

JK ROWLING, A MARKETING WIZARD

Harry potter: will the magic ever end?

The final and book in the Harry Potter series, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, was launched on the July 2007. In the first 24 hours it sold 15 million copies, beating the book, the Half Blood Prince, which only sold a mere 9 million in the first 24 hours! Amazon.com reported that first-day pre orders for Harry 7 were 547% higher than first-day pre-orders for Harry 6. The last book in the epic series has been so popular with Amazon's customers that the online retailer sold more copies of it on the first day than they did of book six in the first two weeks of the pre-ordered period.

It has been two years since Harry 6 was launched and two years again since Harry 5. Since book 5 was launched, every Harry Potter book has become a record breaker, always becoming the fastest-selling book in history. Bloomsbury, the British publisher, had a first run of 12 million copies for book 7, the largest release in history, compared to 10.8 million copies for book 6.

In less than a decade, Harry Potter has become one of the world's most widely recognised brands. It is no secret that, as a writer, JK Rowling is no literary genius. In many ways, Harry Potter's amazing success accounts for the exceptional abilities of Rowling as a businesswoman. She is as much at home writing a commercially viable book as she is planning marketing campaigns within the big tent of media circus. Her stunts have included organising undercover book deliveries, stiff penalties for breaking bookstore confidentiality agreements regarding titles and private Hogwarts Express trains for days-long promotional tours.

As with any book in the series, the plot for Harry 7 was kept a total secret until launch day. JK Rowling and the marketing machine surrounding Harry 7 worked hard to keep the whole project as secretive and mysterious as possible. Rumours began to circulate that Harry was to die in the last book which left the media and the fans anxious to know more. Again, the same as with most books in the series there was a leak. Pictures were taken of the pages and posted in the file-sharing site Bit Torrent. The quality wasn't perfect but for desperate fans it was legible.

The same happened with books 5 and 6. Even Harry Potter and his gang could not have conjured up a better potion for a publicity stunt than the accidental leak of Harry 6 from a suburban Vancouver store. Fourteen copies of the book went on sale, more than a week

before launch date. According to the spokesman from the Canadian Superstore it was an inadvertent error by a store worker, who just thought he was doing his job. Raincoast Books, the Canadian Publisher, obtained a Supreme Court injunction preventing anyone from disclosing or copying information about the book. Raincoast asked those who bought the books to return them in exchange for a gift package. Nothing of the sixth book leaked out onto the Internet, but it kept the global publishing partners and the media around the world vigilant, watching out for any breach. Something very similar happened with Harry 5, a threat of a leak arose after thousands of books were stolen from a warehouse in England just days before the book's launch. Bloomsbury obtained an injunction that prevented anybody from publishing the content or a summary of the book.

JK Rowling dealings with courts and injunctions have not stopped after the release of Harry 7. The media had little sympathy for Warner Brothers and Rowling when they decided to take a librarian, Steven Vander Ark, and RDR Books, a small Michigan publisher, whose sales record for any book is 10,000 copies, to court. Rowling and Warner Bros accused RDR of infringing copyright by seeking to publish a printed version of Vander Ark's "The Harry Potter Lexicon" website. Rowling told the judge that the Lexicon had wracked her with "heartbreak", that her creative work had been decimated. The media comments were less than kind when allegedly speaking about the Lexicon she said: "I think there are funny things in there [the Lexicon] and I wrote them".

The launch of Book 7 was a spectacular success. Bookstores and other retailers around the world dressed up in Harry Potter themes to celebrate the book's launch at 12.01am on the 7th of July. Even Potter fans at sea didn't miss the event. Those fans travelling on P&O cruise ships were able to buy the latest instalment as soon as it went on sale. The cruise-line secured copies of JK Rowling's seventh book in advance of the launch and open its shops at midnight on July 7. Passengers were treated to a "Moonlight Opening" party in the library with goodies such as cauldron cakes and chocolate frogs on offer. In addition, Harry Potter films were shown on board.

Competition among retailers was fierce. A price war erupted in the UK and Ireland among bookshops, on-line retailers and supermarkets as they competed to attract in as many Harry Potter addicts, both young and old, as possible. Booksellers described as outrageous the move by supermarkets to sell the new Harry Potter book at less than the recommended retail price of £35.00. To try to overshadow this move, most book stores gave free gifts and special entertainment on the big day.

Especially controversial was the move by Asda and its “£1 Magic Price” offer advertised in the UK press. Asda reported a 79% market share of sales of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows’ children’s edition after its first three days in the shops. Rival retailers reacted angrily at this promotion. Given their sales figures it is estimated that Asda lost around £150,000 on the promotion; as one of them said: “this wasn’t a book decision; it was an Asda-sales decision”. Harry 7 was selling for £4.49 in Waterstone’s and on Amazon. Tesco originally sold the paperback at £6 but then dropped it to half price and it was part of Borders’ buy one, get one half-price offer. When asked to comment on Asda’s price promotion, Bloomsbury executive director, Richard Charkin said: “It’s out of our hands”.

Before the launch of Harry 7, a boxed set of the first six books was released. This set spent 883 days among Amazon’s top 100 kids’ books. No doubt we can expect a new-boxed set with the complete series. Also, JK Rowling has admitted she is planning to release an official accompanying guide to the Harry Potter books. However, there have been some doubts as to how much longer the Potter magic can last. The big competitor is Stephanie Meyer’s book series: Twilight. A bold move at the time, Meyers embraced social networking sites like Facebook, My Space and Twitter. Potter, still trapped in the medieval time, has been slow to fall under the Web’s spell. Meyers’ readers have created an entire world of Twilight on the Internet which she has eagerly encouraged, even signing in and hosting chats with them.

Book 7 was split into two movies, the first film is said to be released on November 2010, with part two following in May 2011. David Heyman, the producer, assured Time Magazine that this was done purely for creative reasons. However, one cannot help but see this as a clear attempt to prolong the marketing spell a little longer. Two separate movies multiplies the revenue, two premières and all the surrounding publicity, two DVD releases, and finally two different sources for spin-offs and merchandising. So far the Harry Potter film franchise has earned 4.5 billion dollars at the worldwide box office, so one can see why JK Rowling doesn’t want the magic to end.

However, rumour has it that Twilight’s magic might just be more powerful than Potter’s. Some of the hype for the two movies accompanying book 7 has died down after the problems experienced in the delayed release of movie 6. After waiting more than a year for a fresh fix, the fans were anxious. Toy stores had ordered large quantities of movie-related Christmas merchandise and prepared themselves for the Potter mania but at the last moment Warner Brothers pulled the plug because of the screenwriters’ strike. Studio executives at Warner were concerned that they wouldn’t have a 2009 summer blockbuster

and decided to postpone the movie release for eight months to July . The delayed release of movie 6 caused major disappointment among fans and retailers and opened an opportunity for Twilight to sneak in.

Despite the fact that with each book the material becomes more mature, the tone darker and the drama more intense, Harry is still a wholesome schoolboy compared to Twilight's vampire hero. Many commentators consider the vampire hero more appealing for the grown up Harry fans that are now in their mid teens. The rivalry between the franchises has inflamed the Web, if you Google "Potter vs. Twilight" 32 million results come up.

Hype, hysteria and marketing bliss are all potent ingredients in the spell Harry Potter has cast in the publishing and movie industry and the magic does not end there. Although JK Rowling has insisted that there will only be seven books in the Harry Potter series, one for each year Harry spends at Hogwarths School, the brand will continue, to some extent, for decades to come. There is one Harry Potter movie for each book launch (two for Harry 7), which offers lucrative opportunities for spin-off merchandising. At Warner Brother's official website, fans can buy clothing, houseware, toys, games and collectibles with just one magic click of the mouse. In an effort to embrace technology, branded applications have been launched for mobile phones. Furthermore, there are always the leather-bound special editions with gold trim to occupy their deserved places on bookshelves, coffee tables and children's bedside lockers.

Questions

- 1. Evaluate Asda's promotional strategy: "£1 Magic Price".**
- 2. What do you think the competitor retailer meant by the phrase: "This wasn't a book decision, it was an Asda-sales decision"?**
- 3. Why do you think the use of social networking sites and the Internet has become such a potent ingredient in Twilight's success?**
- 4. How could the Harry Potter Brand use the Internet more effectively?**
- 5. Evaluate Warner Brothers' and JK Rowling's decision to take Steven Vander Ark and RDR Books to court. Do you consider that all publicity is good publicity?**
- 6. Assess Warner's and Rowling's decision to split the seventh book into two movies. Do you consider it a smart marketing move? Is there any risk of a consumer backlash?**

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