## Industry Analysis

## *How do first-time authors market themselves online?*

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The last installment of Charles Dickens’s serial work *The Pickwick Papers*, the stories that shot him to fame, sold almost 40,000 copies - a colossal figure given the technology and marketing channels available to authors at the time (Patten, 2001).

One can only wonder how far Dickens might have come in the internet era - an age in which a message can spread to and be consumed by billions of people in an instant, or if, among the deluge of data, his voice would have been discovered at all.

Fast-forward to the twittery-first century when publishers are asking all their authors to start blogs (*Penguin Authors Guide to Online Marketing, 2008*), and self-published novelists such as [Hugh Howey](http://www.hughhowey.com/), the current pin-up boy for do-it-yourself digital marketing success, are at any one time attached at the fingertips to dozens of media channels and various promotional technologies to spread the word about their works.

During a talk at the Kobo stand at the London Book Fair this year, Hugh predicted that the future of publishing is the self-styled, hard-working, business-minded, self-publishing author. “You can start your career in self-publishing and end up wherever you want,” he said.

And it’s true: for little or no cost at all, anyone can set up an online profile on multiple networks and attempt to promote themselves to the billions of people now online across the world.

This is all terrific for people with technical skills. But what of first-time authors, who often have to juggle their ‘other’ careers, with little time or money or inclination to begin the journey from pencils to pixels? What strategies do they employ?

# Step 1: The website

In a time when some people are questioning whether writers should waste their time with a blog at all (Barkat, 2013), [Jeff Goins](http://goinswriter.com/) is a hard-working blogger and copywriter who has achieved the writer’s holy grail: to be able to ditch the full-time job and work in one’s underpants.

[](http://goinswriter.com/)He did so by establishing what is now a successful blog and brand, [goinswriter.com](http://goinswriter.com/), where he publishes articles on his craft and provides advice to other writers who wish to know how the hell he did it.

I got in touch with Jeff to ask him what tips he’d give to first-time writers.

“Start a blog” he told me. “Be passionate about what you write. Be honest, and importantly, be kind to your core fans.”

On the practical side of things, Jeff says, “You need a website and an email list. Great content is a good idea, too. But I would start there. Those are the basics.”

Jeff’s approach is, not to write what they’re telling you to write, but use it as a way to connect with your readers and improve your craft. “I wouldn't worry too much about convincing other writers,” he says.

“What I would focus on is getting you to believe that this is worth your time. **Who knows if blogging pays off, but what we can't argue is that practice pays off.** A blog just allows you to do that in public and to generously share some of your best work for free. Not a bad way to build an audience, if you ask me.”

# Step 2: The community

Joanna Penn’s writing blog, [The Creative Penn](http://www.thecreativepenn.com/), is another well-known resource for information on publishing and writing and marketing books. I quizzed one of her guest bloggers, self-publishing author [Daryl Rothman](http://www.darylrothman.com/), on the next steps a writer should take in the world of online promotion, and how new entrants in the whizz-bang world of the unceasing digital orgy should plan their online campaigns. As a new author, he’s only been on Twitter for three to four months, but has gained nearly 1,000 followers in that time.

His tip? Take it “one relationship at a time”. Get in touch with people who understand the business.

“Mainly authors, and/or readers, folks who seem to be potential kindred literary spirits," he says. "You can get some buzz going about your work, learn about and support the work of others.”

According to Daryl the technology is only there to assist what authors should be doing anyway: “Interact with people and see how you can support them. **Show them a human side by which not every tweet is about writing/publishing.”**

“ If you start to get followers, commenters, visitors/subscribers to your site, don't view them as stats to accumulate and hawk to potential publishers - engage them authentically, with appreciation and reciprocity to the best of your ability.”

## Case studies

# [Piers Alexander](http://www.piersalexander.com/)

## Piers AlexanderIn 2013 [Piers Alexander](http://www.piersalexander.com/) won the The Literary Consultancy's (TLC) PEN Factor competition after pitching his novel The Bitter Trade. I asked him how he went about marketing his work online.

#### How did you come to the realisation that you had to start developing an online author profile?

I didn't think about it at all until I'd finished writing and editing the novel - I wanted to focus completely on the story, and I was unaware of how important a digital profile was to traditional publishers, as well as to self-published authors.

#### How much time do/will you spend on online promotion/engaging with your online audience each week?

I have promised myself half a day a week. 2-3 tweets a week, 2-3 blog posts and articles a month, one update a week on Facebook and Goodreads.

#### Which specific technologies/activities have brought you the most success?

Going to events, learning face to face and meeting people - I'm in the events business anyway and I am much more effective when I see people live.

#### How do you finance your online marketing activities?

No publishing contract to date and I am covering costs myself.

#### What important lessons have you learned since starting out?

Nobody's going to give you a free pass, even if you get a traditional publishing deal - you have to build and control your own brand.

Build your own network and newsletter database - 1000 True Fans, get professional advice and work, and build a virtual team to make it fun and real.

Nobody really has a clue how to market a novel online. People don't Google for fiction unless they already know the title.

There's a lot of talk and mystique about making self-promotion a full time job but I decided to set myself strict limits on what I will and won't devote to it. If it's more than 8 hours a week then it will just stop me writing and that's my main goal.

I think there are about a million authors blogging about being an author so that's one piece of advice I'll be ignoring!

#### What is your advice to first time authors who have little experience with online marketing/technologies?

Go to seminars, talk to authors, web people; get into TLC or other author-centric services. Look at sites you like, write down what works, and do as comprehensive a spec as you can. The web people will change it but at least you will get your key points across.

# AJ Waines

[AJ Waines](http://www.ajwaines.co.uk/) is a self-published crime fiction writer, who spent 15 years as a psychotherapist. Her debut novels The Evil Beneath and Girl on a Train have achieved success on the UK Kindle Charts. I wrote to her to ask how she juggled writing and self-publishing with marketing.

#### How did you come to the realisation that you had to start developing an online author profile?

 My agent suggested it.

#### How would you rate your knowledge of online promotion?

 Currently around 6/10. As a Psychotherapist, originally, I had no online presence at all apart from a website (which I’d set up with the help of an IT-expert friend). The idea, as a therapist, is to keep a low profile, so I had to totally change my approach. I learnt a lot by looking at other authors websites, I had to learn a lot about Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Pinterest etc very quickly by observing/reading online material/instructions. My Agent also suggested some Social media training which was useful.

#### How much time do/will you spend on online promotion/engaging with your online audience each week?

 It varies each week – more if I am running a promo on Amazon, for example. Minimum 30 minutes a day, maximum 4 hours. I Tweet daily, but only if I have something to promote or inform people about – and I retweet other authors or reply to their tweets. I blog on a Crime/Forensic theme once a week and post this to Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Stumble and around 8 Goodreads groups. I issue a quarterly newsletter through Mail Chimp.

#### Which specific technologies/activities have brought you the most success?

 Amazon promos are the most useful – I am on the White Glove scheme. Goodreads has been helpful - I did a featured author Q&A and Giveaways.

#### How do you finance your online marketing activities?

 I paid for a Netgalley entry, training and a book trailer video myself at the suggestion of my Agent. I certainly think the promo I did linked in to the Amazon deals was valuable.

#### What important lessons have you learned since starting out?

 I’m still learning – it’s very early days for me. Endless promotional tweeting just gets on people’s nerves, so I try to avoid that. I also deal with a certain number of social media/digital platforms and forget the rest – it’s too time-consuming. I don’t tend to engage in forums (except Goodreads, for example). I do try to reply to every email/comment left on my Blog. Also contribute to other’s blogs with comments/feedback because I know it’s encouraging to have a bit of support.

#### What is your advice to first time authors who have little experience with online marketing/technologies?

 Get a good website to start with and build from there. Look at other’s platforms and find out what works. There are loads of blogs/instructions about how to do all this online. Read and pick out what would work for you.

## Bibliography

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