

Who knows what swag really means? If you google it, you can find definitions from loot to plunder, as in a pirate's haul. Of course you can swag fabric too. But in our author's world, I think it stands for "So What Am I Getting?" Hmm. Maybe that sounds a little mercenary. But in promotion, it seems to boil down to figuring out what you can give potential readers that will make them remember you or your books and, most importantly, buy someday. I have noticed that some authors have the mistaken notion that swag is a bookmark. Really? When half of your readers are using their Kindle or Nook to download their library now? I'm sorry but I think bookmarks may be going the way of the dinosaur. There are probably still a few fans who collect them, but I think they are admiring the graphics. Do they lead to sales? I'd love to see some statistics.

Of course getting statistics on any kind of promo material is impossible. For one thing, I don't think readers **know** what makes them remember to buy a book. Seriously. All the surveys I've seen that probe reader choices seem to come to the same conclusions: author loyalty and good covers with intriguing blurbs are the best sales boosters you've got. But for some reason we all still try to bribe readers to come join our fan base. And we do it with swag. We also hand it out to keep our loyal readers happy. Unfortunately it's an expensive proposition. Let me walk you through some of the basics.

First, you might want to go for bookmarks. I personally always have brochures made instead, the tri-fold variety with an excerpt inside. I waited for a special coupon and got 3000 for \$400. I got a price break because my webmistress did the design work, which ran me another \$125. The good thing is that I had the covers for all the previous books in my series on the front, with the excerpt from the coming book inside. I figured that brochure was good for a year. With my active street team I've already run out of those and just ordered a thousand more because I'm going to the RT conference this spring. I never go anywhere without a few in my purse. They are

my calling card. And they can be used for a bookmark. Multi-purpose. I can't quote a price for bookmarks but go on-line and ask any published author and I'm sure someone can point you to a cheap printer who can set you up. There are easy programs that you can use to make your own with a color printer. I just didn't feel up to it.

My favorite swag was a drink koozie—you know, one of those foam can holders? Fans loved them. I gave them away when I first started my street team and at the last RT conference I went to. I paid too much for mine but they were cute—red with “I'm Blood Thirsty,” “The Real Vampires Series” and my website of course. I put my website, [gerrybartlett.com](http://gerrybartlett.com), on EVERYTHING. I paid over two bucks apiece for these. You can do better if you shop around. I'm totally out of them now because everyone wanted one. So far I've resisted ordering more.

My latest swag was a big hit with my street team. I ordered red shopping bags that fold up and have my logo, bats, with my catch phrase, “Because vampires are everywhere...”, and my website on the side in black. I ordered 150 for, gulp, \$490. Yes, that's a lot of money, but I feel like I got good bang for my buck. I don't kid myself. I realize that the only reason some people asked to join my street team was because they saw the pictures members posted on Facebook of the bag I'd sent them. All of those are gone now, but I got a few that the printer messed up so I'm giving those out too.

Does it sound like I'm breaking the bank? Trust me, I'm not spending nearly what a lot of authors do. One member of another chapter told me about a flash drive she gave out at RT. It had her logo and website on the side and hung from a rubber bracelet. I priced those. Wow! Almost five dollars each. I'd have to get bigger advances to justify that.

The bottom line is: Does a bribe, I mean swag lead to more sales? I've picked up cute things at the RWA conferences in years past. Still use some of the pens. Have a great little manicure set in my makeup drawer. Do I ever notice the author's name on the side of either one of those? No. Did I buy a book out of guilt because I realized the author had spent a lot on that

swag? Of course not. I picked up some of it to get an idea for swag of my own. I don't consider anything that is just paper to be swag at all and obviously neither does RWA. They banned such items from the goody room years ago. RT has too.

So before you order those cute personalized emery boards with your book's title and your name on it, ask yourself: is this going to help my career? Will this sell books for me? Of course I'm a fine one to talk. I just bought 160 gold ornaments and wrote RV (for Real Vampires, the name of my series) in red puffy paint on the side of each one. Swag for my street team members. I felt like I had to give them something for Christmas. But their best gift this year? I always provide a secret link to a preview scene in the upcoming book that no one else gets to see. It's not swag that they can show their friends or take a picture of to post on Facebook, but it seems to make them happy and feel special.

And that's the bottom line. Forget swag and make sure your books are keeping your fans hooked. That's why I tantalize my readers with one-line Wednesdays on Facebook, giving them a line from my next release each week. I tease them and keep reminding them that I've got a new book coming. I also send out a newsletter every other month with a short scene from the upcoming book. Fresh material. That's what they're after. And of course I offer swag—an easy contest where they can win a \$20 gift card to B&N or Amazon, their choice. Bribery. Got to love it.