

TAKE YOUR WEBSITE

TO THE NEXT LEVEL



Is your online home ready for visitors—say, editors, agents and your future fans? Tidy up your digital den with our blueprint for success.

BY KAREN M. RIDER

A professionally designed website is your business card to the world, one that should evolve with your writing career. Your website should make a dynamic presentation of the wares you have to offer—books, articles, or writing and editing services. Unlike a standard blog that aims to engage people in discussion, the purpose of a website is to *inform* people

about who you are and to *market* your writing efforts to your target audience: potential readers or clients, publishers, editors, or agents.

As such, your website should pay you back for the time and money you invested in it. It's easy to tell when that's not happening: No one is contacting you, buying from you or hiring you.

To take your website to the next level, where there's an engaged audience and a clickthrough rate that soars, you'll want to do four things: Make sure all the key essentials are in place, stock it with the best content, get a little tech savvy and maintain a strong buzz.

1 Double-check the basics.

Whether you're an unpublished writer building a platform, a seasoned freelancer, a self-published scribe or a mid-list author, your website has to meet your visitors' basic expectations.

"You'll want to hone the content so it has structure and provides visitors with compelling and current information," says Mark Hollis, president of Hollis Internet Marketing.

Visitors get that structure from the way information is organized, so your first step is to check that your website contains all the right pages:

- A home page with a welcome message
- A portfolio page presenting published fiction/nonfiction (or links to it)
- A reviews or testimonials page



End Your Writing Year Right

- An about page with short and long bios
- A contact page with your info or agent/publicist info
- An events page or calendar
- A services page informing visitors about what you do—copy-writing, editing, etc.
- A press page or FAQ page, as necessary.

After you have all the right pages, ensure the essentials are in place throughout your site:

- Use high-resolution author photos and book cover images.
- Use familiar menu names (“portfolio,” not “library”).
- Keep drop-down menus simple.
- Check that active links connect to the appropriate pages within your site.
- Avoid Flash and music intros that slow down page-load time.
- Make sure your site loads properly on all popular Internet browsers (Firefox, Internet Explorer, Chrome).

ers little-known details about an interviewee.

Karin Bilich, president of SmartAuthorSites.com, says unpublished authors seeking an agent should include video or audio clips of themselves to show that they know how to present themselves. Also, even if you’re not published, provide fun details, such as what inspired you to write a particular story—and no matter what you write, address visitors in your unique voice (not your favorite author’s), so that you stand out in your own way. Keep a link to your website on Facebook and Twitter, too—and record your social media fan and follower numbers, because they can come in handy when querying agents.

“Show you know how to market yourself, and you’re successfully doing it,” Bilich says.

Ultimately, the golden rule is that content is king—so make it good. Even the coolest features—videos, etc.—become hackneyed quickly on

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2 Sharpen the content.

Once the basics are good to go, you can focus on buffing up your content to engage readers.

“Authors can woo visitors by going beyond jacket copy to give readers a feel for what makes the author tick,” says Steve Bennett, founder of AuthorBytes. For instance, novelists can reveal secrets, illuminate character backstory or show images that inspired the setting for a book.

Freelancers can offer bonus material that didn’t appear in a published article but deepens a visitor’s experience of a subject. A “behind-the-interview” pop-up could give read-

ers little-known details about an interviewee.”

Stale content derails website traffic, reducing the number of repeat visits and potential sales. “To keep traffic moving to your site,” says Carol Fitzgerald, president of AuthorsOnTheWeb.com, “assess whether or not readers are getting *current* information and the calls to action necessary to encourage a presale order or to hire you for an assignment.”

This call to action, a “do this now” prompt that entices visitors to do X and to get Y from you in return, is



JUST STARTING OUT?

If you don’t yet have an author website, end your writing year right by starting one. Create a simple WordPress site in five steps at <http://bit.ly/pVrg4R>—or visit writersdigest.com/novdec-11 to learn the essentials of hiring a designer to create a professional site for you.

key. On your website, you won’t sell books, build a platform or get hired without it. Examples include “buy” links to purchase books; e-newsletter sign-ups; registration for exclusive content; and so on.

As for keeping content current, Fitzgerald advises writers to review material monthly and to time-release new additions. “Don’t give everything away at once,” she says. “Think about the timing of your message about a book release, an appearance or when a feature article will publish.”

Then, update accordingly. On your home page, designate an area that alerts visitors to new content within the site. Clean up your events calendar. (No events scheduled? Fill that space with a call to action: “Book Now for Spring.”) Visitors want to read fresh testimonials and reviews, check out recently published clips, and see recent photos.

3 Know SEO.

The technology that makes Internet search results more accurate evolves daily. Getting savvy to technical elements such as search engine optimization (SEO) and analytics can ensure your website has what it needs to get to the next level, and pull in the visitors you want: readers, editors, publishers and agents.

In a nutshell, search engines scan content on websites in response to queries typed into a search field. When keywords in the website code and text are a relevant match, that

site appears in the search results.

What makes for relevant keywords for writers? Depends on what you do. For novelists, relevant keywords could be your name, book titles, even character names. For freelancers, subjects you've written about will most likely be the terms a person surfing the Web will use.

So make a list of your keywords. Then, if you don't know how to tweak your own website code to put the keywords in, don't freak out: You can find tutorials online, and can learn more about this topic in resources such as Google's Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide (available for free at <http://bit.ly/d29DIe>) and the *Yahoo! Style Guide* (free articles are available at styleguide.yahoo.com). Moreover, website/blogging software such as WordPress has simple SEO plug-ins you can use, which will have a similar, though not quite as precise, effect.

Overall, writers unfamiliar with basic Web design may be better off hiring an experienced webmaster to optimize their website. But if you're up to the task, Hollis says one of the best ways to make sure search engines can find you is to place keywords in heading-level tags <h1> through <h6>. "Just as writers use headlines to indicate to readers the kind of information presented in an article, heading-level tags act as 'headlines' for search engines crawling through your Web copy."

For example, a freelance writer specializing in do-it-yourself grooming for specific dogs wants those breed names located in <h1> and <h2>, the top of the hierarchy. When someone searches "grooming poodles," websites with those keywords properly placed in HTML "headlines" will come up in the search results.

Regardless of whether you tweak

the tags yourself or have a pro do it, track your results by monitoring how many monthly page views you get, the number of people signing up for an offer, the sales of books or services—all part of what is called Web analytics. Analytics packages that track website performance range in both price (free to \$80 a month) and the quality of information they provide (one excellent free resource is Google Analytics—google.com/analytics).

Track your stats, then adjust your keywords accordingly ... and save the data.

Agents and publishers respond to statistics because numbers drive business. Showing your stats provides convincing evidence about the market for your work. An aspiring novelist who has detailed analytics in hand is able to say to an agent, "My website has averaged X unique visitors and Y repeat hits per month over the past four months. Visitors spend an average of Z minutes reading my content."

Book deals aside, no matter how many visitors you get, making your site a meaningful investment of your time and money is about more than simply pulling people in.

"Magic doesn't happen just because someone lands on your site," says Penny Sansevieri, president of Author Marketing Experts. "The trick is to convert 1 to 2 percent of your traffic into consumers by getting them to sign up for something: your blog, newsletter, coupon."

To keep traffic flowing so you can reach people with those crucial calls to action, you've got to maintain the buzz at your website.

4 Stay buzzed.

Be proactive: Building buzz begins with *you* actively promoting your website by talking it up and listing that link wherever your name appears,

from press releases to e-mail messages. To stay buzzed, you'll need to do a little online marketing—and, well, resist the urge to get completely lost in it!

Online marketing drives traffic to your website through publicity and promotion. Unlike SEO, any writer can easily do a fair amount of it herself. For starters, place a link to your website on *everything* you do online. Comment on blogs that align with the audience you want to reach. Trade links with other writers' websites (your link on their site, their link on yours). Share reviews of your books or write articles for digital magazines that link back to you. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter can provide link areas to keep your site humming with visitors ready to take action.

Once you start buzzing about your first novel or writing services or latest article, keep it up. "Never go dark," states M.J. Rose, novelist and founder of AuthorBuzz.

It's imperative to be consistent and to keep your audience engaged with compelling content that makes them want to come back for more. Sure, there'll be quiet times (like when you are actually working on your novel), but with a little strategic effort on your part, your website will make it to the next level—and take your writing career along with it. **WD**

Karen M. Rider has published nearly 200 articles for print and digital magazines on topics ranging from energy medicine to writer's block. She applied all she learned writing this article to her website, karenmrider.com, and is thrilled with the results.

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