



Creating the Buzz Behind Bill's Blockbuster

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He's been called Elvis, Bubba, the Comeback Kid and Slick Willie. Now Bill Clinton can add another moniker to that list: Laydown King.

Laydown denotes nothing salacious. In the world of publishing, the laydown date is a book's official release day. The laydown date is the focal point upon which a publisher brings to bear all the marketing prowess it can muster in an attempt to create a blockbuster. It's the day that is announced by a publisher ahead of time to generate pre-publication buzz. It's the day that bookstores across the country, in lockstep, put a new title on display and the day that online booksellers start shipping pre-ordered copies to customers. It's the day when the publisher tries to book the author on national television programs, to have him interviewed by the news media, and to have him appear in bookstores to autograph copies. It's the day, or close to the day, for a publisher to arrange the publication of an exclusive excerpt from the book in a major magazine.

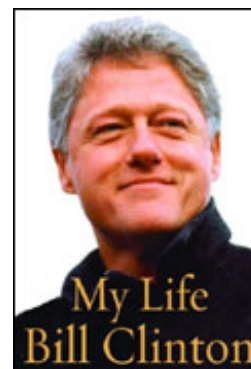
If J.K. Rowling is the reigning Laydown Queen of fiction – with first-day sales in 2003 of five million copies of her most recent Harry Potter novel – Clinton became Laydown King of non-fiction when his autobiography, *My Life*, set a one-day sales record of more than 400,000 copies on June 22. That figure, which represents U.S. sales only, is reportedly double the opening-day number sold by the previous record holder, *Living History*, by Sen. Hillary Clinton.

Faculty members in Wharton's marketing department and people in publishing say Knopf Publishing Group, which paid the former president a reported \$10 million advance to produce *My Life*, did all the right things in setting the stage to make the book a mega-blockbuster. They say executives at Knopf actually did nothing special and broke no new marketing ground in launching their marketing blitz. Rather, their success has come from using tried and true marketing tactics – but using them to full effect.

In addition to making the most of the laydown date, these experts say, Knopf benefited from at least three other factors. The first is that the company published the book in an election year, one in which the electorate appears unusually divided (witness the considerable buzz surrounding Michael Moore's anti-President Bush movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*.) A second reason is the controversial nature of Clinton's two terms in office due to his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky and his impeachment. A third factor propelling the book to such success is that Knopf has made the most of the best salesman that *My Life* could possibly have – Clinton himself.

"The key to marketing is having a good pitch man, and there are not many better pitch men I know than Clinton," says John Pierce, director of marketing for [Wharton School Publishing](#), a joint book-publishing venture between Wharton and Pearson Education. "If he can talk [his way] out of an affair, he can sell anything." Pierce adds that Knopf took the correct approach in marketing the book as heavily as it could. "His book probably would have sold anyway, but [Knopf] did it right. My read on this is they treated it like they should have instead of just assuming his book was going to sell [a lot of copies]."

Wharton marketing professor [Patricia Williams](#) says Clinton's willingness to promote his book on programs like *60 Minutes*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Larry King Live* – all of which he did in the days immediately preceding and following the laydown date – has been "essential" to its success. "He's the best marketer for his book," notes Williams. "During these interviews, we've seen him at his best in a lot of ways. He's always been extraordinarily bright and articulate, able to connect rhetorically with people on every level, and able to communicate complex, nuanced ideas. He's a very engaging speaker; he always has been. If he had been unwilling to go out and answer Dan Rather's questions directly [on *60*



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Minutes], there would be a lot less interest in the book. If you're on *Larry King* and *Oprah*, you're in front of millions of people."

"Pull-marketing"

Marketing professor [Peter S. Fader](#) holds a different view. Asked whether the success of *My Life* stems from Knopf's marketing strategy or Clinton's personal appeal, he says: "It's 100% the latter, zero percent the former. There was almost no buzz about this book until a couple of days [prior to publication]. Of course, there was buzz among the literati, but among regular consumers, who was aware of this thing even a week before it was published?"

Fader says the book's success is an example of "pull-marketing." He explains: "A lot of this buzz is totally organic – people talking to people – as opposed to responding to what they see on talk shows. That's a real credit to the man, regardless of your politics. He's just a fascinating character."

However, marketing professor [David Schmittlein](#) believes that, in assessing why the book is doing well, it is impossible to separate the effects of marketing from the effects of Clinton's persona. He says Knopf thoroughly understands Clinton's appeal to millions and has done all it can to put that appeal to maximum use. "It's not like the marketing stands aside from that persona. They have been insightful about how to tap into it. One of the things about Clinton is the extent to which he connects to people personally."

Tim Moore, vice president and editor in chief of FTPH/Wharton School Publishing/Reuters, says Knopf helps boost buzz by imposing an embargo on the book until the laydown date. "That's not done all the time but it's frequent. You embargo it so the press is drooling to see it." The embargo also allowed Knopf to negotiate exclusive rights for *Time* magazine to publish excerpts from the book.

Will Lippincott, a literary agent in New York, says the laydown approach has become more common in recent years as publishers seek to create the biggest splash possible for books by big-time authors like Rowling, John Grisham, Tom Clancy and Bob Woodward. He notes that laydowns take on added importance because the faster a book sells – not just the number of copies sold – helps propel it onto *The New York Times*' various bestseller lists.

"Velocity of sales is as important as the number of units sold," says Lippincott. "No one knows the methodology behind [the *Times*' lists]. They're very cagy about their formula." But books on the lists "don't always get there because they have sold the most units. The paper also tracks how often a bookseller will reorder."

Lippincott says the world of publishing has changed dramatically since the last time a bestselling presidential autobiography – *Ronald Reagan: An American Life* – was published in 1990. The emergence of Amazon.com and other Internet booksellers, as well as the rise of mass discounters like Wal-Mart and Costco, have put new distribution channels at the disposal of publishing houses. "The means of distribution have shifted so that blockbusters like [*My Life*] are possible," Lippincott suggests. He adds that publishers today view the first day of sales just like Hollywood studios views movie premieres: They want a huge opening day so that they can use the buzz to build sales.

Books and Shampoo

In recent years book purists have bemoaned the fact that major publishing houses are no longer the gentlemanly, independently-owned businesses they once were. But Fader says there is nothing at all wrong with marketing books like any other product. "There are a lot of parallels between publishing and other entertainment businesses, like movies and music. Publishers are starting to borrow concepts and methods from other industries, like direct marketing and packaged goods. I think it's a great thing. The basic underlying sales patterns are largely the same." Selling books the way that consumer-goods companies hawk shampoo and deodorant may appear horrible to "cultural guardians," Fader adds, "but I give [publishers] a lot of credit for recognizing the links and taking the risk to capitalize on them."

The experts agree that advertising for Clinton's book – that is, paid-for TV, radio, newspaper or magazine ads – is a far less effective marketing tactic than traditional public relations, which costs relatively little but can be enormously valuable in pushing a product. Such PR would include so-called "free media," such as print and broadcast news stories, and bookstore appearances. Clinton had customers standing in line by

the thousands outside bookstores in New York the week of publication – some overnight as if they were waiting to buy tickets for a rock concert – and he is slated to make many more personal appearances in the days ahead.

“I don’t know that [Knopf] put a great deal of money, as opposed to energy, into promotion itself,” Schmittlein says. He notes that the purpose of Clinton’s nationwide tour of bookstores has less to do with selling books to individual buyers than with generating a media event that results in buzz. “Creating long lines of consumers to get to meet him is classic public relations. PR relies on the classic economic multiplier effect: You get word of mouth going or get mass media to pick up on a story.”

Moore notes that while most of Clinton’s book-signing events will not make the national news programs, they will be covered locally and hence contribute to the ongoing “feeding frenzy.”

An Election Year

Those interviewed by Knowledge@Wharton say sales of *My Life* would not be as great if 2004 were not an election year. They say the polarization of the electorate has contributed to sales among fans of Clinton.

“[Knopf] timed publication of the book to coincide with presidential politics in general; that was certainly a smart decision on their part,” says Williams. “The polarization that has occurred over the last three years also works to their advantage. They can’t control that, but it’s a nice bit of serendipity for them. Bill Clinton’s memoirs are relevant to the state of mind of consumers. Their marketing is about timing and exploiting a natural phenomenon.”

There is another motive behind readers’ interest in the book: To see what Clinton has to say about Lewinsky and other women with whom he has allegedly been involved over the years. Notes Lippincott: “Don’t ever underestimate the American appetite for sex and scandal.”

Schmittlein, however, says Clinton’s place in history as a controversial political figure is not the main driving force behind sales. He suggests that *My Life* is not being bought by people who want to learn more about Clinton the man or the details of his travails and achievements. “This book is being bought by people who feel he was a good president and are showing their loyalty by buying this book, not unlike the attendees of Michael Moore’s movie. Virtually out of a sense of loyalty they are going to see that movie. In a way, you’re supporting Bill Clinton against Ken Starr [the prosecutor who investigated Clinton] by buying this book.”

Bad Reviews

Two days before the laydown date, Clinton’s book was panned in a front-page review in *The New York Times* by Michiko Kakutani, one of the paper’s regular book reviewers. An Associated Press review also had harsh words about the book. But most of the people interviewed by Knowledge@Wharton say the negative notices will have little or no impact on sales.

“I don’t think [the negative reviews] matter a whit at some level because the event becomes larger than the substance and isn’t that what the noise is all about?” says Moore of Wharton School Publishing. “I’d say that if they do matter at all, they matter in the sense that they pique interest; they keep the conversation going.”

The Wharton experts say Clinton probably runs little risk of being overexposed in the months to come. In fact, they say he could get tons of free media if news editors and producers request interviews with him to discuss everything from the presidential race to U.S. policy in Iraq. Pierce predicts that *My Life* will sell eight to 10 million copies over the next 18 months as the marketing juggernaut rolls along. As of June 23, there were 2.25 million copies of *My Life* in print and additional printings are planned, according to Knopf, a division of Random House, whose parent company is Bertelsmann AG, an international media company based in Germany.

Clinton has indicated that he would like to write other books. Pierce and Schmittlein say it is unlikely that sales of any future Clinton works would top those of *My Life*. But they say Clinton could do well for himself if he were to try his hand at fiction – perhaps a political thriller – or take a statesman-like approach

and churn out books on current affairs or public policy every few years like Henry Kissinger has done since leaving government in the 1970s.

In the meantime, what will never be known is how many buyers of *My Life* will actually read all of its 957 pages. Pierce points out that consumers buy books for many reasons. “You buy the Harry Potter books because you want to read them all and collect them all. You buy Reagan’s book because it’s sentimental. You buy [Rudy] Giuliani’s book [*Leadership*] because it’s central to American history.”

What has helped sales of *My Life* is that it is what Pierce calls a “situational” book – that is, a book that appears at the right time, because of any number of circumstances, generates buzz, and just about begs to be purchased. A book by Giuliani would not have sold nearly as many copies had the former New York City mayor not had to grapple with the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. By the same token, Pierce says, Hillary Clinton’s most recent book, while a bestseller, “didn’t do as well as many people thought it would because there wasn’t anything situational about it.” He adds: “Timing is everything. If you really want an out-of-the-park bestseller, you have to have the moon and the stars aligned.”

Moore doubts that most readers will read all of *My Life*. But that should not be surprising he says, because it is more than just a book, or maybe less.

“I’m sure there have been bestsellers bought by people who didn’t read them,” he notes. “People thought they needed to buy a book like *Godel, Escher, Bach* [a difficult 1979 tome on mathematics, computers and the human mind that won a Pulitzer Prize] but got to page 20 and said, ‘No, no, no.’ But that’s not what is going on here with Clinton’s book. We create celebrities in America. [Buying Clinton’s book] is no different from lining up to get Derek Jeter’s autograph after a [New York Yankees] game. A well-oiled and well-greased publisher marketing campaign like we’ve observed with this book, with a subject you can goose to the sky, creates an event. And, at some level, what do you have? You have a Pet Rock with covers. Everybody wanted a Pet Rock in 1972 and that’s what’s happening here. I don’t say that to debase the book, but at some level the celebrity factor takes over.”

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