

Lesson Seven - Focus, Drive and Fear

Good morning all!

Today we are going to talk about how viewing your tasks as smaller individual projects can do more than just help you organize your schedule and make progress on your books or status as an author. In each lesson, we have talked about staying focused and intelligently limiting your involvement to just what you need to further your business in all things writing. Today we are going to talk more about focus with short discussions on branding and marketing, and we are going to talk specifically about SWAG selection. Then we will talk about drive and avoiding fear of succeeding. We will close with a short note on workshops, classes, and additional training.

The Concept of You As A Business

One of the first things taking a project management approach allowed me to do was really get out of my slump of thinking I was just another wanna-be struggling writer who probably wouldn't succeed anyway. When I looked at it as a whole it was far too big, too hard, too much to hope for (being a writer, that is). I could not manage to convince myself I could do it, no matter how much I wanted to. I tried and failed and failed again.

I didn't fail because the writing was bad, I failed because it was always last on my list because I felt like I could never get there. So the time spent didn't feel like an investment in my future, it felt like time I was selfishly throwing my time away on a pipe dream when my family needed me...badly. I failed for a long time because being a mom and keeping house was something I knew I could do well so I always did that first. It was safe and known.

There were several things that contributed to that. The first was that my head wasn't in the right place to get what I wanted. A few years ago, if I had had an agent or editor ask to purchase some of my writing, I would have been terrified that I was making the wrong decision or that I was being taken advantage of. I stalled out and even though I had a complete manuscript, I submitted it a couple of times and turned down the offers I got.

I eventually figured out the first thing I had to do was get my mind into business mode. I couldn't seem to change my thinking for me personally, but if there was a business, that might help my family and that I could work for like my day job, I would be able to get behind that. So I opened that business. I had to realize that my writing was and is a business. Period. Opening a business isn't necessarily a big storefront, in reality it was a little bit of paperwork and a mindset. That's all. There is writing for joy then there is writing to make a living. For me personally, I can't invest the time in writing unless it gives me at least enough back to live on. Time wise, I do not have the luxury of being a hobby writer. That is a decision you need to make. Once I came to grips with that, I was able to make some bigger leaps to start meeting that end. It took me a long time to make that mental overhaul stick in all the right places, it wasn't easy.

One of the main things I had to come to grips with was if I didn't treat writing the *exact* same as my day job mentally, I would not do it. I began by pretending I was a big name author and I had my high end New York editor clamoring for my work and I had a big, successful back list so I no longer had anything to prove. It sounds silly, but I did that every night for about three months. By month four, when I sat down I felt like I mattered and I was creating quality work more often than not.

I kept doing that and I started judging contests. One, to get some experience critiquing and two, to see how others in my genre's writing looked (quality wise, not like plotlines or things like that). Some of it was amazing and made me feel like I didn't have a chance if these gals couldn't get published (it didn't matter that they hadn't even started submitting yet) I would never get there.

Side Note: If you don't know, many published authors enter contests with their unpubbed work for six months before they start shopping the manuscript. This is allowable in certain cases. They do this so they can put on their query letter that they finalled or won this or that contest. It is a marketing strategy to give that book an amazing query letter. They have a little patience, win a contest or two, and then they have this awesome perk for their query letter via a tangible credentials to submit.

Back to contest entries...The others that weren't so strong reminded me of my current and earlier work. As I got better, I continued to gauge the level of my work against the

entries I was judging. Sometimes, it gave my confidence a boost and the more I looked for issues in other people's work, the more problems I was able to find and correct in my own. So while I was doing these "extra" things, I was also networking, volunteering, and improving, as well as helping other writers. That helped me realize I could get where I wanted to be even if I had to lose some time to make some progress. Also, I was reading at least some entries that were better to far better than mine and IMHO every time you read something better than yours, you learn a little bit about how to improve your own craft. Again, we are talking general craft here, not plagiarism, that is not OK at all ever, not even a little bit.

Once I had done some judging and felt like I was getting good at it, the "business" mindset started to settle in. I realized that what I thought and felt like I was, is what I would become. I went to conferences and acted like I knew exactly what I was doing. Because I did, I had been volunteering for seven years, I had it down, even though I didn't feel like it. I found out the only one who wasn't on board with the knowledge all my hard work was earning me was me. Other people believed in me. I was convincing complete strangers that I was going to be an awesome writer someday by virtue of my confidence and how knowledgeable and professional I was. If they could believe in me, I should be able to do the same. I knew how much drive and desire I had for real, I should not be the last one to get on my own bandwagon but honestly, that is exactly what happened. That lesson took a long time to sink in, don't feel bad if it takes you a while as well.

Instead of making your tasks so large you are frightened or intimidated by them, break them down as we have discussed *as you discover them*. Pretend you are that famous writer or pretend you are a famous writer's assistant or a ghost writer. Most of us have no problems getting into a mind set to work when we are working for someone else. Try to trick yourself into feeling that way about your own work for a week or two and see if it makes a difference. For me, it was like many things, at first, I only got a glimpse of my working as hard at being a writer as I did at being a military analyst when I had been one. Then I was doing it more often and knocking out big chunks of to-do lists or I was burning through my daily list of small tasks in half an hour with all my social media done and ready to write in a little under an hour.

Then I was able to do it, just like getting a new job and finally settling in, I got it. I found the rhythm and lost that at loose ends feeling. I have a great work ethic. I don't know why it took me so long to decide I was worthy enough to invest my time and effort into writing like I did all the other "day jobs" I had held. Now, I consider writing my full time job besides being a mom, that will always come first. Back then, when I was finding my way, I considered it a part time job, twelve hours a week to start. I had to do some interesting mental gymnastics to convince myself it was just like any other job, but it worked.

A final part of the mental mind set I had to change was to stop giving away my work. I had to convince myself no one was doing me a favor when they read my work for free. Unless they were an editor, then yeah, read away, typically at my expense. I became an exceptional editor between my college writing classes and professional writing certificate, craft books, judging three to six contests a year with up to ten entries each (I was sick for a while and couldn't do much else) and working with my critique partner.

One of the toughest things I had to do was stop giving my time and writing away for free. Chances are you are either already a good writer or well on the way. Make sure your business mindset includes honoring how valuable and really special and unique your work is. Don't give it away for free, don't give your time away for free, if you do you lose that part of your mindset that allows you to not feel guilty when you are in the position to ask for money for your work. You can't negotiate a great contract, cover or deal if you don't feel like you *deserve* a good contract, cover or deal.

Branding

When you are looking long term, and trying to figure out your brand, the biggest thing to keep in mind is every branding and marketing decision you make is a business decision. In the last lesson, I talked about being personable without oversharing or getting too involved and personal. Keep your eye on the business aspect and you won't try to share everything in your life because you love your readers and want to have a soul bond with them because they love your work as much or more than you do. You won't have time to do that. When you are looking at branding it is easy to get confused, upset, and overwhelmed and to tune out. Don't. Slow down, calm down, think big picture and

start breaking it down. Then, once you slow the emotional roll, focus on something solid and specific that represents your work. Notice I didn't say represents you, you aren't representing you, you are representing the work and the author's persona of that work's creator, not you as a person. They are very different and should be for LOTS of reasons.

I have a dear friend of mine whose favorite saying is "I want to keep my options open so keep it broad". She is a lovely person and an excellent author, but her sales remain low on all fronts because you can't tell what she writes by looking at any of her media presence. Don't be cute, vague or cast a big wide net. If you have things you want to brand later you can add them in. To start, figure out the main big items you want to write, like which general genre you want to write in and start there.

Decide how many pen names you need (combine what you can and separate out the rest). The February 2014 RWR has an excellent article in it (sorry, no link) titled *Writing in Multiple Subgenres: A Guide for All Authors* by Maya Rodale.

She talks about genres and subgenres but the article gives some great advice on when to and not to consider pen names or more than one pen name. If you log onto your RWA.org, and look for their resources section, you will see the database of previously published RWR's. If you click on *Romance Writers Report* under the widget, you will see the past editions below the blog at the top of the page. It will look like half are missing. If you click on the file titles that say *Romance Writers Report Past Issues: (Insert Year) RWR* it will open and all the issues are there in PDF format which means you can download them and have them on your phone, tablet, kindle, nook, etc.

Sorry, back to branding, don't overwhelm yourself. Get a general idea of what you want and then go back to RWA (you pay a lot to be a part of RWA, are you using it?) and under the education tab scroll to the bottom where it says Conference Workshops from the last few years. There are a ton of branding workshops in there from some incredibly successful authors, just scroll through and find them. Pick a few (not a bunch). They will cost you one to a couple of bucks each. Take a week and listen to one a day as you are cleaning off your desk or paying bills or whatever semi-mindless task you can find. After a few classes branding will be demystified pretty well, all you will need to do is put some brain time into making decisions. Once you have some solid plans you can start.

Remember, S.M.A.R.T. goals; specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound.

The more small tasks you do, the more you will get the hang of it and the faster and easier it will be. Learning to make decisions, good ones, is just like anything else, it takes practice so start practicing with small easy things. If you aren't ready to make any decisions, keep researching until you are comfortable. The time will come when you are. You also always have the option of having a branding consult with a marketing firm. Those normally run \$150 to \$500 but can save you a ton of time and effort. It is up to you. Do what you can with what you have as long as you are doing something.

Marketing

When presenters used to talk about marketing I would glaze over after the first three to five minutes of their workshop. Even my two minute rule couldn't save me. This was the most horrible aspect of writing as far as I was concerned. The whole thing felt below me, like I was hassling my readers and like I was begging. Guess what, I sort of am.

However, we are all begging for someone to give our work a chance because we think we know how great it is (only the reader knows for sure how they like it). You are not begging for money, even if you are. It is OK to feel good about your work and want money from it. Don't let the trolls on the internet or your own self-doubt slow you down because money enters the picture. Be especially dismissive of anyone telling you your work should be free. It shouldn't.

To market effectively start slow. Start by checking out the marketing practices in your genre (that doesn't mean do them, just check them out), then look over the social media and websites of the people in your genre you love. Just limit your time before you start so you don't get lost in it. See what other people are doing, head back to rwa.org and order you up a few more classes and as you find things that fit your brand, things you want to do and things you think you can do, try them. You can go slow and do this all along as you are writing your book. The water where marketing is concerned isn't all that deep so don't be afraid to swim, just don't dive in head first without a little research. You will end up overwhelmed and stalled out due to lack of direction and too many options.

SWAG

A big part of marketing is SWAG, authors spend hours thinking about it, ordering it, making it, playing with it and then trying to give away all the stuff other authors gave them because it sucks. There is a trick to SWAG. First, you have to know what it is. SWAG consists of promotional items. SWAG is also an acronym. It could stand for any of the following depending on which industry you are in: Souvenirs, Wearables and Gifts, Sealed With A Gift or Stuff We All Get. OK, so that last one is a bit phony. However, you can burn a TON of time and money on SWAG if you aren't careful.

Before you order any SWAG or start thinking about what cutesy or cool things you are going to have made up for your next conference or signing, stop and go find a copy of Heidi Thorne's *SWAG: How to Choose and Use Promotional Products for Marketing Your Business*. It is a 132 page paperback that is worth its weight in gold. It is not specific to the literary industry. However, Heidi's Promotion with a Purpose approach is well thought out and wonderfully appropriate for authors. She has the background, education and specific experience that makes her well qualified to give the advice she does. She has chapters full of checklists and questions for you to consider so that your SWAG is something that will actually drive sales and not end up in another author's Facebook SWAG giveaway because they don't want to keep it.

I have been working conferences for the last six years as conference staff and watched our hotel haul out *full sized trash cans* full of cards, post cards, gee gaws and all sorts of things that went right into our goody bags, then right out of the bags (because the attendees and readers didn't care for it) and straight into the trash. Once conference was over, I started harvesting left overs for our chapter welcome packets from a writer's lounge where we set up for extra things. It killed me to watch so much time, effort and money get thrown out.

Poorly made, useless (as in doesn't have a specific function, which things like letter openers or post its do), and unoriginal SWAG isn't a complete waste by any means, but hundreds if not thousands of dollars' worth of stuff is wasted every conference and at every event I have been to. One of my chapters does booths at trade shows and what not as well and I see the same thing there. Make your time and money count, Thorne's book

is hands down the best resource I have seen for it. If you don't use her book read up a little bit on promotional materials, there is a lot of guidance out there. Make sure to look for it before you invest. Do not go for cute. Do not go for whatever your other pals are doing. *Go for something that puts your name in front of readers when they are thinking of buying a book.* Absolutely nothing else, your promotional items are for driving business, that's it. If your SWAG does not lead to a purchase or at least with the reader on your newsletter (newsletter, not following you on social media) then it is a COMPLETE waste of time and money, period. Approach it like a business, it's a tool, not a fun little thing you get to do. It's also a huge time suck to make your own, which I do but I am VERY careful about how many and what I make so that it makes sense.

Fear

This article is one of the best I have seen on fear. It combines several well-known concepts and many of these apply to writers (in general, not all of us) as if it was written specifically for us. Please take a moment to read it. <http://www.change-management-coach.com/fear-of-change.html>

When I was learning to put myself in the position of being a CEO and author, I discovered fear was my biggest enemy, not my schedule, my knowledge or lack thereof, or even my perception of how talented I was or wasn't.

Take a good look at the things in that article. If they apply, or are holding you back, you may need to work through them or come to some sort of agreement with yourself on how to handle the fear. I normally trick myself out of it to begin with then when it is manageable I find a long term solution (mental, physical, or sometimes both). I was so stalled out by it a few years ago that I now have not one, but three books ready to go because it took me that long to get brave enough to publish them.

How did I get over that fear? I didn't really, I am still getting over that fear. I made a big list of everything I thought I didn't know and that made me nervous or anxious and started ferreting out that information. For me, the unknown is always more likely to stall me out than knowing what something is, even if it is a big or involved task. I opened my business so I understood what went on behind the curtain as far as how to publish and release a book. I got an accountant to let me know what I needed to be doing business

wise. Ditto an attorney. I had to start teaching more classes to pay for all that but I got it done. The more parts of the process I shined a light on and figured out, the less afraid I become.

I paid for a professional developmental editor, copyeditor and proofer so that I knew my books were up to par (Ok, I am still doing this because it is expensive, but the books are in their hands, all I have left is fixing what they find). The more you break down the process and learn what lurks in yonder dark corners, the less hesitant you will be to get down to business and start knocking out bits here and there, and soon enough you will be confident, ready and only slightly terrified when it comes to publishing your book or letting it go for submission to that dream agent or publisher.

Not sure if your books are up to par and want to submit them to a big five publisher or small press? There is nothing saying you can't submit a manuscript to a freelance editor (if you can afford it) to look it over and help you polish that manuscript before you send it in that first time. If you approach it as a learning tool you should be fine. If you do that, you will need to continue to work on your craft so you don't need to do it every time or plan extra time and money into your production schedule if you want to continue. But if you haven't gotten that first MS out yet, use what is available to you to make it the best MS possible, build your confidence, and learn what mistakes you are making before you wrack up a ton of rejections.

You can do it, but you have to give yourself permission to formulate a plan and be brave. It isn't easy, don't think because a zillion other people have done it is *easy*. They call it a writing journey because we all travel a different road where writing is concerned. Take your time, do what you need to do, learn what you need to learn and then do your best. Consider what the alternative is. How bad would it get if you put your work out there and it does poorly? What's the worst that can happen? You won't sell a book? If you can't get it written you are already not selling books. Focus and get it written, whether it is your first or your tenth, finish the book, your choices increase exponentially once that is done.

The Continuing Education of a Writer

Before we wind down for the day I want to mention that time black hole of “keep reading and learning” that nearly every keynote I have ever heard manages to work into their speech somewhere. Plan your educational time very specifically with the same focus and fore thought you are giving the other aspects of your day. If it is reading a book in your current genre, that counts. If you are looking for classes have a list of topics you are specifically looking for. If you find something new and different be very picky and make sure it will actually help you. I know, I might be putting myself out of a job here. Any time I see a class I think would be cool, I have a mandatory three day waiting period to think about it unless it is short notice and I have to decide sooner. Because if you are like me, you want to take them ALL, and you simply can’t and still produce saleable product.

I could go out and take two classes a month, every month forever from RWA speakers. We have an incredible bunch of men and women sharing their knowledge and experience out there. I can’t just go trolling for a class here and there or I end up bogged down printing out five classes a day with no real chance of every reading most of them. I am learning not to monitor the RWR for things that are relevant to my writing, but to search genre specific blogs, YouTube and even Facebook Groups for my daily dose of enrichment. Don’t lock yourself into thinking you only have one or two options as far as continuing education goes. Block out a *little* time each day and find things you can do in that time.

Doing a little bit every day, even if it is reading a two page RWR article on the kindle app on your phone while you are waiting in line to go to the bathroom at the grocery store helps. The more you keep writing as a part of your daily grind, the more you will feel like writing is your job.

Closing

Thursday will be our final installment and we will have a post, a quick sum up, closing comments for the class, and a few days for questions. I hope you all had a peaceful and content

Warm Regards, Merien