Increasing Your Online Presence: Helping Audiences Find You through Internet Searches, Social Media, and Your Website

Presenter: Karlene Browning

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Karlene Browning: Hi! I'm Karlene Browning, a.k.a. InkSplasher. I've been in the publishing industry my entire adult life, and one of my favorite things to do is helping authors create a coherent online presence—making them easy for their readers to find. So let's get started.

Welcome to "Increasing Your Online Presence." Although this is focused specifically on authors, the principles apply to all artists and creators. This is a big-picture class: a forty-minute overview where we will look at the basics of an author's online presence from a reader's perspective.

We'll briefly cover author identity, websites, newsletters, author profiles on other sites, and social media. Don't worry about taking notes; just watch to get a feel for the topic. At the end of this class I'll tell you how to get free access to the extended version of this course.

I've worked in the publishing industry for my entire adult life, but I feel I am uniquely qualified to teach this class because of my website: storytellersinzion.com.

In 2007, I started offering free spotlight posts and promotional opportunities for new fiction releases by members of my faith. In a perfect world, authors would contact ME and give me the information I needed for their spotlight. But it's not a perfect world, and I spend a lot of time hunting down these authors and their books.

Often, I can't find the authors anywhere online. But in the years of attempting to track them down and verify that they are members of my faith, I have become a googling expert. And when I say "expert," what I really mean is googling is my superpower.

If there's one thing I want you to take away from this class it's this: It's not your reader's job to find you. It's your job to be where your readers are. Memorize this.

So where are your readers? A huge chunk of them are on the internet.

And where do your readers buy books? Again, a lot of them buy from online resellers like Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Apple books. Most brick and mortar bookstores also have an online presence now where readers can order books online.

Where do your readers learn about new releases or get good book recommendations? Again, a lot are online, looking at book reviews and blogs or following avid readers on social media. Others are subscribing to newsletters from their favorite authors, so they never miss a new release.

Your readers are on the internet. So that means YOU need to be there too. That's what we call an online presence: it's where you show up on the internet and the message that you put out for your readers.

My goal is to help you be where your readers are. To do that, you need to address their top four questions.

Question One: Who are you? What is your name? What do you look like? And what is your personality like? Question Two: Where are you? Do you have a website? Do you interact on social media? How can I, as a reader, discover you? Question Three: What do you write? What's your genre, your writing style? What books have you published? And Question Four: Where can I get your books? Are your books in the format I prefer and at the places I like to shop? Make it easy for me to buy your stuff.

The key to a solid online presence is giving consistent answers to these four questions everywhere you interact as an online author.

Let's look deeper at Question One: Who are you? When someone is trying to find you, they usually have a starting point: the title of your book or your name. Readers can google this information and hopefully find you.

They want to confirm that you exist and to find your book. For this reason, you want to make all your online information consistent and easy to recognize, everywhere.

Let's start with your name. What is your name? It's the name printed on the front of your books. And it should be the same name on every single book you write, unless you're using a pen name for some reason.

Every time you vary your name, even a little bit, you lose traction with the readers who like you. They will look for additional books written by the name they are familiar with. If you varied your name, they may or may not be able to find you.

This may seem like a "well, duh" moment. But surprisingly, I find many authors use variations of their name on different books and all over the internet. This makes it very confusing to readers who want to follow you.

For example (and this is a true story, but the name and the genre has been changed to protect the guilty): Here's an author who decided she wanted to write inspirational women's fiction. When she published her first book, she was happily married. She used her married name as her author name: Mary Louise Smithson.

Nothing wrong with that. Except that a year later, she was divorced. She just couldn't bear that her divorced name was on her book.

So, since it was her first, it was easy to switch to her maiden name: Mary Louise Jones. Since she kept the same title and cover and the "Mary Louise" part of her name, most of her readers were able to make the connection between the two editions.

But then someone in Mary's critique group said "Mary Louise" made her sound too old to write compelling women's fiction.

Well, she couldn't have that. So for her second book, she dropped "Louise" and published as just Mary Jones. She lost all the readers who were googling for "Mary Louise Jones." Just before book number three came out, she discovered that two other authors were using "Mary Jones" on Amazon. And one of them published soft porn. Ah.

Mary added the "L." to avoid confusion. Readers who googled "Mary Jones" couldn't easily find her as Mary L. Jones.

A few years passed, and Mary remarried. She was so excited. She published the new book under the name Mary L. Jenkins. While she picked up some new readers with that name, no one made the connection between her previous books and this one.

Then Mary wrote a thriller. Even though it would probably cross over with her fans just fine, her critique group again convinced her that men would not read a thriller written by a woman.

So, she published book number five as M.J. Jenkins to hide her gender. At this point, readers are wondering, Who is this author? Nobody knows.

Along with consistency, you need a unique name. You may have your heart set on using your own real legal name, but if you have a common name that's already used on Amazon or brings up celebrities when you google it, that may not be the best option for you.

If a reader enters your name in a Google search, and you don't show up on the first page, very few will continue looking.

If you can't compete with others already established on the internet, consider changing your name in some way.

You want your name to be unique enough to stand out from the crowd. But if it's too unique, that can sometimes be a problem as well. Yes, fans will figure out how to spell your name eventually, but if it's easier to spell and remember, that's a plus.

You want a name you can use everywhere online. If you're not set up online yet, make a list of name variations, and google them. Find one that doesn't already have a bazillion hits.

Your author name is very important. So let's walk through this process. I like to make a list of at least 10 possible names or variations that I'd be comfortable using.

Let's say you've decided on an author name, for example, "Mary L. Jones." Now you need to check and make sure that name is available everywhere you want to use it.

Step One: Check Amazon first. If there's an author already using the name you've picked, they will be on Amazon. If there's already a "Mary L. Jones," don't use it. Even if your genres aren't the same, it's not worth confusing your readers.

Change it slightly. Use a different middle initial. Or change "Mary" to a variation like "Marian" or "Mara." Or pick something altogether different from your name, like "Tabitha M. Zelinski." We're going to assume no one is using "Mary L. Jones." So Step Two is: google the URL.

And google it as www.maryljones.com. This is the second most important place to look after Amazon. If the URL is taken, again, consider changing your name.

You can add "author" or "books" to the URL. But that can confuse readers if they google you, and a dozen Mary L. Joneses come up.

If you vary the name at this step, go back and recheck Amazon before buying the URL.

Step Three: If the domain is free, and no one else is writing under that name, check the main places you'll be interacting online, like Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other social media sites you think you'll be using.

There's a little more leeway here, but you want your social media account name to be as close to your author name as possible. If you have to create variations by adding "author" or "books" to your name, social media is the place to do it.

You'll link to your email and social media accounts from your website, so readers can find you. But it's still better if you can use the one name. Readers will search for you under your official author name. So make sure, at least, that that full name is included.

A comment about Gmail: yes, you do want a Google account with the accompanying Gmail address. There are things in good website setup that may require that Google account, like, for example, Google Analytics.

To be clear, What is your name? The name on the front of every book is Mary L. Jones. Your domain is www.maryljones.com.

Your email addresses are mary@maryljones.com and maryljones@gmail.com. Your Facebook author page: facebook.com/maryljones. Your Twitter name: @maryljones. Instagram: MaryLJones. And author profiles on Amazon, Goodreads, BookBub, and other places: Mary L. Jones.

It may seem like I'm hammering this to death, but I do so because there are so many authors using different variations of their names in all these places.

And it's almost always impossible to track back and connect them and make sure that you're at the right account or the right website for the author that you really want to find.

Even for someone with googling superpowers, it's difficult.

If you're a new author, it's much easier to do this at the start. If you're an existing author, and your name is varied everywhere, see if you can clean it up as much as possible.

Along with your name, readers like to know what you look like. A photo makes you real to them, which is a connection you want. You do need a professional headshot. But that doesn't mean you have to pay a lot.

Mine were taken by an 18-year-old. Some authors use photos taken by spouses or friends. As long as the photo is clear and shows you at your best, you're good. You can always network with authors in your area for photographer recommendations.

Selfies are a no-no, especially silly ones. Now you can smile in your photo or not. You can be friendly or serious. Or if you write horror, maybe you can look a little scary. But remember, this is your author identity. Do it right.

Once you've picked your headshot, use it everywhere for visual continuity. When you use the same photo everywhere, your readers will clearly know when they found you online. This is especially helpful if your name is similar to another author.

Absolutely use the headshot from your book on your website, on Amazon, and Goodreads, and any site where your books are sold. If you change your headshot on new books, update it everywhere else at the same time.

Your social media profile images can be a little different pose. But I recommend using images from the same photoshoot, where you have the same hairstyle and are wearing the same outfit.

The more often you use the same, or very similar image, the more immediately identifiable you will be to your fans.

It also helps if your headshot actually looks like you. Update your photo every few years or so. Because if a reader expects to meet "this author" at a book signing . . . And they end up meeting "her," even if you're a lovely older woman, it's still a little disturbing.

But what if you're really shy? Or you just don't want your photo online? Get creative. I've seen authors use cartoon sketches or logos.

C.J. Cherryh used this photo for years. Half her face was in shadow.

Jaclyn M. Hawkes uses the photo on the right because she writes under a pen name, and she wants a protective layer of anonymity. The point is, use the same image everywhere. And if you change it, change it everywhere.

Now that we know who you are, the next question is, Where are you? On the internet, obviously. But specifically, you need to exist online, at a website, in a newsletter . . . At online resellers, and on at least a few social media platforms.

You need a website. You need a base of operations. The bare minimum is a website or blog. No, a Facebook page is not adequate, neither is Google Plus or Twitter or any other social media site. Social media sites come and go. People leave, policies change. It's just too volatile to serve as home base.

Also, social media posts have a short half-life. They hit the newsfeed, then disappear. If your reader is not on the site when you post, chances are they won't see your information.

A website is a permanent place with a corresponding URL address where readers can always find you and your books.

A website is the first place readers look when they want to know more—more about you or your books.

You have control over everything on the site. The look, the feel, how you interact with visitors, and when news and information is dispensed.

Your site must be fully responsive and mobile friendly. "Responsive" means it resizes and rearranges the elements of the website to fit the screen size your visitor is using. This isn't shrink-to-fit. It actually converts your design. How important is this? I do a lot of website browsing from my phone at night. And honestly, when I click a link and get something like this (a nonresponsive site that is just shrunk-to-fit), I'm out of there in two seconds. There is just no information important enough for me to try to read that teensy-weensy type on my phone.

Because your website is also your biggest promotional tool, you want to make sure your most important information gets the prominence it deserves: Front page, up top.

A clean design using slightly larger text sizes in a sans serif font and with plenty of white space is easier to read and more appealing. A cluttered site with small type, long box of text or too many blinky, slidey things can be overwhelming.

On your website, you need a homepage with a visually attractive header and clear and easy-to-find top menu navigation. You also really need a search field.

It's your choice on a static or blog style homepage. Styles come and go. Right now, a scroll down static homepage with all the basics on it is popular. The key is to make sure the important things are easy to find.

Before we defined what the important things are, let's talk about basic website systems. With most website builders, there are two main ways to add information to your site: posts and pages.

When and how to use these is a course all by itself, but we need a basic understanding before moving on.

Posts are used for traditional blogging. Content can be timely or evergreen, but it is usually less critical than the information on pages.

Individual posts are ordered by date, with the newest post showing at the top of the column.

Because posts are ordered by date and there are generally many more posts than pages, to find a specific post, you need to scroll or use a search field.

Pages contain important information that visitors might want to find quickly. The content of a page doesn't usually change much over time.

Pages are usually accessed through your top menu bar navigation, represented by the green stripe here.

You can build your menu however you want. So it doesn't matter when you add a page. It will stay in the menu right where you put it until you change it.

Because the pages are available through a menu link, they are very easy to find today, and let's look at the important stuff that belongs on a page. There are a few must-have pages: an About Page with information about you; a Books Page with information about your books and where to buy them; a Contact Page with a way to contact you; and an Events Page with dates and locations of personal appearances.

Optional pages include (but are not limited to) a blog, which is really a collection of posts, but it's accessed from the menu; a media kit with information and images about you and your books; a Coming Soon Page featuring your work in progress; and a FAQs Page, if you want one.

All of these are covered in the longer course you will have access to after this class. There are also several other items you could include. Look around at some other author sites and see what you like.

Associated with a website is the newsletter. Do you really need a newsletter? The answer is, Yes! This is the only reliable way to make contact with your readers. A reader might see your posts on social media, but they're more likely to see it when it's delivered to their inbox.

And remember, newsletter subscribers have identified themselves as your fans. They are self-selected as interested in your books.

Many newsletter services have a free option. I've used MailChimp, MailerLite, and SendInBlue. Ask your author friends what they recommend.

Newsletter content can vary from genre to genre. But mostly, your readers want to know about YOUR books, especially new ones or if one is on sale.

They also want to know about books by other authors in the same genre, recommended by you. And, cool facts about your world or your writing process.

I believe you should only send out emails when you have something of value to say. Some authors email weekly, and if they release frequently, that's fine. For most authors though, a monthly or quarterly email is adequate.

For your email subscription, create a reader magnet—something to encourage readers to subscribe. It must be compelling enough to overcome their fear of being spammed by you.

I like the free novella, available only to subscribers. It gives the subscriber a sample of your writing, and hopefully, leaves them wanting more.

You also need to create author profiles, anywhere you can online. An author profile is like a mini website at a booth or a booth at a fair. It's a place where people come prepared to spend their money. Amazon and Goodreads are the two best places. Get those profiles set up as soon as possible, like tomorrow.

Set up your profile using the same photo and bio from your website. Always include your web address in the profile. Claim your books on the site. Add any that are missing.

Social media is another place readers look for authors online. So you need to be there. Why? Well, think of social media as a barbecue without the food.

These are places to be social, to interact with readers and potential readers. You want your personality to shine through. And you also want to make sure you keep things light and positive.

There are a bazillion social media sites out there, but don't let that overwhelm you. No one expects you to be on all of them. Look at a few of the more popular platforms, and find one or two that you enjoy.

Each social media platform has its own set of best practices. They prefer certain image sizes and word count. Once you've decided on the platforms you'll use, learn how to use them correctly.

Like a blog, consistency is important. Make a plan for frequency and content, and stick to it.

It's important to separate your personal accounts and profiles from your author accounts and profiles. It may not seem like a big deal at first, but I promise, there will come a time when you'll want to separate them. It's best to just start off that way.

Now you may recall, I mentioned there were four top reader questions. And we've only covered two. No, I didn't forget.

Question Three is, What do you write? If you set up your website using the information we've covered today, create your profiles on Amazon and Goodreads, and are active on at least one social media site, then your readers are going to know without a doubt what you write.

And guess what? Question Four, Where can I get it? That one's taking care of too, because you have a rock solid online presence that even a newbie googler can find. That means you're doing your job. You are right where your readers expect to find you.

And thus ends the quick overview of "Increasing Your Online Presence" course. Thanks for attending. I hope you found some nuggets to help you better connect with your readers. Give me just a second to close out of this and bring up the information on how to access the free course.

Before we get to the coupon, let's do a really quick online audit on two authors. Both of these authors have given me permission to use them as examples.

The first one writes under the name "The Purple Lady." I already know she's going to be difficult to find because that's not a name. It's a phrase. And so it's going to bring up lots of stuff.

Here's our Google hits for that name. Lots of purple ladies out there. A reader would need to click each of those links to see if it was the one they were looking for.

The correct "Purple Lady" didn't actually show up for me until the third page on Google. And most people won't look that far.

Let's add "author" to the end of her name. There she is, on page two. If I was a reader, I would probably click that. But let's see if we can find her in some other searches first.

I entered her name in the Amazon search, under "books." Oh, here's a book. But it's not hers. Let's try Goodreads now. She does show up at the top of this list. That's good. I clicked on that. Here's her book page, and she has a profile on Goodreads. So I clicked that too. A photo! I finally know what she looks like. That's great! And there's also a link to her website, her Twitter account, and to her book on Amazon.

But that's about as far as I can get with a basic search. And like I said, most people won't even try that hard. This author gave me a few links to find her online. So let's analyze those.

This is the Amazon link she sent me. What? She has two books! By searching alone, I never would have found that second book.

This is her website. Look at the URL: "I heart purple." I would never find that by googling her name, and I would never think to google that phrase to find her.

On this website, she blogs about various things. But it's not dedicated to her career as an author, and it doesn't spotlight her books. With a quick glance, I wouldn't know if this was her website or not.

She gave me the link to Facebook. It's good that she has an author page and is not just using her personal profile. But look at her profile image. I'm not sure I would connect this image with her Goodreads profile without a direct link to it.

Also look at her tag: "The Purple Lady." That's a fine tag. Just remember it for a second.

Here she is on Twitter. Notice the tag? It's not the same. While I might think to search for her tag on Facebook, "The Purple Lady," I would never think to search for this combination of shortened words with underscores throughout.

Also, in her name, the word "purple" has spaces between the letters. A quick search using "The Purple Lady" name or her Facebook tag doesn't bring up a Twitter account for her at all.

Also, her tweets are private. Same problem over on Instagram. Without a direct link, no one would find there either.

This author has a personal reason for these accounts to be private right now, and they will eventually be public again. But for now, I'd have to rate her online presence as low. There isn't a cohesive picture of her, and it's very difficult for anyone to find her online without direct links to each of those places.

Let's try another author: Heather B. Moore. Heather writes romance and women's fiction. When I googled, there she was, right at the top with a photo and the label "writer" right beneath her name. Before I even hit search, I'm pretty sure this is who I'm looking for.

In the sidebar, you see her photo and some romantic-looking book covers. That's got to be her, right? She's also at the very top of that Google page. This is exactly what you want people to see when they google your author name.

First: your author website. Second: your Amazon profile. Third: your Goodreads profile. If you scroll down this page far enough, you will also find a jewelry designer named Heather B. Moore, but that's okay because this one is clearly who you're looking for. So let's click that top link.

Yes! It goes straight to her website. There's her name and the image right at the top. Awesome! Clicking the second link brings us to her Amazon author profile. It's not just a list of books or one book—but her entire library of books. And the photo lets you know, this is the same person as on her website.

Link number three takes you to her Goodreads author profile. Same image. Also, she has links to her website, her Twitter account, and then below her bio, she lists a lot of her social media tags.

If we stay at that first link we clicked on Google (the one to her website), on her Contact Page, we find buttons that go straight to all of her social media accounts. So, we don't have to look for her.

But if we do, we can still find her. Heather uses a group on Facebook instead of a page. This makes it a little hard to tag her, but you can still find her there by typing "Heather B. Moore" in the search field.

Here she is on Twitter. Again, she's Heather B. Moore. That's her name, and her tag is "Heather B. Moore." On Instagram, her tag is "authorhbmoore," but her name just below it is, again, "Heather B. Moore." And it's okay that she uses that different tag here, because she writes historical fiction under the name "H.B. Moore." So if we googled "H.B. Moore," could we find her under that name too? Let's try. Oh, there she is.

Yep. No matter which name you use, you will find her on the first page of your Google search.

Because she's Heather B. Moore or H.B. Moore everywhere online, and because she's got author profiles and images everywhere, any reader looking for her (regardless of which name they google) is going to find her. Now, let's go get that coupon.

Okay, here's the code. I've an extended version of "Increasing Your Online Presence" that I sell on my website.

It goes into more detail on the things we've covered here. PDF downloads, worksheets, and checklists are also included. If you've attended my class at this conference, I'm offering you free access to that online course. To get it free, go to my website—that's www.inksplasher.com, and click on the Courses tab.

I use Podia to host my courses, and you'll need to create an account with them. Follow the instructions as if you're going to purchase the course. Before checking out, enter the coupon code: IOPLDSPMA20 (all in caps). This code expires November 1, 2020.

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