Building Your Author Platform

MARKETING BASICS

lulu

lulu

The first step to building an audience is creating an author platform. Don't worry, it's not as scary or as difficult as it sounds. With this guide, we'll cover the basics for creating your platform, some best practices to help drive readers to your work, and some methods for making the most out of every sale.

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01 Building Your Platform

Your author platform is going to be a critical tool for connecting with readers and selling not only your book, but your brand as an author/creator. It's more than just a store front. It's your face on the web.

You have the opportunity to connect with a staggering number of potential readers online. But getting the masses of viewers out there to buy your book, instead of someone else's book, is a real challenge.

That's why you need a platform that stands out from the crowd. You need your presence on the web to say "pay attention to me." Not only that, but you need to make it worth everyone's time if they do!

Using the Right Tools

The first step is finding and using the right tools to build your author platform. You can choose from a number of quick, clean services that offer easy to use web tools.

Before you make a decision about hosting for your author platform, you need to define a few goals for this site. Will you be prioritizing:

1. Driving as many potential readers to the site as possible?
2. Driving fewer, but more interested buyers to the site?
3. Capturing contact information for future marketing?

Based on what you want to get out of your site, you'll make the decision about how best to host the site. For example, if you aim primarily to drive readers to the site through your content, you'll need to be blogging regularly and your site should facilitate that. If instead you already have a strong email list and know readers will be coming to your site through email and social marketing, you might prioritize the ecommerce options.

Some of the most popular choices for web hosting include:

WordPress

WordPress is the most recognized name in website development for a reason. Their easy to use and inexpensive tools give you everything you need to get started. And with a vast 'Plug In' library, you can adapt the basic site to fit your specific needs. What sets WordPress apart is their open source option, which allows anyone to create a website completely free of charge.

Price	Free with WordPress.org DIY (requires coding) $99.00/year with Premium (hosted)
Blogging	Yes
Ecommerce	WordPress also offers Plug Ins for some popular ecommerce tools
Domain Hosting	Included

Wix

Wix is going to remind you a lot of WordPress because they are a very similar. The main difference that set Wix apart and can justify the higher cost: Wix is a little easier to use for a new user with their zero-coding, drag and drop website builder.

Price	$168.00/year with Unlimited
Blogging	Yes
Ecommerce	Wix offers their own web store feature (Wix Stores)
Domain Hosting	Included

Shopify

Shopify is primarily an ecommerce solution that allows you to host a webstore. They do offer some of the features like blogging, but Shopify is more tuned for a retail site than a content site. You'll need to consider how important the check out and ordering experience is for your users, and how many sales you'll be making, if you're considering Shopify.

Additionally, we have a Lulu plugin you can use for free on Shopify that completely automates your printing and shipping.

Price	$348.00/year with Basic	$108.00/year with Lite
Blogging	Yes
Ecommerce	Shopify offers a range of Apps to improve the ecommerce experience
Domain Hosting	Included

Weebly

Much like Wix, Weebly aims to be an easier to use WordPress competitor. While the builder tool is similar to Wix (simple drag and drop), the main benefit of Weebly is the variety of plans and the options those plans offer. If you are looking for something simple today that might grow into a more complex, retail heavy site in the future, Weebly is a great option to consider.

Price	$96.00/year with the Basic	$216.00/year with Pro
Blogging	Yes
Ecommerce	This service has limitations and fees for the Basic plan
Domain Hosting	Included

Squarespace

Squarespace is similar to Weebly in that the plans they offer represent an array of valuable features at fair price points. The Basic plan doesn't include ecommerce so you would need to redirect buyers to a retail site, but it does offer the benefits of Squarespace's impressive templates and design tools. The Pro plan includes all the ecommerce and marketing tools you could need for a professional, polished website.

Price	$144.00/year with Basic	$216.00/year with Pro
Blogging	Yes
Ecommerce	SquareSpace only offers ecommerce with Pro plan
Domain Hosting	Included

Jimdo

Another paid hosting service, Jimdo is very similar to Weebly and Wix in that the builder is simple and the services cover all the expected tools (blogging, domain, and ecommerce options). Jimdo is definitely more oriented toward businesses, as is evidenced by their more professional templates. For a serious retail site, Jimdo is a great option

Price	Free for Basic	$240.00/year for Business
Blogging	Yes
Ecommerce	Only available on the Business plan and up
Domain Hosting	Included

Making Design Choices

Hubspot, the content marketing wizards, rank four pages as being the most often visited for any given website:

1. Home
2. Blog
3. About
4. Contact

This isn't just a measure of author websites either. We're talking all websites. Those four pages, along with a page for each of your books, are basically all your website needs to be!

Home Page

Your home page is going to be a crucial piece of your Search Engine Optimization (SEO) plan. You'll include lots of relevant keywords for you, your books, and your reader niche to help new readers searching the web find you.

Here's a quick list of the important elements to include on your home page:

- **A Search Bar**
  Not the most vital, if you skip anything, skip this. But if you have a number of books or a lot of blog posts, you'll want to add a search bar.

- **Follow, Email Capture, and Social Follow buttons**
  Every website building tool is going to include widgets to allow you to add an email capture box and social following buttons. Some, like WordPress,

allow users to follow your site with their own WordPress account too. Give users every opportunity to connect with you.

- **A Compelling Title**
This is a tough one. "My Author Website" is probably not a great idea. If you have a well-established name in your writing community, use that as the title. Otherwise, look for a reference point in your work that you can use as a title. But make certain this is evergreen!

- **Fresh Content**
You're a writer! The best way to drive search traffic and keep readers coming back is with fresh content. And that content needs to be on your home page so it's easy to find.

- **A Footer with your Site Links**
Make this standard across all pages and give us the links we need—any terms and conditions, the About page, your social media links, email/contact page, etc.

Blog

That fresh content referenced above will most likely come in the form of a blog. Keep it regular and be sure to cater to your audience. Once you start to gain more and more readers, keep a close eye on the content they seem to like (based on views, time on the page and social shares) and work to expand on or supplement that content.

About Page

The About page is absolutely necessary for any website. Imagine a common scenario:

You're browsing your favorite social media platform and you come across a product that seems interesting to you. You follow the link and land on a creator's website. You poke around on the home page a little—what link are you most likely to click?

If you want to know more about the product, you'll be scanning for a product listing page. But if you're more interested in the creator or business, the About page will be your target. What happens next? You skim the About page and decide to either continue learning more about the product and company or you click away to something more interesting.

As such, the About page serves two critical roles: to draw a user in and to steer them to further pages on your site.

With that in mind, there are three pieces of the About page you should aim to incorporate:

1. **A story** – this is likely to be some backstory about you, your products, and your area of expertise.
2. **A value proposition** – why should this Internet user buy your book instead of a different one?
3. **A Call to Action** – give your reader a link (or two or three) that directs them to the next steps you'd like them to take (most likely buying a book or reading your blog).

The About page is all too often overlooked or created with a minimal effort. You can't afford to lose users who make it all the way to your website! Keeping new users on your page and converting them to a reader (someone who has bought a book) is the entire purpose of your site.

Contact Page

Your Contact page is almost as important as the About page, though in a different way. While your About page will very likely be one of the most viewed pages on your site, the Contact page won't get as many clicks.

What really matters is that users see a Contact page link is present.

Everyone should be able to contact you through an email form. If you hope to sell books, you absolutely need to provide your readers a means to contact you with questions or (in the rare case) if there is a print defect and the reader needs a replacement book.

WordPress, as well as many of their competitors, offer a default "Contact" page as part of their basic design. The page offers a simple contact form and is a perfect jumping off point for your Contact page.

Along with a contact form, offer links to your social media, and a phone number if applicable (though most likely you'll want to skip this). Be innovative, but don't try to reinvent the wheel. The Contact page (and About page for that matter) should hold to best practices and serve up what your visitors expect.

Products Pages

Along with the four pages we already looked at, you need a product page for each of your books. You might create a high-level page with all your books listed if you have a lot of titles. But each individual book needs a page too. That means a unique URL you can share to send a reader—they can follow that and buy your book!

The book page needs to include data pertinent to your book. This includes:

- Title/Subtitle
- Author
  - Publishing metadata
  - Description
  - Publishing Date/Publisher
- ISBN
- Reviews
- Similar works

We'll look at ecommerce a little later in this book, but the ideal is a website with your store built into the pages so readers can shop from your site without having to navigate to a retail site.

Staying Adaptive

There are over 1.8 billion active sites across the web. That is a lot of white noise, which creates an unlimited amount of options when your potential reader opens their browser. How do you get them to navigate over to your site?

You don't want to grab the attention of people at random online. You should not be looking at your burgeoning website as a destination people will discover. Your first goal is not what SEO experts call 'organic' search. That is the wrong mindset.

That doesn't mean you should completely ignore the potential that you're discovered by a completely new reader online. You need to build your site so it can be found through search engines. But that's not your ultimate goal here.

Instead, you're going to drop your URL on a business card, inside your book, add it to your email signature, and on all your social media handles. Your web URL is going to be tacked on to everything. What's the benefit of driving a reader who already bought your book to your website?

Most importantly is the potential that they leave a review. Alongside that, if they enjoyed your book, they might be inclined to follow your blog, join your mailing list, and even buy other books from your catalog.

The point is that the intent of your website is to serve readers and other authors you encounter. Once you've established a fan-base, you might start to see their extended cloud of connections showing interest. Developing a following who reliably buys your books is the most important step in earning income from your writing. The website is a critical tool to facilitate this goal.

02 Content Marketing

Content Marketing is one of those catch phrases that can sound kind of meaningless. But the idea behind it—using high-quality content to attract attention—is something authors should understand explicitly. Spreading the word about your books through searchable, quality content should be a natural means of building an audience.

Never Stop Writing

The most valuable part of Content Marketing for authors is that it demands you keep writing and that you write a variety of content.

Your blog is going to be the outlet for your content. You'll want to develop a schedule and post regularly. Once a week is a good place to start and should give you the time you need to develop 2000 or more words on your subject.

Remember too that your blog is adding keywords and search terms to your site. So, you can help build a little organic SEO when you blog. You're still not going to want to make a concerted effort to catch readers with your search engine hits, but if you do catch a few, that's awesome!

Another awesome thing you can do with your blog is drip new content from your book(s). Like a sample chapter. Or an excerpt from an interesting section. For a forthcoming book, this is a great way to let people know you have new work coming out and to get advance feedback. And for a book that's already published, a taste might just be what it takes to push some from interested to buyer.

Keeping it Fresh

Here are four basic types of blog posts you can create to catch attention.

Lists

List posts serve a few purposes; capturing attention, providing a quick read, and often times amusing readers. There are heaps of research suggesting that article titles with a number in them garner more attention than other kinds of titles.

A list blog for a self-published author is likely going to emphasize the writing or publishing process. This is great content, and with the list style, you can create a post with less in-depth detail than the other kinds of posts while still offering value.

How-Tos

A How-To blog is terrific for self-published authors to use as both a promotion for their work and a contribution to the rest of the authors out there.

Blogging about your writing process also falls under the How-To category. Do you use character design templates? An editing checklist? What about routines that keep you on track and progressing toward completing your manuscript? All of this content is interesting and valuable to your readers.

Content in the How-To category will often be the most interesting and valuable kind of content, the sort of content that engages readers. Be sure to take your time and thoroughly develop How-To content.

Resources

Similar to a How-To, a blog about resources will allow you to share resources you find useful with other readers. You can also share reader resources like book review sites.

This kind of blog has a lot of value, as you can share your experiences with different software and writing tools, marketing efforts, and really anything pertaining to your writing and publishing process. Just be careful to differentiate a post about resources from an opinion piece. It's fine to offer an opinion about resources, but more important that you speak to pros and cons of the resource with an emphasis on how they work as writing and publishing tools.

Opinions

An Opinion piece is the most open kind of blog. Anything you post that isn't based on hard information is opinion. This can include reviews of other books you've read, thoughts on the publishing industry, or even a personal story about an adventure you've had. Remember that this blog is yours and you have to own it. Don't make it too dry (unless that fits your audience of course) nor should you over do it with opinion content.

Your blog will be a tool for your author brand, and part of that is YOU. Use opinion blogs to reveal a little about yourself so readers can get to know you. It will make a difference as they need to see you not as a business that sells books, but as a person who creates books. The difference might seem subtle, but it's important none-the-less.

Social Media dos and don'ts

All that content you're generating for your author platform needs to be promoted and exposed to readers and would-be readers.

There's no better way to reach a broad range of people than social media!

But which platform? How often to post? How do you get your post to appear amid the torrent of cat memes and political news?

You have to understand your audience and the social media sites they frequent. If you write in a particular niche that has a lot of readers on Facebook, then Facebook is the social media platform you'll focus on.

Social Media Platforms

Facebook

The social media giant, Facebook attracts the broadest group of potential readers. If you're writing in fiction genres, there's a good chance you'll find multiple Facebook groups focused on your genre. This platform is a safe bet, though because it is so heavily trafficked, you can be lost in the "noise" on Facebook.

Twitter

Unlike many other social media platforms, Twitter is almost entirely focused on individuals. With that in mind, you'll do best on Twitter if you have a significant following for yourself, rather than your content or works.

LinkedIn

The Facebook for business professionals, LinkedIn is becoming more and more of a content focused platform. That bodes well for authors who create self-help or business strategy type content. If your audience is primarily targeted at business professionals, LinkedIn is the platform for you.

Instagram

If you're an artist—be it photographer, painter, sculptor or any other visual creator—you'll find a lot of traction on Instagram. The platform's focus on visual sharing means you get to highlight your work while connecting with a broad and diverse audience.

Goodreads

Goodreads is a bit of an outlier. It's not exactly a social media platform in the traditional sense, but because it is so focused on writers and readers, it bears consideration. Utilizing forum style groups and blogging, Goodreads can a unique resource, but only if you have readers who use the platform.

To learn more about using Social Media to promote your book and author brand, check out our Social Media Marketing Basics ebook.

03 Ecommerce for Success

Your Author Platform serves two important purposes:

1. To give readers a place to find you online
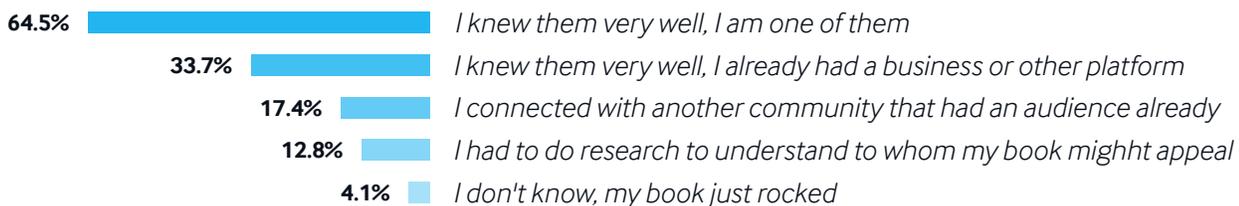2. To sell your book(s) to those readers

The first point you cover with your content—an active and interesting blog or a robust social media presence that appeals to the readers you know will be interested in your book.

The second is where ecommerce comes in. Historically, selling online has meant sending a buyer to a retail site to complete the purchase, then taking your cut of the profits after them. But modern web tools have made ecommerce accessible to the masses, meaning your author platform can be more than just a blog and some links to a retail site.

Finding Your Audience

Locating the readers who will buy your book is the first and biggest challenge. And to complicate matters, there is no simple and effective method to finding them. The best way to start is with other authors. Look at books in your genre and track that author online to find where their readers congregate.

Lulu surveyed nearly 4000 of our authors to better understand how they find their audience. Here's an aggregate of what we learned:

64.5%	*I knew them very well, I am one of them*
33.7%	*I knew them very well, I already had a business or other platform*
17.4%	*I connected with another community that had an audience already*
12.8%	*I had to do research to understand to whom my book mighht appeal*
4.1%	*I don't know, my book just rocked*

Most authors wrote for audiences they either consider themselves to be a part of or groups whose needs and shopping behaviors they were familiar with. This made the process of determining how to reach their audience easier because they knew which marketing channels would grow their reader base.

Is this true for you? For example, if your book is on health and fitness and you have identified your audience as other like-minded fitness enthusiasts, you may already know several websites these enthusiasts regularly visit to learn about fitness and to make purchases.

Making the Most from each Sale

Did you know that selling a book using the most popular retail self-publishing options will mean you earn less than 1/3 of the sale price as revenue? You're trading some of your profits for access to those retailer's massive exposure and fulfillment network.

Basically, you get your book on Amazon and they print and ship for you, in exchange for a large chunk of the profits.

That's not a bad deal, but if you're driving readers to your author website, there's no reason to send those readers to a retail site to make a purchase!

When you use ecommerce tools to sell direct to your readers, you keep all of the profits, and you capture the reader's contact information for your email list, meaning you have more contacts to communicate with in the future.

All of the web-hosting platforms we looked at in the first part offer some form of ecommerce. Deciding which one to use will mean balancing out the cost of taking payments and hosting with your sales traffic.

Lulu's Print API

There's one other option.

If you have a dedicated web developer or know how to code yourself, you can use Lulu's Print API to access our print-on-demand network directly and without any cost.

That same API access is available as an App for Shopify, so if you use their ecommerce platform, you can add print-on-demand directly to your website.

For any other option, you'll need to fulfill yourself, which means printing and holding stock, then packing and shipping when an order is placed.

Whichever the method, doing it yourself means you hold on to all the revenue.

Appendix: Resources

Lulu Community and Knowledge Base

Lulu hosts a community forum for writers to discuss different aspects of writing and publishing, as well as seek help from writers and Lulu staff.

Visit the Lulu Community to learn more - http://connect.lulu.com/en/

Self-Publishing Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure your book is ready to publish

Print Books:
- ☐ If you create a PDF file for uploading, all fonts must be printable and embedded
- ☐ Pages are sized to match the Book size and are in the same orientation (portrait or landscape)
- ☐ Front matter (Title Page, Copyright, Acknowledgment, Table of Contents, etc.) are included in the file
- ☐ Images sized properly and inserted at 300dpi resolution
- ☐ Margins, header/footer, and gutter are properly set (min 0.5", 0.5", 0.3" mirrored)

Ebook:
- ☐ Word Files: Remove headers/footer/page numbering
- ☐ Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3, are used to indicate titles, chapters, and sub sections.
- ☐ Heading 1 is used for Title (which must appear on the first line of the first page)
- ☐ All heading styles are used sequentially (1, 2, 3) in the document
- ☐ All other text is in Normal Style Automatic formatting turned off, and all automatically created elements removed or added manually (Such as lists or numbering)
- ☐ Images sized approximately 500 x 500 pixels, at 72dpi resolution, and inserted "in line"
- ☐ No text boxes or borders

Additional Resources

Lulu.com - Free online publishing tools, advice on author success, and step-by-step instructions for self-publishing your book.

AuthorLearningCenter.com - site dedicated to author development with a focus on community and powerful timeline tools.

Purdue OWL - The online Purdue writing advice and resources pages are great for grammar rules, source citing, and general writing help.

Chicago Manual of Style - The Chicago Manual of Style is the definitive reference for styles and standards in formatting. Check out their home page:

Lulu Style Guide - When you are ready to publish your book, download Lulu's free Templates and Style Guides. Layout and format of your manuscript like a pro with our guides.

Lulu Toolkit — Get free guides for file creation, formatting, publishing, and marketing.