

MARKETING PLATFORMS

YOUR BACKGROUND MATTERS BY ALLY E. PELTIER

In today's highly saturated book market, a strong publicity and marketing campaign requires authors have a solid platform to get the kind of media attention necessary for sales.

In the publishing industry, the term “platform” refers to everything about you that helps your publisher sell your book, such as credentials, useful connections and public presence. Next to writing ability, your platform is the most important selling point you have when approaching agents and publishers. Even a few key elements, referred to as “planks,” can improve your chance of success.

A sturdy nonfiction platform is built up on: educational or professional experience; relevant personal experience; membership or officer standing in organizations; print or Internet credits; a mailing list obtained via a speaking schedule or Internet presence; an established following such as newsletter or blog subscribers; or a reputation as an “expert” with local or international media.

A nonfiction author's background is critical for two reasons: History shows that potential readers will choose books by authors perceived as experts; it's easier for marketing and publicity departments to get media attention for credentialed authors. Those credentials need not include an academic degree if your other planks are significant, but the right degree always helps. For example, if you're writing about heartburn, being a gastroenterologist or a nutritionist is a strong advantage. If you aren't a certified professional, getting one to write your introduction and endorse your book will help. Ultimately, your platform must illustrate that readers can trust you as an authority.

Marketing fiction, however, relies more on visibility than credentials. A well-constructed fiction platform includes: connections to published writers; an established readership and mailing list via a newsletter, blog

or other serial publications; prior publications; and any connections you have that might lead to a book review, serial sale, interview, book signing or other appearance.

For fiction, it matters less if you have a degree. However, having a degree in medieval history, for example, would be an advantage for the author of a novel set in the Middle Ages. A master's degree in creative writing also helps you stand out. It means you may have connections via your academic program to published authors who might provide endorsements. It also conveys a devotion to writing as a career, thus increasing the possibility that you'll produce more than just one novel (in other words, that you're a better long-term investment than a non-degree writer). And it gives you more opportunities to teach at universities and notable conferences, which further increases your visibility and opens venues for sales.

The more planks you have, the stronger your platform; a great platform takes a lot of guesswork out of an essentially risky process. Your platform lets publishers know that you understand book promotion, which is increasingly an author's responsibility. It tells them how marketable you are. It tells them where they can expect to gain some relatively effortless sales, or at least some valuable attention. And it gives them an indication of where the audience is—bigger audiences equal greater expected sales, which can get you a bigger advance. If no one's heard of you, publishers may be more cautious—hence a smaller advance, if you get an offer at all.

The key to developing a great platform is to acquire better planks. Put as much effort into your platform as you do your writing, and you'll have more than just a leg to stand on.

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[EXERCISES]

1. MAKE A LIST OF POTENTIAL AUDIENCES FOR YOUR TOPIC. For example, if you're writing a book for new mothers, look for OB/GYN associations, groups devoted to parenting advice, resources

for new grandparents, etc. If you're writing a novel about a new mother, do a similar search. This will generate a sizeable list with multiple purposes.

EXERCISES

2. BUILD YOUR NETWORK. Get involved in key organizations: become a member, obtain an official position, offer to write for their newsletter or website, or volunteer to work at events. Second, spend time networking with people who share your interest by attending meetings, joining message forums or chat groups, or participating in conferences. These connections will serve as resources for developing your platform. Don't overlook smaller local organizations, either—face-to-face contacts are more likely to want to help you out when you call on them.

3. BEEF UP YOUR RÉSUMÉ. Choose three topics relevant to your subject on which you could write or speak. Next, pitch your ideas to at least five venues from your potential audience list. Unless you already have great contacts, start small, using each achievement to build up to bigger venues. For example, query a small website or local publication first. Then pitch your second idea to a slightly larger publication, and so on. Or offer a free workshop to members of a local

organization you belong to. Then see if you can interest an education center in paying you. The goal is to obtain contacts, credits and a mailing list complete with names, addresses and e-mail addresses. Publishers love authors with regular speaking engagements and publications because they know that these generate audiences predisposed to buying your book.

4. BUILD AN AUDIENCE FOR YOUR WORK ONLINE.

Myspace and Blogger have become hugely popular places to blog—Myspace even has a subscription feature. Blogs are also great for getting feedback and contacts. Yahoo Groups allows you to create and manage a distribution list for your e-publication. Create a Web presence and tell everyone you know: Add it to your business cards and your e-mail signature. Get as many unique visits or subscriptions as possible so you'll have hard stats proving that people want to read your work—even a small following can help get your material read and considered by potential publishers. —AEP

Examples of Platform Success

Some websites and blogs like the ones listed below have become perfect vehicles for launching new books:

- *The Darwin Awards: Evolution in Action*, by Wendy Northcutt, started out as an e-mail, then became a website (darwinawards.com) and eventually became a book about people who “remove themselves from the gene pool in a sublimely idiotic fashion.”
- *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government and Other Goliaths*, was authored by Glenn Reynolds, the founder of the popular political blog Instapundit.com.
- *Bitter Is the New Black: Confessions of a Condescending, Egomaniacal, Self-Centered Smartass, or Why You Should Never Carry a Prada Bag to the Unemployment Office*, by Jen Lancaster, grew out of the author's blog, jennsylvania.com, which chronicled Lancaster's downward spiral after losing her high-paying job.
- *The True Stella Awards: Honoring Real Cases of Greedy Opportunists, Frivolous Lawsuits, and the Law Run Amok*, by Randy Cassingham, originated as a website (stellaawards.com).

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