

THE FOUR LEGS OF A GOOD WRITER'S PLATFORM

Marketing plays an increasingly important role in an author's life today and in addition to writing good books, authors need to work hard to build a strong writer's platform. For many new authors, this concept of "platform" is a new and unknown idea and they are not sure exactly what platform is or what they need to do to create one. This article will help to explain what the concept of a writer's platform is and what the main aspects should be in a good platform.

A Platform in the dictionary is 'a raised level surface on which people or things can stand.' A writer's platform is sort of similar. It's what *you* stand on as an author—your visibility as an author, who you are, the connections you have, what supports you as an author. Jane Friedman, who has fifteen years in the publishing industry and speaks at many conferences and workshops on this subject, says platform may be hard to define ... but that editors and agents are attracted to authors who have this thing called "platform."

A good way to think about platform is to visualize an old movie where people used to climb up on a platform to get on the train. A person had to get on the platform to get on the train; otherwise the train just sped by. So platform is an "enabler" to get you on the train to reach your goals as a writer so you won't be left standing and waving as everyone else zooms on.

Another way to think of Platform is to visualize it like the foundation of a house. Without a good foundation, the house won't stand – or it won't stand well for very long. In building you have to start with a good strong base and then build on that. Each subsequent part is only as good as the previous parts they are built on. Building a good writer's platform, like building a good house, takes time and thought and hard work.

In the last book I completed one of my main characters was a building contractor. I learned more about building houses, especially log homes, researching that book than I can probably use in ten books ... but I also learned about the 'carefulness' and 'thoroughness' of planning and building.

A writer wants to build a strong platform or house – and most want a *visible* house. Otherwise we'd go buy a piece of wilderness property and build our house back in the woods, put up a gate, and keep to ourselves. ... Now let me stop and make an important point here. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact some days in my busy, hectic life it sounds very appealing!

The further point you have to personally decide is what kind of writing career you want. Even scripture advises – '*consider well what you want to build lest you be unable to finish it.*' Just as a couple decides what kind of house they want to build, how big, where, what type, and at what cost – you have to think out the many options a writer has today and decide what you want and are willing to do work wise – and then build platform accordingly.

There are all kinds of good writers with all kinds of different goals. Platform needs are different for different goals. Let me give you three examples:

(1) I have a writer friend – let's call her Jean – who wanted to do a history of her family to leave as a legacy. She had no particular aspirations to write more books – if any - or to have a writing career. Self-publishing proved the best avenue for Jean with a small corresponding platform. Jean likes to occasionally speak to a group or sign at a small venue. She is not comfortable getting out and marketing – and she doesn't do much with, as she tells me, 'all that computer stuff.'

(2) A second writer friend of mine – let's call him Kenneth – has done multiple books now on historical figures, places and battles. Some are

published traditionally with a well-known regional publisher, a few self-published. Kenneth has a broader platform – as he speaks for many groups, goes to history-related festivals and events. He also signs with independent bookstores, especially in the southern areas related to his books.

(3) My third writer friend – let’s call her Vera – writes historical fiction. She weaves real history with fictional characters, bringing the past to life within her stories. Vera published her first three books with a small publisher and then moved to a larger national publisher – one of St Martin’s Press imprints - as her work became better known. She writes one to two books a year. Vera has a big platform to support the big base of these ongoing publications – and is active in many platform aspects.

All of these individuals – Jean, Kenneth, and Vera - are “good writers” with “good books” ...but with different career goals and with correspondingly different platforms. A small platform can support smaller career goals and limited publications. A larger platform is needed to support larger career goals and multiple, ongoing publications. The more books and the bigger the publisher, the bigger the platform needed. You have to decide what you want and what you’re willing to work for and do. And each of us here may have different writing goals – and thus different platform needs.

However, all writers’ platforms that are successful – with small or larger goals – have certain main characteristics in common or should. I call these the “four main legs of a successful platform.” A platform without each of these legs is like a three-legged table. It might stand, but it might be a little wobbly.

(1) Leg 1: A GOOD BOOK

The first leg of good platform is just having a good book or a good product. You might talk people into buying your book via many platform venues, but if it isn’t good, or is riddled with editorial errors the reader will

not be in line to buy a subsequent book and will be unlikely to tell others about your book with enthusiasm, increasing your future sales.

This is especially important to consider if you are interested in publishing through any traditional publishing route – small press, regional press, or national publisher. In Renni Browne and Dave King's book *SELF EDITING FOR FICTION WRITERS* they begin their first chapter saying that publishers today are looking for a well-written and well-edited manuscript. Publishing houses, and often agents as well, are just too overworked today to take the time to develop writers with potential – whose books still need an extensive overhaul. So in order to stand out from the crowd, you need to make your manuscript as sharp as possible. This is true no matter what publishing route you follow.

Unfortunately most new authors can't see the inherent problems in their own books, like parents enraptured with a new baby they've produced. Another problem is that most writers don't know the publishing world and what publishing expectations are for the type of book they write. I have another writer friend, let's call her Rita – who has self-published a couple of books, without much success, and has now decided to look for a traditional publisher for her next titles ... and maybe to pick up her already published titles as well. Rita asked me to look at her books. I should have said no; I usually do. Rita is vibrant, outgoing, and marvelous in marketing and media, but her books were absolutely filled with editorial flaws and mistakes. I pencil-marked all the way through, my natural research professor coming out. The format was not professional in layout; there were flagrant misspellings, typos, and punctuation errors. The books head-hopped with the point of view not clear. Too many characters cluttered the books without clear explanation for the reader about who they were, and the plots wandered. There was too

much “telling” and not enough “showing.” Rita had used all speaker tags and no beats, not okay in the publishing world. She overused “weedy words” throughout the book, and many of her characters talked in the same voice. I tactfully and sweetly told Rita that I thought she could make some positive changes to strengthen her work and that I would be glad to sit down with her to go through her books and make suggestions. She got huffed that I didn’t think her books were good. She is still selling those books filled with typos and errors. This is a liberty only self-published authors have. All traditionally published authors get edited – and the process is extensive.

Miral Satar head of a highly successful author services business says: “Once you’ve written your book, a developmental editor is important. Many authors think they don’t need an editor. Everyone needs at least some type of editor. Not having an editor is like not QA’ing a software product or not testing a drug before it goes out into the marketplace. An editor will evaluate and critique your manuscript, suggest and provide revisions, and shape it into a smooth, workable piece. They’ll look at the big picture and make sure everything flows and is consistent.”

Chuck Sambuchino agrees and points out that one of the things a publisher can do for an author is to edit their work well – ‘to help transform the manuscript from good to great, and/or from great to amazing.’ They also will design the book and its cover, distribute the book and make it available in major bookstores as well as on the most highly trafficked book-buying websites, and they will pay you. With a good publisher, money always goes “to” the author, never “from” the author. As a self-publisher, you will always pay all publishing expenses.

According to Satar a good developmental editor gets about \$46-\$65 an hour for examining and working with an author on the style of their book. Once that’s hammered out, a good copyeditor gets about \$25-\$50 an hour “to

go through and catch spelling mistakes and adjust for grammar, punctuation and consistency.” In a big traditional publishing house, your book goes through (1) developmental or style edits with your primary editor who may suggest moving or dropping scenes, changing or correcting point-of-view, or dropping or changing characters, (2) copy edits with a copy editor who checks grammar, spelling, punctuation, facts, consistency, and logic, (3) proof edits with a third editor to eliminate any final missed errors, and (4) final galley edits with a fourth proof editor for a last check before printing. Through these stages the product is refined and readied to be the best product it can be to sell on the market amid all the competition out there.

Competition in any publishing venue is stiff. A book like Renni Browne’s and Dave King’s can help to teach you the craft of editing so you can begin to see your writing in a more realistic light – and nurture it to be the best it can be. There are many other good books out there to help you, too, like Strunk and White’s *THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE*.

Your first book and how good it is – whether you self-publish, publish with a small press, publish with a well-known regional press, or publish with a large national publishing company—sets the stage for the legs of the platform that come next. Think of your book like a “new product.” Is it so good that people will buy it again and tell their friends to buy it? Or is it so riddled with problems that people will be disappointed and avoid that product name again.

Writing is a business – and your success in it – will depend on how willing you are to work and learn that business and create a great product to put on the market.

(2) Leg 2: A GOOD AUTHOR’S WEBSITE

Once you have published a book, the second needed leg for a successful writer’s platform is to create an excellent author’s website. Chuck Sambuchino

writes: “If you don’t have a website, get one now. Everyone needs one.” It is the foundation of your platform and even a minimalist website provides two important things: (1) basic information about you and what you write; and (2) a means to contact you.

If someone “googles” your name, they should find a personal website. A published author’s website is their “central hub” – a landing site that has different critical elements on different pages – about you, your work, your books, your appearances and events. Chuck Sambuchino has a whole chapter devoted to this in his book titled: “Your Website: The Foundation.”

Creating a website is not difficult. Most of my author friends create and maintain their own sites. My daughter created mine but J.L. and I keep it up and add to it. Your website should have, according to Sambuchino:

- (1) A good “home page” or landing page. It’s the first thing people see and it should be attractive and give readers a sense of who you are and what you write – maybe hint at the branding of the bulk of your work. Mine has a mountain banner across the top, pictures of my novels, some blurbs, and a link to my book tour events.
- (2) An “about the author” page – that tells about you, your background, and gives author facts. Somewhere on the home page or on the author page should be a good headshot or photo of you.
- (3) A “books page” – where each of your books is spotlighted and summaries are given.
- (4) A “contact me” page – here you want to provide a clear way to get in touch with you. I have an email address, set up just for contacts from my website and which I also have on my business cards. This is so important and Chuck goes on a rant about it. How can someone ask you to come and sign, come and speak if they have no way to get in touch with you. This page is also the place to give your media links like a link to Facebook, Twitter, etc. It can also include high res, media ready images of yourself and of your book covers.

All publishers expect a website. Phyllis Miller, head of an online marketing company says: “if you are truly interested in giving your book the best online marketing opportunities, you need to have your own book author website.”

(3) Leg 3 – SOCIAL MEDIA

The growing evolution of the Internet and its many connection opportunities makes a presence in Social Media the third leg of your writer’s platform. This allows as Chuck Sambuchino says to ‘connect with other individuals through websites and social media sites where people virtually gather.’ He advocates that social media allows you – in the comfort of your own home or office – to: “(1) connect, network and make friends, (2) receive information, news and learn, (3) share information that you created or found interesting, and (4) promote your work and the works of other authors whose work you admire.”

The two largest of the social media sites that have been found to be particularly effective for authors are Facebook and Twitter. Sambuchino has a whole chapter on this overall topic: “Social Media: Twitter, Facebook and More” and he advises: ‘no matter what you do, don’t avoid these new means to promote yourself.’

According to several top research studies the two top, most effective social media sites, when used well, are: (#1) Facebook and (#2) Twitter – so it pays well in your time investment to give time to both of these social media opportunities. Other sites can work well, too, like LinkedIn for influence and connections, GooglePlus, Pinterest, and a couple of specific sites readers love like Goodreads, Library Thing, and AuthorsDen.

But “Be Careful.” Social Networking can become a time suck. You have to plan it and keep a noose on it – or it can begin to absorb your writing time.

Remember your primary job is to write books, magazine articles, or other works that you can sell and make money from ... not *give* all your writing away. Also, it is important to remember that writings you post on online sites are legal giveaways of your work. Anyone can use them or repeat them.

I'm on Facebook – two, one Author's Page and one personal page; I do Twitter. I'm still working on developing it. I have a Linked-In page, an Authors Den page, a LibraryThing page and a Goodreads page. I also have an author page on Amazon and a few other sites. I'm sure I could improve in all my social media areas ... but my #1 goal is to also keep writing two books a year.

I do not do a blog or a newsletter yet. Maybe later. Some people are very successful with these. I am especially interested in the brief blogs that are a part of an author's website.

Whatever you do: *Think Professional*. Set up your Facebook site, your Twitter page, etc with a good recognizable picture, not a generic faceless head, a photo when you were 20, or a picture of your dog or kids. On my personal page I have a photo of me in front of a waterfall in the Smokies with a small waterfall and steam behind it. That's my branding ... and my name Lin even means 'pool at the base of the falls.' My Author's Facebook page and my Twitter Page have book rows behind my photos.

Every time you post to whatever social media sites you use, think:

(1) Does this post represent who I am? (*It should*) ...

(2) Is it consistent with my work and branding? (*It should be. Readers on your social media site will expect to see a consistency between what you write in your books and what you post*) ...

(3) Is it my best work? (*It always should be; you are a writer for heavens sake. Read it over and read it well before you post; edit it. Make it good and make it count or don't put it up*) ...

(4) Would I want a publisher or agent to read it? (*Definitely think about this one, because they will look at your social media sites*)

Remember this important point made by Laurie Abekemeier, a well-respected literary agent with DeFiore and Company and a former editor with Simon and Schuster: “It’s not social media if you’re not being social.” She advises: “Be useful, be personal, and be interactive.” ... You have to like and enjoy people and you have to interact. Chuck Sambuchino confirms this concept, saying that it’s in this area that most authors fail. Too many post without interacting or without ever reading and commenting on others posts.

If anybody should be good at posting on social media sites, it should be authors. We know how to write. We should be the *best* on these sites. We should be able to be personal and professional ... to write posts that appeal to others versus boring them. Authors should also always avoid bashing, trashing, whining and being a horse’s ass on their social media sites.

Everyone who reads my books knows I’m a romantic, that I love the Smoky Mountains and the outdoors, that I love books, and am a woman of faith. By reading my bio, they also know I teach college, work with my husband’s business, have two grown kids and like cats. Thus, they will expect to see posts relating to these things they know about me. Facebook readers show up at my book signings feeling like they already know me. One of my Facebook readers said: *I love your posts because you let us into your life.* Another wrote: *I look forward to your posts every day; they are so inspirational.*

I would suggest working your way into social media by capitalizing on the Number 1 and Number 2 sites: Facebook and Twitter. Set these up and post every day – and interact every day. I spend a little time every evening before bed deciding what I will post the next day. I take my idea, quote, promotional piece, thought, whatever – find some related photo – and put

them on my desktop. The next morning, as I check email, I go over to post to both my Facebook pages and to Twitter. I might take a few minutes to interact and then I go to work. Later, at a break or at the end of the writing day I'll pop over again to interact. I'm an extrovert and writing can be a little overly introverted for me after a while. So I love social media.

If you are not using social media regularly – and effectively – you are missing a huge opportunity for building readership. If people like you, they want to read your books. Debbie Macomber writes: “We were meant to have relationships.” Debbie has good books, a good website, and she has active social media sites. She also does a monthly newsletter. She genuinely loves people and her readers, and she likes connecting to them – and giving back.

(4) Leg 4: GETTING OUT THERE

So far our writer's platform legs have all been things we can do sitting at home in our grubs at the computer.... Writing, Setting up and Keeping Up a Website, and Getting Interactive in Social Media.

“Getting Out There” is the last and final leg on the writer's platform that all writers need to do – leaving the house to market, sell, promote, sign, and to get your sales product visible. Simply getting your book on Amazon among five million-billion other books is not getting yourself visible or seen.

Writers are artists. They have different products and different personalities – so what works for one doesn't work for all. But, with rare exceptions, authors *must* get out there to promote their work.

I can remember back in the 1980s when a friend suggested we go over to a Book Signing in the area for an author called Debbie Macomber. She said, “I don't know who she is but she writes romance books and maybe she's good.” Debbie was out on tour “seeding” - getting visible, meeting and getting to know new potential readers. Becoming an author is like being Johnny

Appleseed ... You have to put your bag of seeds on your back and hit the road. And for every seed you plant, for every new reader you gain, you'll have increase ... if you have a good book readers like, they'll tell their friends, and you'll get a return on that "planting."

When I got my first publishing contract and had my first publication date set for my first book, I went to work as soon as I had a cover design, a fact sheet, and a publication date in hand. The quick surprise—after a few pep talks and ideas with my new publisher—was that I was on my own with this book. Sink or swim, it was up to me. Now I wanted to swim – so I went to work. I created a work notebook/showbook, made copies of my fact sheet, printed business cards, and hit the road. No one would find or discover me with a small publisher. I had to find them. If you've ever seen an Ingram book catalog or seen the stacks and stacks of publisher catalogs a bookstore is inundated with, you'd understand why this is so important to do.

I would research an area – like Maryville/Townsend/Wear's Valley – googling for bookstores, shops that carried books, then plan an agenda, put on my suit and my smile and hit the road. I might do that researched area one day, then another area the next. While visiting, pitching and smiling to get them to order and carry my upcoming book – I'd offer to sign. I set many signings on those calls in my datebook. I got many stores to pre-order my books. Those contacts and signings were my first "get out there" platform.

It is NOT easy to get your books into bookstores. They have limited space. Big national publishers "buy" space and when it comes to shelving *Lin Stepp* or *Jan Karon* or *Nora Roberts* in romance I'm not stupid. I know who'd I'd pick. I used to work in a major bookstore and I ordered for three sections.

Until you are known, you are a risk. I won't lie to you, it's hard work to get out there. "Blurbs" help by credible people – saying they've read your

work and like it. Reviews by credible sources help, too, saying they've read and like your work. Getting "blurbs" on your book is smart.

If you are self-published, I'll be honest—your journey is harder. Look at this photo I brought of three cola cans. Which would you pick if I told you I'd give you one of these right now? ... Coca-Cola, Shasta Cola, or Like Cola. ... My husband said Coca-Cola without hesitation. It's a brand we know. It has years of reputation behind it. Shasta we've heard of a little bit ... but as J.L. said: "I've never heard of Like cola.

When you start out self-published with a publication name you made up, you're like the Like cola. With a small-established publisher, you're similar to Shasta Cola; some people have heard of that publisher. With a big publisher, you're on stronger ground. People have heard Of Penguin, Avon, and Random House. As a new author you're like these colas, too ... You know who John Grisham and Stephen King are ... but what about Jason Matthews? ... he published *Red Sparrow*, an espionage thriller, with Simon and Schuster and won a best first novel award, but still we haven't all heard of him or of Maegan Beaumont's *Carved in Darkness* with the small Indie press Midnight Ink, yet it won the Gold award in the Suspense/Thriller category in the annual Independent Publisher awards. What about John Willis? What do you know about him? ... For most of you nada even though he's an award-winning author. As a former Chicago police officer, he's published the Chicago Warriors Thriller Series through his own publishing company he calls TotalRecallPublications.

I met John at a SIBA conference some years ago ... and he gave me copies of two of his books. Show them. ... This leads me to a side point of platform that fits well here and that Chuck Sambuchino stresses as much more important than most authors realize. And that's the Book Cover. ... Which of

these covers do you like best? The second is obviously better – as is the back of the second. John works hard to market his books but another hindrance to his sales is his book price. \$22.95 for a trade paperback. Most trade paperbacks in this category sell for less. Overpricing a product can hurt marketability of your product, too.

With our hiking guide THE AFTERNOON HIKER, which J.L. and I self-published, we've had to work much harder to get it in stores and venues. The bookstores look it up and it immediately says P.O.D. ... which tells them it is a self-published book or a book with a very small press. One of my favorite bookstore managers says this is an immediate red flag for them. As he says, "so many self-published books out there today are poor quality and needed a professional series of edits before they went to press." He explained that if he orders them to give them a try, he is taking a risk. He doesn't have time to read and review them, and if they are bad or full of errors, customers complain and this hurts the store. For us, having blurbs by some professional writers and having a reputation already established helped us get in stores. But we've had more problems than we anticipated. It has been harder without publisher distribution and name behind us. Going with UT Press as a distributor helped. But as J.L. said, he was glad this self-published book wasn't our first book out.

Other ways to "Get Out There" ... besides knocking on doors and doing book signings are: (1) to speak for groups and organizations, (2) to do radio and TV interviews, (3) to strive to get reviews in newspapers and magazines, easier if you are doing a signing in the area, (4) to visit festival events that feature authors, preferably indoor ones, (5) to go to literary events with multiple authors in attendance, and (6) to speak to libraries and library associations. There are many more "get out there" items that fit here.

I had over 50 “Get Out There” events on my Book Tour calendar this year. We had three books published this year ... making things a little more hectic: *THE AFTERNOON HIKER* in February, *DOWN BY THE RIVER* with Kensington in late May, and my short novel *A SMOKY MOUNTAIN GIFT* in the Christmas anthology *WHEN THE SNOW FALLS* in October. I do most of my events in places J.L. and I can drive to and return in a day. Motels and meals add up ... and it's hard to recoup these at a signing.

As an author, you have to be willing to experiment and get out there to see what works for you. Also, you have to work hard at any event you go to, to be able to engage people, to interest people in your product, to market and sell it. My rule is to always consider myself like an employee at anything I go to. I give my best. I go early and stay late. I work hard. I'm cordial to everyone at the store or event. I keep a nice attitude. Since I genuinely like people and enjoying meeting and talking to readers, this makes it easier for me. I personally have never understood many writers' reluctance to “get out there” to do signings and events. That is the main way I have built my readership.

As Chuck Sambuchino says: an author needs visibility. He gives an entire chapter in this book to talking about Public Speaking and how valuable it is in a Writer's Platform. In a well-known site called Author Learning by the large publisher Author House, the value of signing for bookstores is well stressed. They advise: “Signing books at a table at your local bookstore may seem like a small part of the overall success of your book, but the result of your signing may surprise you. Not only do you have the chance to inspire and connect with your readers, but you get the opportunity to better understand your target audience. Meeting with readers face-to-face in a book-signing environment may be one of the best ways to market your book. ... Book signings are an excellent way to directly sell your book. While many authors dream of having their book on a bookshelf, your book is more likely to get purchased if you're interacting with potential buyers one-on-one. Furthermore,

bookstore managers may keep any extra books on site after your signing is over, giving your book further exposure. Talking with potential readers leaves an impact unmatched by other forms of marketing, making readers more likely to read your book and support your cause.” In addition, stores are more likely to carry and to reorder books for authors willing to come and sign. It’s a way for authors to say Thank You to stores willing to stock and carry their books.

In closing ... to be successful as an author requires a lot of hard, dedicated, persistent effort. Most new writers are always surprised at the demands expected. A lot of that work will be within the walls of your own home and a lot will be outside those walls. But a good book, a good website, good social media interaction, and a dedicated effort to “get out there” to market and sell your book are the four basic legs of any successful writer’s platform. I hope this talk has helped you to understand some ways to make your own books more successful ... and I highly recommend that you buy Chuck Sambuchino’s book **CREATE YOUR WRITER PLATFORM** for more than I could ever have time to share about ways to build audience, sell more books, and find success as an author.