

Show Your Work!

What's in it for me? Reap the benefits of self-promotion by being open about your process.

The French novelist Honoré de Balzac was on to something when he wrote, "For artists, the great problem to solve is how to get oneself noticed." If you're an artist, then you're most likely passionate, and dedicated to both your craft and the pursuit of creativity. But passion has its limits – and you probably draw the line at self-promotion. After all, shouldn't your work speak for itself? Steve Martin said, "Be so good they can't ignore you." But in this day and age, being "good" isn't enough. If you want to be discovered, you have to be findable. That's where sharing comes in. Instead of buying into the tortured artist trope and toiling in secrecy, be open about what you're working on. Share your process with the world. This won't just make your work discoverable and help you build an audience – it'll pave the way for lifelong friendships and provide a valuable feedback loop. In these blinks you'll learn

why the lone-genius myth is so destructive; why self-discovery is more important than self-promotion; and how to think like an amateur – and keep your possibilities endless.

Creativity is a social act.

You've heard of him: the man who is suddenly struck by divine inspiration; who holes himself up day and night to mold his brilliant idea into a masterpiece; and who, at last, graciously shares his opus with the public amid much pomp and circumstance. Yes, we're talking about the "lone genius." He's a towering figure in Western culture. He's also a fabrication – one of the most destructive myths to permeate humanity's conception of creativity. The problem with the lone genius myth is twofold. For starters, it paints a warped picture, in which most geniuses just so happen to be dead white men – think Einstein, Picasso, or Mozart. It also excludes the partners, collaborators, mentors, benefactors, and influences who made the work of these men possible. It depicts creativity as an antisocial activity, when, in reality, it's almost always a result of an ecology of talent. The key message here is: Creativity is a social act. So what's an alternative to this harmful myth? Meet the "scenius." Sceniuses acknowledge that inspired ideas usually don't emerge, fully formed, from an individual mind. They know that creativity is a communal endeavor, involving artists, thinkers, theorists, and curators. Because of this, they encourage sharing ideas, making connections, and starting conversations. The internet, an interconnected web of sceniuses, makes this sharing easier than ever. Online, it doesn't matter if you're famous or obscure, a master or just starting out. We all have the ability to contribute something. Actually, on the internet, it's the amateurs who often have an edge over professionals. Amateurs are perpetual enthusiasts with little to lose and everything to gain. As such, they're open to experimentation and go where the wind blows. They're not afraid to make mistakes – or fools of themselves. And the thing is, the world is changing so quickly that it's transforming every one of us into amateurs. We will all need to embrace the unknown, over and over, in order to flourish. That might sound scary, but here's a tip: read the obituaries every morning. Get inspired by the people who came before you. They were all amateurs at some point in their lives – and they were all courageous enough to put

themselves out there, to reinvent themselves, to persevere through thick and thin. So adopt the mindset of an amateur. Make a point of learning in the open so others can learn from your failures and successes. Find a scenius, and talk about the things you love. That way, you'll figure out what you're doing and where you're going - you'll find your voice. In other words, start sharing! The rest will follow.

Document your process to develop your audience, hold yourself accountable, and create a valuable feedback loop.

Back in the day, the creative process was a private affair. An artist toiled in secrecy and then revealed the glorious fruit of her labor. There was a clear difference between an artwork and art work, a painting and painting. The product of creation was not to be confused with the process of creation. But this was before the digital age. These days, product and process are often totally intertwined. And, the author argues, if your work isn't online, it doesn't exist. Here's the key message: Document your process to develop your audience, hold yourself accountable, and create a valuable feedback loop. Now you can share any part of your process at any time and be as secretive or as open as you want. Involving your followers satisfies their human curiosity, lets them be vicariously creative, and makes them more invested in the final product. Just take it from astronaut Chris Hadfield, who drummed up public support for the Canadian Space Agency by posting videos of himself clipping his nails and brushing his teeth from space - garnering millions in viewership. Talk about glorious! Documenting your work also has the benefit of helping you figure out what you're doing. The more you share, the more you'll see patterns and themes emerging in your process. It will also help you stay accountable and serve as evidence of your progress. It's easy to get overwhelmed when we think of how much we have to do. So don't think about years, months, or even weeks. As the saying goes, take it day by day. Every day, after you finish your work, share a snapshot of where you're at in your process. That could be something that's inspiring you, a work-in-progress, or even just some discarded scraps. Share it in any format - as a video, photo, blog post, tweet, or email - and don't worry about it being perfect. A lot of what we produce will be garbage. According to science-fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon, 90 percent of your ideas are destined for the trash. That's another reason why documenting our work is so useful. Social media is like a public notebook; it provides us with a feedback loop. We can see how our audience reacts to our output and use that information as input. Remember that sharing is a tool to help you get you where you want to go, so don't overthink it. Try crafting a post on your commute or during your lunch break. Or set a timer for 30 minutes - when it rings, get back to work!

Building your own space online is the best investment you can make in your career.

Social media is great. It's also transient. Instagram and Twitter won't always be around. (Who remembers Myspace?) So if you're serious about expressing yourself and sharing

your work, you need to invest in a web domain. It's not as scary as it sounds – and it'll make all the difference. The key message is this: Building your own space online is the best investment you can make in your career. The author credits his success – his books, art shows, speaking gigs, even his friendships – to his website. He didn't know what he was doing when he began building it, but he figured out how to implement a blog, which became both a sketchbook and a storefront for his work. With time, one little blog post became thousands, and his ideas turned into substance: multiple books, to be exact. To carve out your space online, register a domain name. That means, buy `www.[insertyournamehere].com`. It doesn't even have to be your real name; use an alias or pseudonym if you want. It just has to exist. Visit a library or go online for help building a site on it – or hire a web designer. And voilà. You now have your very own place to do whatever – and be whoever – you want! Collect email addresses from people who encounter your work and want to stay updated on your activities, and encourage new viewership by putting a sign-up widget on every page of your site. When you have something significant to share or sell, send out an email. You might even want to invite the audience you're accumulating to donate if they like what they see – the digital equivalent of passing around a hat. A pithy button on your website – “Like this? Buy me a coffee.” – would do the trick. Or be more blunt: the author has “Buy Now” and “Hire Me” buttons on his own site. But, in general, treat your website as a machine for self-invention rather than self-promotion. It's an environment you've created for yourself to become who you want to be. So use it as a meeting point for all the things you care about, including your work, ideas, and inspirations. Remember, social media networks come and go, but your website is like diamonds – that is, it's forever. If you maintain and respect it, it will, over time, become its own currency. Just keep doing your thing, without compromise, and you'll be ready when people show up knocking.

Sharing your interests and inspirations will attract “your people.”

As we've seen, generosity trumps genius. Generosity also generates generosity. The more you open up and share, the more ideas, feedback, and connections you'll receive. Think of your newly built online space as your Wunderkammer, or wonder chamber – a cabinet of curiosities that displays your desire to learn about the world. In sixteenth-century Europe, that curiosity might have manifested as a collection of skulls, jewels, and taxidermy specimens. Today, it might be more along the lines of your favorite books, records, or artists. The key message here is: Sharing your interests and inspirations will attract “your people.” The thing is, collecting and creating aren't all that different; in fact, they're two sides of the same coin. Our experiences and influences shape what we like and how we think, which affect what we put out into the world. Conversely, the act of creating can affect what and how we collect. And, when collecting, remember that there's no such thing as good or bad taste – it's all just data about who you are. After all, one man's trash is another man's treasure. Just take it from Nelson Molina, a New York City garbageman who created a whole museum from discarded art and objects he found on his route. Dumpster diving is essential to being an artist, even if you only ever dive into figurative dumpsters. To dumpster dive is to judge objects and ideas by your own lights, regardless of others' opinions. It means paying attention to what's considered “high” in culture, but also what's considered “low.” It means seeing everyday things – “boring” things – with fresh eyes. It's incredibly fortunate that we don't all love the same things – imagine how actually boring that would be. So take pride in what you love, even if others might think it's inconsequential garbage. And if

you share another's work, remember to give credit where credit is due. This way, not only are you showing respect to the work's creator – you're also leaving your audience a trail back to your source of inspiration in case they want to learn more. Ultimately, sharing your true interests and inspirations lets others really know who you are and what you do. Sometimes it does this more effectively than your actual work. So stay honest and open about what you like. If nothing else, it'll increase your chances of finding people who like the same things.

Work doesn't speak for itself, so learn how to tell good stories.

Imagine you're looking at two paintings. They're identical, as far as you can tell. But then you learn one of them was painted by a Dutch master in the seventeenth century. The other one? A forgery. Now look at them again. Do they still look the same? Probably not. Even though nothing about the paintings has changed physically, you are now biased. The point is that our perception of things is influenced by what we know about those things. Artists like to think their work speaks for itself, but that's just wishful thinking. The story of your work can be as powerful as the work itself. And to tell that story, you'll have to do some speaking. Here's the key message: Work doesn't speak for itself, so learn how to tell good stories. This goes back to human curiosity; we want to know how things were made and where they come from. The stories you tell will affect people's understanding of, and emotional response to, your work – which, in turn, will affect how they value it. So how do you tell a good story? First off, learn how to structure one. Almost all stories follow this universal formula: First, there's a problem. Then you work to solve the problem. Finally, you arrive at a solution. You can apply this formula to your lifelong work arc, as well as to specific instances: client presentations, cover letters, grant proposals. Pitches, after all, are nothing more than glorified stories. Learning to craft a good tale will take time and practice, but there are a few simple things you can do to boost your storytelling skills as you go. Keep your audience in mind, value their time, speak plainly, and – it goes without saying – use spell-check. Also, practice talking about yourself. If you're at a party and someone asks you what you do, you should be able to give an explanation, with humility and self-respect. And this explanation should be clear to anyone – whether it's your niece, an elderly neighbor, or the guy sitting next to you at a bar. Be honest, always. If you're unemployed, for example, don't beat around the bush. Plainly state that fact, and then mention what kind of work you're interested in pursuing. The same goes for writing a bio. Stick to the facts, and don't try to be cute. Short and sweet is the name of the game.

The more you teach, the more you'll learn.

Speaking of stories, here's one for you. In 2010, the author visited a dinky Texas meat joint called Franklin Barbecue. Back then, it operated out of a trailer off an interstate highway. Three years later, Franklin had become one of the most famous barbecue venues in the world. A line of hungry customers now trails down the block six days a week; every day, the restaurant sells out of meat. So the author was shocked when he found himself watching pitmaster Aaron Franklin explain – in front of a camera crew –

exactly how he smokes and prepares his ribs. Why on earth would he share his precious trade secrets? Well, Aaron said, the technique of barbecue is, in fact, pretty simple. Mastering it, on the other hand, is hard. The key message is this: The more you teach, the more you'll learn. And that's the thing. Teaching doesn't breed competition – not immediately, anyway. Just because you know how to do something in theory doesn't mean you've mastered the technique; that can take years and years. On the flip side, the more you teach and reveal about your work, the closer people will feel to it – and the more they'll teach you about it in return. Another way to expand your learning is by turning down your own volume and just listening. No one wants to be human spam – the kind of person who isn't interested in anything but himself. And we know that powerful art is never made in a vacuum. So while you're honing your craft, ask questions, be a fan, be thoughtful, and look to connect. In short, be what the author calls an "open node." By being an open node, you'll naturally start to attract "your" people. Don't focus on gaining more followers online or following people you're not interested in. Talking to people you don't want to talk to about things you don't want to talk about is just a waste of everyone's time. Instead, when it comes to followers, prioritize real connections, and organically build a network of people who are actually invested in you. These are the people who share your passions and obsessions. Nurture your friendships with them, support them, and collaborate with them whenever possible. Which brings us to a final note: banish the vampires in your life. To the people and things that suck out your energy, leaving you feeling drained and exhausted, say – once and for all – begone!

For lasting success, sell out and cultivate grit.

As soon as you start making any real money, a lot of people are going to label you a "sellout." In their twisted view, if you're not miserable and struggling, you're not a true artist. But the starving artist is a romantic – not to mention false – ideal. Having money does not automatically corrupt creativity. We all need to be able to eat and pay the rent. Many beloved works of art were made for money. Cases in point: the Sistine Chapel, which the pope commissioned Michelangelo to paint, and *The Godfather*, which Mario Puzo wrote because he was sick of living in debt. The key message here is: For lasting success, sell out and cultivate grit. If embracing the opportunities that come your way means being a sellout, so be it. If being ambitious or trying something new means being a sellout, you got it – go for it! Maybe you're changing, exploring, or taking a risk. That's what a life of creativity is all about. In any case, be proud of your successes, as well as the successes of your peers. Every career has its ups and downs. Luck certainly plays a part – but grit plays a larger one. Often, the people who achieve their goals are the ones who've simply stuck it out. So, as the author says, "Don't quit your show." Instead, ask yourself, What's next? Literal chain-smoking is disastrous for your health, but if you apply the concept to your work process, you'll never lose momentum. "Light up" your next project with the embers of your last one, reflecting on what you weren't able to get to or what you could've done better. Then jump right in! That said, eventually you might burn out and need to search for a match. Taking a sabbatical can rekindle your flame and give you the chance to regroup and recharge. Of course, we don't all have the luxury of being able to walk away from our normal lives for a year. A practical sabbatical, however, can also do the trick. Look for daily opportunities to turn off your brain. This could be through exercising, getting outside and inhaling some fresh air, or staring out a window during a commute. By allowing yourself to completely disconnect from work for a while, you'll be able to get back to the drawing board with

an amateur's fresh mindset.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: You don't have to network to build a network. By creating things you love, sharing your curiosities and works-in-progress, telling stories, and teaching what you know, you're inviting others to acquaint themselves with your work – and with you. In the process, you'll attract people who love the same things, gaining indispensable fellowship and feedback. Actionable advice: Learn to roll with the punches. As soon as you share your work with the world, you're going to get some feedback. There will be wonderful comments of support. There will also be trolls. Don't feed them, and learn to take a punch. To do this, first you need to relax and breathe. Practice getting hit to become immune to criticism. That means continually putting out a lot of work. Or take it further, and lean into the criticism; view it as an opportunity for a new work approach. Finally, keep in mind that your work isn't who you are – it's just something you do! Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Show Your Work! as the subject line, and share your thoughts! What to read next: *Steal Like an Artist*, by Austin Kleon Looking for some more ways to keep going and find inspiration with your creative work? Well, here's another tip from the same author, and it's one that goes against the grain: steal some ideas from your favorite artists. That's right – steal! Well, sort of. The suggestion is a bit more nuanced and ethical than that, and it's more about learning from your favorite artists than actually stealing from them. To get the lowdown on this counterintuitive idea and many more, check out our blinks to *Steal Like an Artist*.