Today we are going to start talking about how to keep a handle on some of the major time black holes that are territory we pretty much don't have any choice on whether or not we cover as authors, the only thing we control is the path we take. We are going to talk about social media, volunteering (and networking), critique partners, and conferences.

Protecting Your Creative Well

I have mentioned a few times already that if you want to be able to focus more quickly you have to protect your creative well. One of the ways you do that is by having a clear plan and keeping distractions at bay. If you know exactly what you need to do the moment you sit down to work it is much easier to jump in and do it. When I close out a work session I make a short detailed list (one or two things) that are to be the first things I do when I sit back down. I try to make them story related so the first thing I do is specifically related to productivity. By having a plan and sticking to it as much as I can I am not having to decide a path and task right off when I sit down, which allows me to keep my sanity intact and just sit down and do. By the time those two things are done, I am back in my groove and rolling.

For me, I have noticed this goes for my writing, my business, and my family. I will be honest with you, there will likely be times when following your plan won't be fun, it will feel like downright drudgery. In the last few years, I have listened to hundreds of workshops (I do audio masters for conferences occasionally which means listening to every single class taught and talk given) and dozens of keynotes. Many of them talk about how commitment and doing the work and pushing through that sucky part where you would rather be watching TV or visiting friends or having a moment to yourself instead of forcing yourself to write may be the difference in your eventual success and maybe less success. I would say the "it's not fun all the time" or the "sometimes, you just have to do the work" POVs are valid but if you don't have balance, you can't sustain.

I certainly don't mean you can't ever have time for yourself, as a matter of fact, self-care is really important, I've even talked about just how important it is a little bit, but when I sit down at night I usually know deep down if what I am doing is going to further my career, business, and books, or not. Acting on that, putting away the "fun" stuff, and getting to work (for me at least) is where the rubber hits the road in being an author instead of just a hobby writer. Your line in the sand may be something else, but most authors I have spoken to have a point in their career where they assessed everything and they "got serious" and really became brutal about how they spent that tiny sliver of time they are able to carve out to write.

In the following sections, I will talk about things most authors will need or want to do to legitimately further their career. I have done the social media parts and the conferences and I am usually an organizer of the events I attend. I like to watch people and see who is actually getting something out of the events/obligations/etc. and who isn't. Don't get me wrong, when you first start out you will be doing your fair share of strictly being a tourist and that is fine, but once you get enough information, experience and

professional maturity to have some direction, it will save you time and distraction if you have a plan. Not that having a plan is always fun, sometimes it isn't. Always remember your plan is only as good as you make it so making a plan is second only to the writing itself in how important it is to your success. "Making a plan" can sound vague, I very specifically mean taking some time to simply THINK about what you are doing, what it is getting you, and if it is the best way to get you closer to what you want BEFORE you jump in and commit yourself.

Making Your Obligations Work for You

The first thing I recommend is taking the time to really think about your direction. Even if you take a few weeks to decide exactly what you want from writing, it is absolutely worth it. I took three months to do it. I got tired of feeling overwhelmed and like I was spinning my wheels getting nowhere. I felt like I was doing one of those circus acts where the guy was trying to get plates spinning on eight or twelve poles at a time and I didn't have the time or energy for that sort of thing so more often than not I just gave up.

Remember back in lesson one where we talked about liking actually being a writer versus liking the idea of being a writer? The first thing I did was spend about a week thinking about all the writers I knew, cyber stalking them a little bit, and deciding what I wanted my daily routine to look like because more often than not you get exactly what you ask for. I decided as many aspects of how I wanted to run my business as I could. Literally down to what kind of desk, office, and hourly activity I wanted. What kind of day would make me wake up and really WANT to go live that day or as close as I can everyday. Then I wrote a plain language business plan.

Several of you may have just tuned me out at the phrase business plan. Tune back in and hang with me for another few paragraphs. Bottom line, I took "I want to write books" and turned it into a business plan and goals with numbers, deadlines, and production schedules. It was a little less sexy that way but it sure was easier to get a handle on the actual productive work on it. In the beginning, this was plain language, I want to make enough to own a house, have life insurance, help my kid with college and have a retirement. I want to interact with others occasionally but mostly I want to write and interact with my close circle of friends. I want to interact with my family some but not so much that they drive me crazy (may or may not make your list). I want to have an LLC so that if I get sued I don't lose my house and all the stuff I mentioned above. It was rough and list of what I really really wanted. Then I went and bought a business plan for dummies book and made it better. Then I bought an actual grown up serious book on business plans and with the help of my accountant and attorney I made it exceptional. I did it in steps and eventually with help. You don't have to do it alone, you don't have to do it all at once, you just need to do it. A business plan will give you limits, if what you are doing isn't directly contributing to that plan it needs to go, period. It gives you a working framework and while the term business plan may be scary, it shouldn't be. Make it in a pretty notebook, put stickers on it, glitter tape, make it a collage journal in

the beginning if that's what it takes to get you putting brain matter to making your plan, find your process and go for it. If you "fail" are you any less on track that you are now? The truth is any decision you make is not a failure, it is another step toward you being a successful business.

I almost always have a book on self-publishing, traditional publishing or industry issues in general on my night stand or on the front seat of my car (for long waits in parking lots, no reading while driving) or generally handy. About two years ago I was reading *The Naked Truth About Self Publishing* by The Indie Voice (a group of 10 bestselling authors who came together and wrote a book about self-pubbing, I highly recommend it, BTW). They had a section on writing a business plan in there that I almost didn't read because I figured I didn't have time or the know-how, and since so much of my "business" was reader dependent how was I supposed to guesstimate how things would go? But I did read it. I am so glad I did. You don't have to have a bank loan worthy business plan to reap the benefits. As I said above, *Home Based Business for Dummies* is excellent (put your ego away and wrap the cover in pretty duct tape if you don't want anyone to see you reading a for dummies book).

Start with the basics, what you want to write, which genres, how you want to publish, what rights giveaways are deal breakers for you, if you want to use a pen name and how many. For example, after a ton of research I realized having two pen names actually SAVED me time. Generally, it sounded like more work, but when I looked at it, it simplified every bio, marketing plan, promotion plan, and event list to attend I would have from there on out so in the long run it was MUCH less work and time. Then of course, there was that fans could find the two lines of books without having to sort out my convoluted marketing strategy for grouping it all under one name. If there is any part of your plan that makes something complex for readers, you might want to rethink it and make it simpler at first. That benefits both of you. Start basic, get what you NEED in place, then once you know if you have a following or not, add more details and complexity (only if you need to, if simple works, don't screw with it). Don't invest the time until you are relatively certain there is a payoff of some sort. Don't do things because everyone else does.

Let's talk about social media. Numbers are great on business plans and you should eventually get to the point where you have those too. However, at a minimum think through what you are trying to do. Think through your future goals. Make sure where you want to eventually be can be reached from where you are and the platforms you are setting up now. Think about which social media platforms you think are most likely to go away, really consider if they are worth your time. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE ON EVERY PLATFORM OUT THERE. Also, do some research and make sure your future readers are on the platform you select. I picked three in the beginning, that I was already familiar with and that I am on on a personal basis and capped it. I have since went down to two because I have decided I don't care for the third. I didn't want to spend the time to learn a new platform. For me, getting good at a few that I am already on anyway (and where I knew my readers were) was more valuable and a better use of my time than

casting a super wide net. Also, the what does it hurt to learn a new platform argument is bogus. It is a huge time suck. Simplify all the admin stuff down to bare bones and focus on the writing.

Over the next year, I will likely cut down to one. Since I opened a media company it has come home to me that **all my social media platforms should simply point readers to my website nothing else (*because that's where ALL my buy links are*)**. Social media, if you are an author, is your public resume, if you are using it as your personal method of expression STOP. Open a page under your maiden name for sharing pics of the kids etc. and keep your author stuff all business all the time. That is all it is for, it is a tool to direct readers to your website for upcoming releases and buying your books. But that is so cold you might say, it is. Building "relationships" with your readers is fine, *but unless you have tons of saleable product available, you need to do that later*. You have to have product and the ability to sell it or all the followers in the world won't help you one bit. Directing everyone to your website for information means you are only updating your website and not five different SM platforms every time you put something out. Don't set yourself up to have to post, tweet, pin, insta every single thing you do. Short posts to your website and put all the details and information there. In the long run it will save you a ton of time. In other industries that is standard operation procedure. When was the last time you saw an ad on Facebook or in your browser that took you anywhere besides the advertising parties actual website?

But I do get readers from the seventeen social media platforms I am on you might say. I am sure you do, and can. Anything you put your time into will typically yield something for you. However, it has to be *enough* to make it worth your time. So if you aren't checking analytics or finding some way to see where your actual sales are coming from you need to find a way to tell what is and isn't working. Yes, there are other platforms, yes, you might turn up a few more readers on them, but if you can't make yourself do them, they are drudgery and there is no joy in it, at least there wasn't for me. Which means they are a time suck. I don't have time to write the quality of books I am shooting for if I am on lots of platforms. They do little to nothing for me enjoyment wise, no matter how great they are in general. Only be on what you can make work for you. Also, you don't get credit for just showing up and having a log-in, you need to be active and curate a business like feed. If you think you have to be on everything to be successful, go check your MySpace account for readers wanting to follow you. Exactly…

Facebook is a juggernaut, make no mistake, but as the algorithms change and as FB continues to monetize many authors are seeing that their reach is actually decreasing and their time is better spent working their own personal website, etc. Don't do the spaghetti toss approach (throw spaghetti at the wall and whatever sticks is done and ready to eat). Take an hour or two and research each platform over time. I do this by going on YouTube and searching "How to use (insert platform of choice) and (insert platform of choice) Fails". Between how to use it and how people mess it up, within an hour I can usually see enough to know if this is a platform I want to invest the time in learning to use effectively.

If you do have a platform or three you love, do some general internet searches for hacks and time saving tricks for that program. I highly encourage you to only consider platforms you can link together. For instance, Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram can all be linked together so that if you post something on one, it automatically posts to the others. Avoid one offs that don't play well with other platforms unless you just love it or your specific reader base really utilizes that platform. If you are going to be on social media, learn how to use your chosen platforms *well*. It will save you tons of time by knowing shortcuts, quick links, and just where things are in the menus should you need to adjust something.

So getting back to your business plan, the very first thing you have to do is get your direction. Once you have that you can start filling in one off tasks on your schedules because you will no longer have something on your list like "Post on social media" you will have something much more specific, like, "Like five authors comments in my genre (network)" or "make a list of my ten favorite authors and like/comment on posts/comments from two of them each day". As I said earlier, the first and toughest thing for me to do was to sit down and decide what was really HELPFUL to me as an author. So how did I get around that part?

I have 21x24 trifold cardboard science fair board (not full size, that would be too much) but big enough I can set it on my desk beside my laptop and look at it when I go on social media or online to update my website. Just having it sitting there big as day reminds me I am working not doing fun stuff for me and cuts my time online. I will post some photos of my boards in the files section. I started in the middle and wrote the pen name, pasted on a head shot (which meant they had been done), wrote a long bio, short bio and the names of all the projects I currently know I want to write under that name. I wrote the bios, saved them to my computer, printed them out and taped them on the middle of the board. I picked a color scheme and font scheme for each author (I have two pen names so I have two boards) had business cards I made up for each pen name and taped them along the bottom. To do that I had to set up each of the social media accounts on those cards (and my websites). Since each one has its own color scheme it made doing website, social media and business cards easier because those all need to match enough that if a reader gets on one they will know for sure they are in the right place on the others. Don't mix up your colors and get "creative" with your brand, it's business, it needs to match everywhere. How many large companies do you see "mixing it up" with their branding? Exactly. You are building a business brand, not your own personal mix mash of colors, pictures, weird quotes and family photos mixed in for fun. I have the user names and passwords of all those social media accounts written on the bottom of that middle section of board as well. I am careful to make all my author accounts separate from my personal accounts. It may seem like that takes longer, but for me it is faster because I have a strict no lingering rule for my author and business accounts. For my personal accounts, I am tempted to linger (which is fine) so I separate them.

Each pen name got a charity or social cause to support. So at least one day a week for each author I plug a charity associated that author/pen name supports. That is on the right flap of the board, anything else those authors do is listed. I do all my teaching under one name and I do voice work under the other, so notes about both are listed on there. Things like what my maximum number of classes or voice projects I can take on is and things like that. I wrote down how I marketed those things. For my classes I made that a big part of the Merien Grey website, it is one of the big draws to the site.

On the left tab for each board/author I have a list of **seven** topics (no more than seven). For example, coffee, optimism, Regency articles, etc. under no circumstances should your author profiles go anywhere near religion, politics or anything else volatile. This is business and about marketing, not your soapbox to rant from, do that on your personal profiles. But that is a cop out you might say, I want people to know ME. I want to stand for something. No, it isn't and no, you don't. Save all that emotional, polarizing stuff for your personal page where it won't cost you readers and money. Where your author profiles are concerned, it is ALL business. If it is not something you would put on that profile if you were selling cupcakes out of a retail bakery (or anything else a normal retail company would sell) then don't put it on your profile. <u>You are not selling YOU, you are selling **the persona of the author** you are building. Read that again, it is one of the most important things to learn in this class.</u> They are not the same thing, and you don't want them to be, if nothing else for safety sake. If you are far enough along to have an accountant and an attorney, the first thing they will likely suggest you do is separate your personal and business assets for liability reasons. ***You are there to be personable not get too personal.*** Keeping the two together opens your family and you up to various safety risks and under no circumstances is that acceptable.

I take those seven items and have a social media schedule for each week. I go on to each profile every morning and I give myself five minutes. When I started my strategy over a year ago, I actually timed it. I log onto social media and each of those seven topics has a day. For example, Mondays are coffee. I go on the regular internet and search "coffee meme". Find something with an image if you can and give credit to where you got it. I take a look and make sure it is not a copyright infringement and then I post it. One day a week a week I post a very short update on my work, one day a week I share something from one of my author pals and on Saturdays I share a pic of mine. Sundays I don't log in so that day at least has to be pre-set to auto post. Sundays are usually about peace or perseverance. Each day I log in looking at my board and have a topical post and sometimes something else. I don't deviate from my list. Readers know what I will be posting about each week. I select things that tie into each brand that I am building for each author. Everything about it is calculated, ties together and builds a tight, clear, recognizable brand. It is enough to give me some variety, but I am not scanning or looking for something random to post so I am much less likely to get lost on social media. FIVE MINUTES for each author. On and off. I can also sit down on a Sunday and in less than an hour, schedule every post for all my pages and not have to do it at all that week, leaving only a quick two minute pass to like and answer.

Speaking of, I log on at night and like any comments and like something from five other authors then off. That list is also on my board. I try to throw in at least one compliment. Compliments like "Great Job", "Congratulations on your contest win!", "Congratulations on your release!!" or you can share something from your organizations. One of the biggest perks of following your chapters, conferences, and contests (when able) online is they give you content to share. Five minutes, on and off. It is hard at first and it is tough because you *want* to read your pals stuff, don't read it all, you can't, you have to limit yourself. If you have time, you can allow yourself one or two posts to read completely or a short list of people to check on but keep it short and be ruthless. You can't do it all, limiting your involvement is your only chance to not get lost down that rabbit hole.

If you are involved on a platform find out about the analytics for that platform. Facebook analytics are literally three clicks away from your log in screen. Those analytics are the ONLY way you are going to know which platform your sales are most likely coming from. If you are involved enough to spend precious time on these platforms and integrate them into your daily routine, then learn how to use them properly. If something isn't producing, get rid of it or drop down to a quick weekly update. Don't spend your time doing something that isn't helping you. I have even seen authors get started on a platform, realize it is a large time investment without much return and leave a profile on there with links to the social media they actually update. I have seen authors invite readers to other platforms in a very slick and intelligent way. They simply posted on one platform for their particular readership they are better able to interact with readers on X, Y, and Z and they want to spend as much time as possible interacting with their readers so please find them there. It wasn't ideal, but it maximized the author's time and productivity, and readers could still find them.

Commitment

Let's talk about commitment in general. I am one of those folks that my word is my bond, and if I say I am going to help you, I will do so, to the best of my ability until the task is seen through to the end. I never just let things go. I am the epitome of dependability. However, that means there are times when my writing is the last thing on my list and it took some pretty big shake ups in my life to realize that was wrong. If I kept doing that I would end up with a wall full of service awards, an empty bank account, and no books.

You should have a plan for volunteering, participating in events and going to conferences before you ever register or get it in your head you want to go. I sit down every September (a while before RWA board season starts because I know I will get asked to run for something somewhere because I have done it in the past) and really think about what I want to do the following year. I am really tough on my commitments. I make sure I do things because it is a solid business decision, not because it sounds fun. They all sound fun. It is always fun to get with other writers, no question. You should commit carefully and research things carefully before you sign up, because if you are like me, once you are in you are all in. Also, when I am looking at a full year's list of all the

"little things" I tend to volunteer for I realize exactly how not little it is. Look at the whole year for everything you volunteer for RWA, PTA, dance momming, soccer momming, all of it. Thus far about 40% give or take of my students realize they are volunteering themselves into what equates to a full time job when everything is put together for no pay. Put it all down together, it may really take you by surprise. I know my first year of doing it certainly was a nice cold bucket of ice water on where my time was going.

Volunteering

I am a huge believer in giving time and giving back to those people and organizations that help you move along your writing journey. However, I would caution you to do it with <u>precision and intent</u>. There is no rule against, and nothing wrong with, getting something out of your volunteer service on a personal level, as long as you are doing your best (and your fiduciary duty) by those you volunteered to help and aren't doing anything you wouldn't do otherwise.

For example, my first board stint was as Vice President of Communications, my main job was to update the chapter website. I specifically ran for that job because I wanted to learn to do excellent websites and we had a wonderful software engineer that was volunteering to run our site when I took over. I made every effort to help her and become a team with her so that she taught me all sorts of things. Everything I did was in the vein of making the chapter site better, which I did, but I was still learning something useful for me later. Anything you do should have some sort of benefit for you, don't buy that line that just giving back is enough. In today's competitive market you won't find other types of professionals volunteering unless they are getting some sort of perk, typically networking, or education of some kind out of it. As long as you do the actual volunteer position to the best of your ability, as well as enriching your personal knowledge base, you are fine.

Some other examples I have seen that were super smart business decisions was a friend of mine volunteered to run the reader event at her local conference because she wanted to do them as an author and wanted to know how they worked. She learned how they work inside and out and made lots of great contacts. Another friend got on a committee to host a book fair, same thing. Now they both know exactly how to navigate attending those types of events and make them successful ventures. As staff at events, you may not get all the attention your first time there, but you will observe lots of what to and not to do. I classify these types of commitments as ways to increase my professional maturity.

I volunteer to teach at various venues so I can see how certain organizations and events work. That way I can see how the people are as far as how they treat people, and if they are competent, before I commit to work with them. I am currently on the national ethics committee for RWA, there is not much benefit for that besides it looks good on my bio, but more importantly for me in this case, it is something that is near and dear to my heart, so if I am spending time volunteering for it, I have made sure it is something I care about deeply. That makes it OK for me. What your chosen passion project is is up to

you. My only recommendation is you only have one or two of them that don't benefit you much.

To be clear, I am not talking about self-promotion here. I don't mean you volunteer to do something and the benefit is to drive traffic to your site because you are using your personal signature line instead of the chapter one you should be using. That is underhanded and professionally immature, don't do it. You may think it is OK, but others won't, and romance may seem like a big place, but as far as professional reputations it isn't. No matter what you get out of it, you MUST act ethically and fulfill your fiduciary duty to the best of your ability, first and foremost, or any service you give won't help you. Volunteering for a chapter ONLY to further your personal interests *instead of* fulfilling the special roles or jobs you are stepping up to do is against RWA ethics regulations, generally not cool, and won't earn you any respect in the RWA community for going about it that way.

Beware becoming a professional volunteer. I admit. I did it. When I first started I joined the biggest, and what I thought was the best chapter, within a two hour drive. There are five chapters in Seattle and two more along the Southern rim of the metro area. I chose the one that had a conference. I went to conference and began volunteering for the committee. Then I eventually ran for the board and was elected, not once but multiple times. Along the way, I found a chapter that actually had something to do with my writing that was really helpful so I joined that. I started teaching as I realized I had something to offer, but that was OK because it eventually meant some income. I also joined an online chapter because their thing was free classes every month to members and they had some *really good* classes. Classes I could not have afforded if I purchased them individually. My original chapter in Seattle also used to run a contest that I volunteered to help with. At one time, I was in five chapters along with nationals, I was on a board or a board liaison for all but one of the above mentioned chapters, and I was trying to interact with people from all of those chapters and network (which was the whole point, right?). I was well known, popular, and got lots of compliments on how great a job I did. Do you know what I didn't have? A production rate.

After seven years of experience on boards, volunteering, committees, etc. I now know I went the long way around. The information was invaluable, and the things I have learned have helped me immensely. However, I should have sat down and thought about what I wanted to begin with, instead of joining a bunch of chapters and offer my services where they were needed. *All chapters desperately need help if you ask them.* If you tell them you will volunteer if they need you, they will need you. I am not saying don't join chapters, and I am certainly not saying don't volunteer. I am saying take a good look at the chapter(s) you are thinking of joining and really consider how valuable their programming will be for you personally.

By programming, I mean what is their deal. What do they do well? All chapter boards know if they want members they have to "sell" the chapter. They have to offer something. Chapters are a business and for them to stay solvent they have to make

enough money to pay the national organization (yep, it's not free to be a chapter, your board pays chapter costs, event costs, and a fee to RWA for every person in the chapter every Spring as well). They also pay speakers, rent facilities, etc. Don't look at it as a group of gals who want to be your pals (which it is, but that's not all it is). You need to look at those commitments as a business decision and business alliances.

Two years ago, I had some pretty big life changes occur. I lost someone very close to me and it caused me to really consider what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. It was my watershed moment. I took the time to figure out what I wanted to do, where I wanted to be, and realized I was nowhere close to being on the track to getting there. I sat down and made a one year plan to exit all the chapters that I was in basically on a recreational basis. Anything I joined just to be there, I quit. It was hard, I liked being there, being involved, etc. However, my morning email literally had nineteen daily digests in it for me to clear every day. Now, I have three. I remained in the ones I get a quality product from my dues and time. I am a webmaster for one chapter and essentially, a lurker in the other. I volunteer for small jobs that have a definite beginning and end. I help admin or judge a contest here and there and I do the annual financial audits occasionally. Those are one shot deals that only take a few hours. I also schedule those one shot deals every fall for the coming year. I make sure I help the chapters I get something from, but don't overdo it.

The other thing you have to know if you are going to volunteer is that you have to have an exit strategy. Since I am using this as a learning example I will tell you how I am doing that because once you have been in a chapter for a long time leaving is hard, really, really hard. First, I found and trained people to take over my committee and board duties for my large chapter that was two hours away. You need to understand going in, once you are in a job, you will likely be the one on tap to find the next person to do that job. Find them early, split the work, and encourage them to start looking for someone to hand off to, split the work *right from the start.*

Exiting my big chapter meant I gave up going to that conference because I couldn't afford it without all the chapter and committee discounts. However, at the time, I spent two to six hours a week helping just that chapter. I am not saying I didn't get anything out of those years or that affiliation. That is not the case at all, but I am at a point where I know I am going to self-publish and go through a small press for a few other things because they let me keep the largest share of my rights. Since I am not pitching, the conference and chapter were no longer giving me value for my time and money. I ENJOY going and seeing my friends, but that is not enough to justify the money and more importantly, the time I spent to go.

I toned down quite a bit, but I reallocated some of the time I was spending volunteering in person to my online chapter, so no drive time. The bottom line is I didn't just quit. I had to come to terms with how I could leave those chapters and still be on good terms with everyone, and not dessert my commitments or break my word (staying on good

terms with myself). I settled on a year long exit plan that allowed me to make it happen with a clean conscience.

Also, if all of this is hitting close to home then really pay attention to this next part. **Don't make volunteering for chapters or anything else *who you are.*** Don't confuse that part of your professional reputation for who you are as an author. It was time for me to go be an author in my own right, not rely on my great reputation being a volunteer got me because that only translates to a small number of sales. The marketing help is nice but you have to have saleable product for those contacts to actually help you. You should be willing to volunteer and help occasionally if it is something you are passionate about, and it is a good business decision for you to do so sometimes, but don't be guilted into it, and "because so and so said I should" is never a good reason.

When you consider chapters you need to consider the following.

Do they have a website? If not, move on. They can't help you promote you or organize events/contests/classes if they don't have an online presence. If the website hasn't been updated in a long time take a good look at what they offer. It may indicate they aren't well organized or don't have someone to do the work. Either way, if a reader or other author is looking for you through that organization affiliation, will they be able to find you? If not, again, move on.

Are they hard drivers? Meaning do they organize a lot of events, signings, a conference, and/or a contest? Do they have write-ins (in-person or online)? If you want to become really active and get a lot of support these chapters are great, but if you are already on your track and don't need that much pushing, maybe that isn't the best chapter for you. Busy chapters will always be looking for volunteers, they will always have something for you to do (sometimes it will be something you want, sometimes not). Decide how much time and money you want to spend. These chapters are often one stop shops for folks because they offer so much. They are often big and have lots of money. However, you may need this or that from a few small focused chapters, and not the smorgasbord of events from one of the big heavy hitter chapters.

If you are big into contests, don't take the bait and join a chapter to get a contest discount. That is one more set of loop messages, one more set of questions to answer, and one more set of emails to scan through even if you have no interest in being an active part of that chapter. That is why it is not good for you. It is not good for the chapter because if they have an election they can't close that election without a quorum which means you need to vote. If you aren't going to be involved enough to be knowledgeable enough to vote for what is best for that chapter then reconsider joining.

If you have a specific conference you really want to attend then joining the sponsoring chapter and volunteering to earn discounts is not a bad idea. A genre specific conference I attend each year has only cost me hotel the last two years because I built some major presentations and workshops specifically for that venue. However, I put a ton of hours

into earning those discounts. But since it was all about my genre, that was a solid business decision not just something I wanted to do for fun.

It may sound silly, but after all my experience and watching several other gals volunteer for conferences and running contests I have come up with some exchange rates for discounts to keep it in perspective. If you are volunteering to earn a discount on an annual cycle you are normally working for about $3 dollars of discount per hour of work plus what you are learning, so make it count. If you have expertise in something, you would be better served to write a class, submit and teach. It is not a sure thing, but if you are accepted your discount for teaching is normally $30-$50 per hour of instruction.

Some chapters put on classes, my favorite chapter is From the Heart Romance Writers. They teach a class every month all year long and ALL of those classes are free to members. Don't join a chapter to get a single class free. There are chapters that allow three, four or all the classes or all their classes for free or at deep discounts if you are a member. However, make sure you need the classes you are taking or they become a time suck too. Look around, normally the online chapters have the best offerings where this is concerned but not always, you have to check.

Check who the other members are. You will begin to notice that chapters that don't have much to offer don't have many bestsellers on their roster. You might also want to see if the chapter has a lot of people you would like to be friends with. Maybe you have the time to be the change you want to see in your local chapter and you and your friends want to make it better. You can do that, but I wouldn't suggest trying it for more than one chapter at a time.

Things to watch out for...

If there is drama in the chapter LEAVE or make plans to exit as soon as you can. Don't think about it, don't try to be the change the world needs, just leave. Professionally, you will (to a degree) be seen as cut from the same cloth as those you align yourself with, so do so with intent, thought and care. Some chapters are hotbeds of gossip, power mongering, and cattiness. If you get the feeling that is happening, don't walk, run from those chapters. There is nothing good for you personally or business wise in chapters like that. Remember, this is a business. You don't owe anyone anything and unless those people are going to directly increase your sales, give you joy, give you support, offer a class, conference or contest that makes you happy to be involved with, and helps you as an author, get rid of them. Is that a tall order? You bet it is. Being tough on chapters you are thinking of joining is how you keep from over extending yourself.

Watch for not enough participation. If chapters are constantly having issues filling jobs or the board then the chapter may not be that strong to begin with or there may be issues behind the scenes. Low numbers should not be deterrent by itself but it should clue you to look a bit more in depth before you cough up your dues.

Will they protect your data? Does the chapter have a strong board that is concerned with data privacy and do they take steps to protect your data? If you can't tell, ask. Ask what

they do with the chapter roster and with whom and where it is kept. Your information should be kept on secure RWA or chapter servers and maybe the treasurer and secretaries personal laptops but not scattered all over with everyone who volunteers for the chapter having access to your email, address, billing information (meaning they should bill via an official chapter website or via RWA), etc. Data breaches are costly and identity theft will take over your life, at least for a while. These are supposed to be professional organizations, don't let them slide on something that will make such a big impact on you if they slip up.

Make sure they have good programming, as in programming you need. For example, some chapters center on craft for all levels of writing, some center on published author needs, other focus on genre specific things (like the Beau Monde if you write Regency), others focus on self-publishing. Look around, take a little bit of time to ask around and see where you really need to be.

If you take a good look at your business plan/career path and go find chapters that support whatever that is you will find your chapter work much less daunting because you will have more in common with your chapter mates and be more engaged and excited about the programming.

Conferences

Conferences can be a time and money drain if you let them or go to something that is not really relevant to you, where you are as an author, and your plans. I have attended a great general conference the last six years and last year was my last year going. I write historicals as well as contemporary and a new historical conference popped up this year and it is about four hours away. I can't do both. So for me, the historical one will be more beneficial to me.

So when sizing up conferences what do you consider? After six years on a planning committee for the largest writers conference on the West coast here is my advice:

First, what do you need in your current position in your career path and is there something at conference that will help you? In other words, do YOU *need* to get from going? What are you getting out of it? If your only answer is networking and seeing your friends you can still go of course, but realize you are not going to further your career, you are going to a social engagement and for recreation. Decide if that particular conference has something to offer you. Look at the list of classes, what crosses this over from sketchy want to valuable need?

Do you have a book written? If you do or don't is not the issue. The thing is you will benefit from very different programming if you are just starting out than if you have a ten or fifty book backlist that is on half the shelves in the country. Look for master class add-ons. If you are going to a conference sometimes you can go a day early and pick up a three to eight hour master class dirt cheap. Just make sure it is something you need or can use.

Are you an author or a tourist? If you are going to a conference to really network and be a part of the community then consider volunteering in some <u>small way</u> to help the conference staff. Doing a little for the organization can get your name familiar and give you a little bit of a clue on what is going on, but keep enough time for you to do what you came to do (to include free time for things you hadn't planned on). Attend as many events as you can. Help make the conference a great experience for you and others. Volunteering is one of the best ways to meet people, especially if there is a hospitality function or the registration desk is looking for helpers. But if you jump in too far and head up a committee or something like that you may find you aren't able to do what is good for you.

Is it the best use of resources? Do you have the money? And the question of the day...do you have the time? As Nora Roberts said in her keynote at nationals a few years ago, make sure you are there to do business not just go. If you like to get your fix with other authors and it charges you up for another year of writing consider this as a good reason. Last year a few authors I am good friends with in my local area wanted to go to nationals, but really couldn't for various reasons. Money was tight, two of us were working on our debut novel, one of us was having health issues, one had family things that made going out of state for a few days impossible, but we wanted to be part of the industry and the fun.

We got together and rented a B&B out for the weekend. It was within an hour of all our houses. It was just a nicely appointed house where we could get food delivered on a quiet hill overlooking the Puget Sound her in Seattle. There were five of us, one for each room and one for the couch. We split the bill and it was less than $250 each for both nights, we went for a three day weekend. We all broke out from noon to four each day and drove home and took care of family stuff (well, three of us did, the other two were able to stay all day with phone check-ins). We came back and essentially had our own little conference. We bought some classes off RWA.com and listened to them as we all sat in the living room drinking wine and plotting/chatting and helping each other set up social media profiles and taught those who didn't know how to cross post material. Then we broke and went off for two and three hour writing sessions. We did it over nationals' week and on Saturday night (it happened to be a Saturday that year) streamed the RITA awards on the big TV. In the years since we have pitched in for some spendy master classes online. We had, and continue to have fun, recharge, made progress on our work, were part of the fun at nationals and were still close to home. We wrote, got recharged, met everyone's needs, and didn't break anyone's budget.

About once a quarter, me and two of my writing pals have a sleep over at one of our If you are into local chapters and need that kind of interaction find a chapter with people who are willing to do things like that. If you know what you need, you can organize day long write-ins, plot parties, National Novel Writing Month Teams, etc. Don't convince yourself that formal conferences are the only way to interact with other authors. Virtual meet ups and classrooms are an excellent way to do meet ups. All of these things are simply tools in your kit. What you have to decide is what you really need to do to help

you be successful. For me, it was cutting my involvement down to very little, resetting my life in many places, and focusing on my business, which meant tuning out the noise, stepping away, and writing.

Last word on conferences, if you are going to conference to pitch research the editors and agents taking pitches. I used to help an editor/agent chair run the pitch sessions. I admit it, I eavesdropped to see what people were doing right, and what they were doing that could use a little polish. The biggest thing I heard, every single year, as to why editors and agents weren't interested, is that the publisher they work for is not actively looking for that type of submissions. A little reading ahead of time can save you a lot of time, money, and effort. Take the hour to research who is coming and if it is not someone you would really want to work with then don't pitch, and don't base going on being able to pitch if they don't really fit the bill for you.

Conferences are great and I am certainly not telling you NOT to go. I am telling you to be careful, and make sure you go to the best one or cook up your own mini-conference among a few peers. What is best for you is the right answer.

Closing up

I want you to walk away from this class knowing it is OK to take some time and make a viable plan, you don't even have to call it a business plan if that makes you twitchy. Be stingy with your time, money and affiliations. Make sure they are giving you back something useful if you are putting in tons of time. There is no free lunch, not for you and not for your chapters or the events you go to.

Until next time...

Warm Regards,

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