

# The big sell

Not everyone finds success using social media. Can you?

**F**or writers, trying to balance writing time with Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and blogs can be challenging. Many writers feel overwhelmed and want to spend their time writing, not tweeting. But then the importance of being involved in social media is touted by industry experts, and many writers believe they should be visible on every social media platform.

Does social media really help authors sell more books? Is it worth

investing valuable writing time to increase your number of friends and followers? Understanding the facts of the field and making informed decisions about the role social media plays in your writing life can help you determine which approach – if any – will work for you.

In 2011, Romance Writers of America surveyed 1,300 romance readers and found that social media had little impact on their decision to buy. Only 6 percent of respondents

said they followed an author on Twitter, 13 percent followed an author on Facebook and 16 percent read an author's blog.

In 2013, the data management company Bowker published the *U.S. Book Consumer Demographics and Buying Behaviors Annual Review*. The company surveyed nearly 6,000 consumers to determine the factors influencing their book purchases. For print books, the number one influencer was an in-store display, fol-



lowed by a personal recommendation from a friend or relative. For e-books, a personal recommendation was number one, and reading an excerpt online was second. Being influenced by an author's Facebook post or tweet was nowhere on the list.

What do those in the industry say about the importance of social media? Opinions are mixed.

Caroline Casey, marketing and sales director for Coffeehouse Press, says a strong social media presence doesn't necessarily translate into sales, any more than great reviews do. The kind of presence an author has is more important than the number of followers. "If you make everyone feel like your best friend, then yes, they're likely to want to buy your book," Casey says. "Being funny or informative doesn't correlate to book sales, even if people follow you."

When a book resonates with readers, they want to connect with the author, and social media allows for this. Casey Peterson, publishing assistant at Graywolf Press, isn't sure if she has seen a direct influence of sales because of an author's presence on social media, but it does help with promotion. "When we follow an author we like, we are able to feel like we're in on their lives, their jokes and their complaints," she says. "We feel closer to that author, which in turn makes us want to support them."

Lara Perkins, associate agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency, agrees. "In an increasingly connected world, readers want to be able to reach out and engage with their favorite authors and illustrators," Perkins says. "Being available to your readers in some way online is increasingly expected, not just by publishers, but by readers, librarians, booksellers, etc. It's a great way to build a community, and it can be fun."

Best-selling author Janet Evanovich has been in the business for two decades. By the time social media became big, her books were already

popular. While she says she can't scientifically quantify sales through social media, she thinks it is an essential tool for authors. "When I look at Facebook and see how many readers are talking to each other about the books, I think it has to be a positive factor with regard to sales," she says. "Every day I see posts from longtime readers in conversation with readers who've just picked up one of my books for the first time. The 'old timers' are constantly making title recommendations to the 'newbies.' It's very

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**—Lara Perkins, Andrea Brown Literary Agency**

gratifying. The bottom line is that social media has really worked well for me."

Gordon Warnock, a founding partner at Foreword Literary, says social media is important, but needs to be used correctly. "You have to target and interact with your desired audience, and you have to offer them something that they value. Otherwise, they won't care. Simply putting in more time won't result in more sales. It's a matter of quality."

Peterson believes that social media is only effective if the author is comfortable with it and adept at using the application. "The biggest waste of time is asking an author who does not want to be on Facebook to start cultivating a persona there," she says. "People can tell

when you're just shilling your book, and that doesn't help sales."

Lisa Graziano, managing editor for Leapfrog Press, mirrors Casey's view. For her, it is not social media that is important, but the author's contacts. "We have middle-aged and older authors who don't have web pages or Facebook pages," she says. "It's not useful for them to start either."

The Leapfrog Press authors who do book events, who know people in the world of reviewers, who can get signings and readings in different venues, are the most successful for them, she says.

A strong social media presence by an author isn't necessary to achieve success. The most successful authors at Coffee House, Peterson says, have nearly zero social media presence. They are successful because of their books and the support of reviewers and booksellers. The strong social media push comes from their readers who talk about them on Twitter and Facebook.

So, with limited writing time, where do agents want their clients focusing their energy? "I want my clients spending time where they are most effective, which includes several forms of writing, research and promotion," Warnock said. "Some books, and some writers, are naturally better fit for certain outlets."

For Perkins, it is writing, no question: "Social media marketing is only effective in the long term if the product – your book – is as strong as possible. Social media can be useful in bringing readers to your book, but good reviews, good word of mouth and repeat customers only come from a quality product. Writing a really good book is still the best use of your time as a writer."

Time is a valuable commodity. Playing to strengths and finding the right balance between writing and social media will inevitably lead writers in the right direction. **W**

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