publication year, and the cells will populate with suggested deadlines.

Putting it all together

Do book marketing groups drive sales? Who knows. Many factors out of the creators' control affect sales, including book formats, decisions about price, short-term discounts and other promotions, where books are sold, etc. Book marketing groups work to build awareness and hopefully stimulate buyers' interest, which is just one piece of the puzzle.

Survey respondents weren't sure if their activities "moved the needle" on book sales. But many cited increased exposure as a benefit. As one person put it, "I have no clue how to impact sales or how to measure the impact that different efforts have on sales. But the community support and the advice that everyone shared was tremendously helpful..."

Every single person surveyed said they would join a group again if they had to make the choice all over again.

Appendix A: Sample Application Form

Some of our ground rules and guidelines evolved from this initial application form, but here's what we used to start it all (PDF): <https://tinyurl.com/yysqhn7f>

Appendix B: Group Communication

Facebook

Since Facebook is home to many writers' and illustrators' groups, it's often the first choice for communication.

The Pros: Most creators are already on Facebook and are familiar with how it operates. It allows for file uploading and search (though the search is not robust). Some (but not all groups) allow the use of tagging for popular topics. The Facebook app allows group members to check message from their smartphones. Also, the Facebook format encourages water-cooler like conversations adding to the camaraderie of creators.

The Cons: Many creators are shifting away from social media to protect creative time, so you will likely have a few holdout members resistant to the platform. That means you'll have the additional step of emailing members not on Facebook. To ensure everyone sees important posts, it's often necessary for everyone to enable notifications, and to manually tag everyone. We found as the Soaring '20s grew busy with multiple initiatives at once, our group feed became cluttered and difficult to track. With Facebook you can "pin" (stick to the top of the feed) only one post at a time.

Google Groups

Google Groups is a good old-fashioned forum. Using a web browser, members can enter the forum to view posts organized by subject. And they can choose to enable email integration, meaning they can send and receive posts straight from their email inbox.

Pros: If your group has multiple initiatives, you can have a dedicated thread for each one. This provides a more streamlined feed than Facebook. File sharing is permitted. Google Groups also has a more powerful search function compared to Facebook.

Cons: There's no app, which makes checking group activities from a smartphone far more difficult. Members have to remember to log into Google Groups (or enable email integration) to see what's going on.

Slack

I'll be honest. Our group started on Facebook. As coordination began to happen on numerous projects, we used email to coordinate day-to-day off Facebook (for example our big critique giveaway) and spare our members who weren't involved. This got really messy. It was hard to track where information was: an email? In the Facebook group? In a Facebook DM? Did someone forget to loop me in? At that point, one of our astute members mentioned Slack. What is Slack? Pure awesomeness.

Pros: You can run it from a phone or desktop app or in your browser. It allows for organized message threading (called channels), much like Google Groups. You can DM as you can on Facebook. You can tag people, conduct polls, search. You can integrate with your Google Drive and Google Calendar (more about that later). And you have much more control over what you want to be notified about and when.

Cons: There's a learning curve. Not a huge one, but there is a learning curve. And, as with any new platform, not everyone will join. Then you are stuck with looping in those reluctant members either on Facebook or via email.

Email

If you choose email, you'll be able to share files and search via your email provider. However, as work heats up and communication increases, members will likely find their inboxes overflowing. Email is likely not the best choice for most groups.

Appendix C: Other Helpful Resources

Marketing Group Links

- **Timeline Calculator:** Enter your publication year, and the Google Sheet will populate some deadlines. <https://tinyurl.com/yxtc3swd>
- Full list of debut and other co-marketing groups in the kidlit space via KidLit411. <http://www.kidlit411.com/2014/01/creating-platform.html>

Book Marketing

- The Age of the Storyteller: A practical guide for launching your book
<https://age-of-the-storyteller.teachable.com/p/the-age-of-the-storyteller>
- Marketing Beyond the Book Launch Party
<http://www.24carrotwriting.com/-blog/marketing-beyond-the-book-launch-party>
- An Interview with Deb Shapiro, Book Marketing Consultant
<http://www.24carrotwriting.com/-blog/an-interview-with-deb-shapiro-book-marketing-consultant>
- Josh Funk Shares Powerhouse Marketing Strategies
<http://www.24carrotwriting.com/-blog/josh-funk-shares-powerhouse-marketing-strategies>
- A book launch plan for first-time authors without an online presence
<https://www.janefriedman.com/book-launch-plan/>
- Book launch checklist: a marketing timeline for authors
<https://insights.bookbub.com/book-launch-checklist-marketing-timeline-traditionally-published-authors/>
- After the book deal (good info on giveaways)
<http://smack-dab-in-the-middle.blogspot.com/2014/04/after-book-deal-guest-post-by-jonathan.html>
- Part two of "After the book deal" (including good info on book signing no-shows):
<https://shelf-employed.blogspot.com/2014/05/after-book-deal-guest-post-by-jonathan.html?m=1>
- What to ask your marketing team
<https://www.booksandsuch.com/blog/what-ask-your-marketing-team/>
- A short and sweet beginner's guide to securing Amazon reviews
<https://www.janefriedman.com/securing-amazon-reviews/>
- Guest blogging builds platform and sells books
<http://blog.janicehardy.com/2019/09/guest-blogging-builds-platform-and.html>

Debut Year

- Marketing tasks author Viviane Elbee wishes she'd done sooner <https://12x12challenge.com/12-x-12-featured-author-january-2019-viviane-elbee/>

- Debut author lessons
<http://maryrobinettekowal.com/journal/debut-author-lessons-signing-stock-for-bookstores/>
- Authors offer their #1 tip for the debut year
https://twitter.com/AdalynGrace_/status/1078069282536214529
- Reflections on the end of a debut year
<https://mailchi.mp/f8d53e18403e/tidbits-from-rachel-lynn-solomon-first-issue-153007>
- Epic18 book marketing group answers the question, "What's one lesson you've learned in your debut year that you want to keep in mind when your next book publishes?"
<https://twitter.com/MatthewWinner/status/1067955063132430336/>
- Goals for promoting your debut picture book
<http://www.24carrotwriting.com/-blog/goals-for-promoting-your-debut-picture-book>
- Tips for an awesome debut year from Tina Cho and Epic Eighteen friends
<https://groggorg.blogspot.com/2019/01/tips-for-awesome-book-debut-by-tina-cho.html>

Book Launch Parties:

- A short guide to book launch parties
<https://kidlilitartists.blogspot.com/2019/01/a-short-guide-to-book-launch-parties.html>
- Debut author lessons – the book launch party
<http://maryrobinettekowal.com/journal/debut-author-lesson-the-launch-party/>
- My debut launch experience: lessons learned
<http://www.24carrotwriting.com/-blog/my-debut-launch-experience-lessons-learned>
- Tricks and tips for a successful book launch
<https://writersrumpus.com/2014/10/03/tricks-and-tips-for-a-successful-book-launch-party/>
- It's launch party time with Catherine Bailey
<http://literallylynnemarie.blogspot.com/2016/08/its-party-time-launch-party-time-that.html>

- Book signings with Jonathan Auxier
<https://hauntedorchid.blogspot.com/2014/04/after-book-deal-with-jonathan-auxier.html?m=1>
- Book launch events with Jonathan Auxier
<http://owlforya.blogspot.com/2014/04/after-book-deal-blog-series-for-new.html?m=1>

Building a Platform / Social Media:

- Platform development for authors
https://jesskeating.com/for-writers/platform_development/
- Social media playbook for authors
<https://jesskeating.com/for-writers/jess-keating-playbook/>
- Use Goodreads to build your virtual library
<http://www.24carrotwriting.com/-blog/use-goodreads-to-build-your-virtual-library>
- How to request a book be added to Goodreads
<https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/869773-how-to-request-a-book-to-be-added-to-goodreads>
- Pinterest for authors
<https://www.janefriedman.com/how-authors-can-use-pinterest/>

How-Tos:

- How to Make a Book Trailer in iMovie
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=by_o10yv_IU
- Sylvia Liu's HOW TO MAKE A BOOK TRAILER in iMovie
<http://www.sylvialiuland.com/2019/03/How-to-Make-a-Book-Trailer.html>
- **How to Add Your Book to Goodreads:**
 - Join this group: <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/220-goodreads-librarians-group>
 - Then see this for info on requesting someone add your book: <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/869773-how-to-request-a-book-to-be-added-to-goodreads>
 - Once they add your book, you can update it. And then you can claim it and become an official Goodreads Author.

- How to create an author or illustrator website
<https://www.jenniferlaughran.com/faq/do-i-need-a-website-and-if-so-what-should-be-on-it>
- How to use Instagram Stories
<https://buffer.com/library/instagram-stories>

Was this getting started guide helpful? Was there something we missed? Any more burning questions we didn't cover? Shoot us an email and let us know:
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