Your Online Presence: Creating A Haven for the People You Want to Know

written by Holly
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By Holly Lisle

My older son was in the Air Force and on the way to Afghanistan when he went to my writing diary to check on a question I'd asked my readers for him.

He called me up after spending a few hours on the site, and the first words out of his mouth were "I just read your blog, and I didn't think there was anyplace on the internet like that."

I asked him what he meant.

"Everyone on your site is intelligent. Everyone writes in whole sentences and uses punctuation correctly and knows how to spell. They all talk about the subject you're talking about, and add interesting, relevant points – they're good at discussion.

"Even the people who disagree with you don't flame. They bring up good points and they do their best to support them, and they're polite. It's amazing. I didn't think there there was anyplace like this on the internet.

"Where did you FIND these people?"

Well, first I grinned, because he'd spotted something I've been working hard at for years—getting the people I want to talk to on my site, and keeping the ones I don't want to talk to away.

Then I told him I set up my site to attract only people I want to reach.

If you've enjoyed my novels, the conversations on the writing diary, the articles I've written on the website, the various writing courses I've created, my writing tips newsletter, or any of the other things on my site, the odds are high that you're exactly the person I want on my site…and you fall pretty closely in line with one of these two descriptions.

IF YOU'RE A READER

You read regularly, and a lot. You recommend books you like to friends. You read reviews that enthusiastically recommend new work and select new authors based on such reviews, and you tend to ignore and discount reviews by people who are clearly out to trash authors, and who pride themselves on being negative, or "hard reviewers."

When you read a review, in other words, you're not interested in seeing someone torn apart – you're looking for a way to find more books you'll like reading.

Most or all of the fiction you enjoy falls into the designation Romantic Fiction – stories that show the world and the characters who inhabit it not as they are, but as they could be, and should be, and emphasize individualism and the ability of the individual to right wrongs, to change outcomes, and to triumph over adversity.

You prefer fiction that contains plot, story, and pacing; in which the stakes are high and the price of failure will be high; that holds meaning beyond the pages of the book. You want something you can take with you when you've read the last page–something that offers you a way to understand your own life and the world around you.

You do not enjoy helpless main characters who are destroyed by

fate, you don’t care for work in which nothing happens, and you don’t like writing in which the point of the work is to destroy coherence (deconstruction) or to declare fiction pointless (metafiction). You understand that language exists only to communicate, and that writing that does not communicate clearly is not “deep.” It’s garbage.

You may not fit all of these criteria, but the longer you stay on my site, and the more often you return, the better the odds that you fit most of them.

IF YOU’RE A WRITER

You love to put words on the page. You do it pretty regularly – or you want to. Your objective is to create stories people will like to read, and you work hard learning how to do that.

You’re not interested in telling people you don’t know that you’re a writer, you have never gone to a party and introduced yourself as a writer to non-writers and then talked about your writer’s block and how you’re suffering for your art.

You don’t think you’ll find inspiration for your fiction in the bottom of a bottle or at the tip of a syringe, you don’t think killing yourself at forty is the perfect punctuation mark to a perfect career.

You don’t own an entire wardrobe of black turtlenecks, and you don’t own either a smoking jacket or a corduroy jacket with elbow patches (or if you do, this isn’t because you want to “look like a writer”).

You know that writing – and writing well – is hard work, and you’re okay with that. You like to write, and you like to work.

You don’t publicly and elaborately trash individual writers or their works, dissecting them and what they’ve written for the sheer joy of making them bleed. You do not own, nor do you

frequent, online sites that do. You don’t take pleasure watching the destruction of others any more than you would enjoy watching yourself being destroyed.

You acknowledge that not everything written is to your taste, but that writing is a helluva lot of hard work, and you respect the effort other writers have put into their books, even if you don’t like what they’ve done. While you are clear about the kinds of writing you respect and don’t respect, you leave individuals and individual works out of your line of fire.

If you must dissect a work you don’t like, you do it privately to teach yourself or others why it doesn’t work.

You read heavily in fiction and nonfiction, and across genres and fields. You take well-earned pride in your ability to communicate clearly, your ability to use your language well, and in your ability to discuss issues from a researched, knowledgeable perspective. You bring the same care to your personal communications that you do to writing fiction.

You have and cultivate other skills besides writing, and you use these in your work to lend it verisimilitude.

You are, in other words, someone who wants to write and write well, not someone who wants to have written, or to pretend to have written. You’re not interested in scamming readers, in writing work you don’t respect for people you don’t like, or in writing work you know is crap and trying to pass it off as clever or cutting-edge or ‘too deep for ordinary people to understand.’ You know perfectly well that the definition of good writing is that it communicates clearly.

You may not fit all of these characteristics, but the longer you stay on this site, and the more times you return, the more likely you are to fit most of them.

These are the descriptions of the people for whom I created my

site, and for whom I write my novels and my courses. These are the description of people I enjoy spending time with, whom I seek out, whom I appreciate.

SO HOW DID I FIND YOU?

And how can you use my techniques to bring the people you want to talk to and get to know to your website, and to keep them there?

You focus on your people, not on your site.

If you don't understand clearly who you want coming to your site and why you want them to come, don't waste your time creating a site. Sites exist to serve people, not the other way around. NO ONE is going seek out your website so you can promote yourself. Unknown writers who create a website that's a vanity page for the books they've written are wasting their time and their money. No one CARES.

My Instructions: How To Promote Yourself Online

If you want people you can enjoy and like – people worth the time and effort it takes to create and maintain a site – to find you, follow the instructions below.

Be what you value.

In every word you write on every page you create, be exactly the sort of person you want to meet.

If you want to create a hangout for sharks, build a site where you rip apart other people and their work, gossip about people who are in trouble, either by their own doing or through no fault of their own. Write lots of negative reviews. Seek out

articles on the web that you disagree with, link to them, and then attack the writer as well as the article. Feel free to misinterpret what was said, feel free to change meaning to suit your purpose, feel free to take quotes out of context. Declare that you're doing all of this as a public service.

Then sit back and wait while the site fills up with people who are exactly like you as you've presented yourself. And good luck with that. When there's blood in the water, sharks will eat their own.

If, on the other hand, you value light and laughter and creation, intelligence and competence, people who do and create rather than people who resent those who do and create, avoid **everything** listed above.

Do things. Create things. Don't be afraid to be funny, don't think the people who actually matter to you will dismiss you as a lightweight if you aren't weighed down by your own importance.

Be honest about who you are. Show your mistakes as well as your successes.

Offer people what you value. Give them good conversation, interesting debates, help in creating the sorts of materials that matter to both of you.

Understand that not everyone is in a position to buy things from you right now, and that you'll still like the people who find you, even if they don't add to your bottom line. Create for those who are flat broke as well as those who are comfortably well off.

Ask for input.

Ask people how they found you, what they like, what they need.

If you're adding articles, ask folks who read your newsletter

to tell you what they need to know more about. Read your email and look for article ideas. (How I came up with this post, actually – recently I've had a rash of e-mails requesting information on self-promotion. This is the response to those e-mails.)

If you're creating products, give your readers questionnaires that let them tell you exactly the problems they're having so you can show them how to fix them.

If you're writing novels, this is tougher. You must write what you love, and the people who find you through your work will come in loving what you write.

You don't EVER build your fiction around the sort of reader input that would dictate your stories, your content, your characters, or your meaning. Fiction is best when it is the vision of one individual, not when it is some sort of weird collective design-by-committee atrocity.

You can, however ask your readers which characters they loved most, which worlds they'd like to read more about, which story was their favorite, and you can create the stories that matter to you in the worlds that matter to them.

Either way, when you create what your site visitors have asked for, either contact them personally or via newsletter or social media to let them know you've answered their request

Don't think you have to answer every question, or create content for every need. Answer only the needs that are in line with your own philosophy. If you have a lot of people requesting a "Flames" board in your community or asking you to add a **Don't Read** segment to your book review column along with your **Books I Recommend**, and you don't want this sort of content on your site, feel free to ignore the requests. If necessary, remove the requesters.

Create auto-segmenting content

That's a technical term for **'find ways to offend people you know you won't like or don't want to help in order to get them off your site'** – what it means is that you want to include on your site articles, posts, and other content that will encourage the people you want to stay and keep coming back, and that will encourage the people you don't want to go away.

If this seems cruel or unkind to you, consider that people who are working counter to everything you value require more of your time than those who share your values. They will clutter your site with flames and hostility, spam you with endless e-mails telling you why you're wrong and why they're right, mistreat the people on your site that you like, and in all other ways make your life miserable and make you wish they were gone.

So get rid of as many of them as you can BEFORE you have to deal with them.

Do this simply by being honest and by being yourself – by creating content not just about what you love, but about what you find despicable and **why you find it that way**.

Do I have articles like this on my site? You bet.

How To Write Suckitudinous Fiction is a good example, though there are a lot of others. This article is designed to do two things – to show serious writers how to write good fiction (while being funny about it), and to mock writers and readers who value garbage fiction.

It includes (in the inverse) a detailed brief on the most important steps you must take if you want to write fiction worth reading. But it **is** designed in the inverse – that is, as an article ostensibly on how to do something for which I have NO respect – because when I wrote it, I wanted to piss off

exactly the sort of writers I don't like and don't want to deal with. That article tells them who I am, what I value, and that whatever **they** came to the site looking for, they aren't going to find it here.

It is an article as much about two philosophies of writing as it is about the technical details of writing, and most people who hate my philosophy read it and go away. The rest write me nasty, argumentative e-mails, which I delete.

I feel no obligation whatsoever to help people who hate what I do. Neither should you.

Test your content and gauge your results

There was a little quiz on the bottom of my front page for a long time.

It asked: **Are you more likely to read a story where the hero is the most compelling character, or where the villain is?**

I was interested in the results, not because I have any intention of changing the way I create heroes and villains, but because I wanted to know what percentage of people who found my site were the people I **wanted** to find it.

Here's how to read the results as I read them:

I want both the hero and the villain to be amazing and **I want to read about a strong hero** are my solid YES responses. These are folks who have found a site where they'll find something they'll like. That's 83.4%. I'm very happy with that.

I want to read about a strong villain is a bit more ambiguous. This response includes folks who want to have the bejeezus scared out of them, but still want the good guys to win… but it also includes those who revel in the destruction villains

create and want to see the villains triumph. So 10.8% of this particular quiz came back inconclusive.

I only read stories that are morally ambiguous is my dead canary down the mineshaft. These are the folks I DON'T want sticking around my site. They're the ones who prefer fiction than stands for everything I hate, who require that fiction make no moral judgement on the actions of its characters because **they're looking for fiction that excuses the worst in themselves**, and they don't want to be judged.

People who read fiction that makes strong distinctions between what is good and what is evil are NOT looking for ways to excuse their own behavior, and they're not reading fiction to see depraved characters wallow in their corruption and have the fiction declare these crapbags ordinary folks. They have no need to look at something disgusting and say "everybody does it." They know everybody doesn't, because they don't.

People who read moral fiction (again, fiction that clearly distinguishes between good and evil, not preachy fiction) are people willing to be held accountable for their own actions, people who are not afraid to see a reflection of themselves in the fiction they read and come off badly in the comparison.

These are the people I want to work with. Not people looking to see just how much they can get away with, or trying to convince themselves that everyone does evil things, so they can do them too, and they'll still be just a good as anyone.

5.7% of the folks who responded to that particular quiz are folks who don't belong here. Considering the vast numbers of folks out there who actually DO prefer morally ambiguous fiction (the sort I decry in **How To Write Suckitudinous Fiction**), I'd say my auto-segmenting is working pretty well.

So now you may be wondering – are all my quizzes attempts to figure out the philosophies of the folks reading my site?

No.

Most of the time, I'm looking for input on some new cool thing to make, because making cool things is what I enjoy most. Sometimes, though, I want to make sure I'm making them for folks who will appreciate them and get some good out of them.

So those are the steps. If you follow them, you'll discover that the people who find your site and stay are people who love what you love, folks you'll be happy to meet and talk to.

But where's the part about self-promotion?

That's it. This IS self-promotion. Using social media, twittering, pitching your novels, flogging your newsletter – all of that is just means to the following simple end:

You invite the people who matter to you to your site by creating things they'll value, and you take necessary steps to keep out the riff-raff so folks you value will enjoy spending time on your site.

Finally, I've worked hard to find **you** out of all the people on the internet, and I'm glad you're here. Thank you for coming to talk to me.

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