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I'm Published—Now What?

I did a Barnes & Noble book signing and was present with five other authors at the event. I thought it was great. I was in the big time. This was my dream. Published and my books were on the shelf at B&N. Didn't sell a single copy in that two-hour block. Nor did any of the other five people. The author next to me was devastated. She thought there should be a line out the door to purchase her book. It's a nice thought. Not that I was immune to her devastation. This was not my first book signing nor my first time of signed copies not flying off the table.

I always wanted to be an author. I told my first-grade teacher I would write a book. It took a lot of years and heartbreak, but I achieved that goal. My novel was in print. I was a published author. Goal achieved. If I found myself splatted by a truck, I had accomplished what I always dreamed. But now I wanted more. Not just other novels had written or needed to write and be published I desired for people to know me as an author. Book marketing has changed and even with an author is not self-published and has publisher they are leaving it up to the author to sell themselves.

In the ever-changing world, the digital medium has changed the book industry and now many brilliant unknown authors are being discovered. How? Social media is one method. Many have found success in Tweets, blogs, reader magnets and email mailing lists. They build a fan base and once people discover the characters they like, they follow the book series. It works.

I have found another successful route, not only does the author have to sell the book they have to sell themselves. Publishers don't launch worldwide book tours anymore. Many public appearances are funded by the author. That might ruin my image and destroy all the posting of my travels and book signing for the last four years. After being published by a mid-sized publisher, I ran with it. I didn't wait for them to promote me. I did it. I made arrangements, marketed myself and set up my own book signings. Just being published wasn't enough I wanted to bring myself to the next level.

My books are published—what now?

I invested in myself.

I became my own business. Trust me on this, when you are ready, and ready means a five-year commitment to operating a business, get a tax id number and sell your books. Sounds easy. It's not. But running your sales like a small business allows you to write off expenses and travel miles. Anything I purchase to improve my sales is a tax-deductible expense.

That sounds like an easy first step, and it is. Through my publisher, I purchased business cards and bookmarks. I will jump ahead on a learning point. Don't get standard bookmarks like everyone else—trust me—make sure they are an awkward size so when people return home they stick out from everyone else's bookmarks. Some of this can be done by a local printing place but have items with your name and social media information. Use Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Post about you, your books and your signing locations. My first book signing was at my local hometown library. I had copies of my two published novels, bookmarks, business cards, some metal display stands purchased from the hobby store, a black sheet. Splurge, get the king. It was my tablecloth, but it has uses later.

I sold a few books and the library bought them as well.

I moved next to a comic convention, out of state. It was a small one I attended the year before as a patron and actually met a fellow author who introduced me to my current publisher. This was the moment of truth. Armed now with a banner, small collapsible dolly, two plastic crates, my purple pen—I sold books. I made con friends, met fellow authors, cosplayers and people who have become fans. I took pictures shared on social media and asked questions. I learned of other comic cons and book signings. It was a wealth of networking opportunities and I sold books. I set a sales goal and at the end of the two days, I met it. Did it cover my hotel? —no. But I came home with some money. What to do, what to do? As tempting as it is to purchase cool items at the convention, any book money went in the cash drawer. It was for reinvesting. I would have to replace my inventory, and after seeing how many other people set up their tables and booths, I thought I could dress mine up to catch the attention of passersbys.

What I am not saying is not to support fellow vendors. I have a bit of spending money that is not part of the business funds. For the nerd members of my family comic cons make great places to get gifts they won't get from anywhere else. Getting books from fellow authors and meeting celebrities is a plus. Jumping ahead, many of those people now message me about possible signings, being on podcasts or wanting to know when the next book will be available.

Writers are not known for being extroverted. Doing a few smaller shows and putting yourself out there takes time, but if what you desire is people reading your books then it is a necessity evil. There are ways around the fear, including some authors I know who cosplay and sell books in character. That is a buildup expense.

I was successful and people wanted to read my writing. I learned a lot at that show. Not a book signing goes by I don't learn. My father made me some nice wooden book stands and I bought a thirty dollar stand for photo backdrops. That allowed me to hang my banner higher to draw more attention to my table. I also snagged a packet of little rubber ropes to secure it—reusable is our friend.

I found a lot of small inexpensive shows to attend. Close shows meant fewer nights at a hotel and that keeps down costs. Meet more people, made more connections, learned and sold books. Did a zombie day show. Two big experiences came out of that show. One was I sold more sci-fi books than zombie books, and three people marched up to my table credit card in hand and wanted a book. The next book signing I had a Square. Never again would I miss out on a sale.

The next comic con I did in February, and it was freezing.

Did a few more shows and went out of state again. Doing a lot of shows near where I live, I didn't see sales drop, but I met the same people. I needed to expand. My publisher created baseball card versions of my books, which I hand out to anyone who asks about a book. I don't force them on people, but they are great reminders for when they get home and want to order it. They are also the odd size so they stick out in the pile of swag a person brings home from a comic convention. It was also cold at that show.

I had three books published by now and was taken seriously by readers who wonder if they will ever see book two in a series. I had two of my sci-fi on the table and more and more people took an interest in my work. And with a fourth book about to be released, I had a coming soon poster. At this point, I also upgraded to a small collapsible cart as I had more books and was selling more. With four books, I returned to my first comic con I did out of state and learned a great deal. I also began getting asked to appear on more podcasts and even attend show panels to speak on writing and zombies. I got some high dollar folding chairs because some of the event centers provided chairs were cheap.

I did local shows and out-of-state shows—I was making myself known. I used my book sales money to buy more shows, and that tax write-off needed a tax return, allowing me to buy spots at more shows. I needed to draw people to my booth. I got a standee banner with my sci-fi book on it and instead of a custom tablecloth, I went with a zombie throw rug, which really caught attention and was way less expensive. I also invested in shirts with my novel on it and hoodies for those shows that were cold even in July. Anything to advertise. If anyone said, "Want to be on a panel?" I said yes. And the more I did, the more I was asked. The more people learned of my novels. I took pictures and posted the con goers on social media. I made myself a known author. I went from Chicago to New Orleans, Tampa to Nebraska—and people had heard of me. People asked about my novels.

Then my biggest selling book was published. People love serial killers and I was close to perfecting my booth setup, which has gotten as much attention as my novels. Many times, people come to ask questions about it more than the novels. Which is okay because then people know about me. I upgraded my photo stand to an expensive one because I wore the cheap one out. I have a giant banner to draw attention to my serial killer book. The zombie throw as a table cloth. The black sheet now works to cover the table at night when a three-day show shuts down. I have a hand truck to haul all of it in and plastic snap lock totes to protect everything. The biggest draw to the table now is my display of zombie killing weapons. A collection of hard plastic weapons that I thought would keep kids interested in the table while I chatted with adult readers. It works. But it's the adults who play with my knives and machetes.

A few odds and ends. Depending on the show, I can rearrange my setup to fit any space. That takes practice and doing over 75 comic cons. I keep a toolbox with anything I found I didn't have but ended up needed. Tape measure, zip ties, shears, hooks, rubber ropes, Post-its and extra Square, lanyards, pens and markers to sign with.

Now with six books and the seventh to be released in 2021, I will have to rethink my display. In 2020, one of the few shows I did attend, I got my first corner booth and that threw my prefect setup wonky, and if that happens again, I'll need to rework my setup. Anything to get them to the table so I can talk about writing and my books. It doesn't hurt that I love movie fandom and enjoy the shows. It's fun and I never stop learning new ways to share my work. I may have to start over in 2021, but I'll be ahead of the curve. Hopefully with a new banner allowing me to interchange it with the serial killer one, depending on the show.

I spoke mostly about my comic con experience as that was where I had to sell myself the hardest, but I've attended library and bookstore signings, usually bringing in pieces of my display. Many bookstores will do a local author signing call them and ask to be a part of those signings. Don't worry about sales worry about promotion. Get yourself out there. One show may be slow, and the next show you will sell more books than you ever had before. My highest number of books being sold was at a show where I thought I was in the worst location. Spread yourself around. Look for different shows in areas you've never been. If you do a show two years in a row, skip a year. You'd be surprised how many people wonder where you were.

It's all in how you present yourself. You are published and now you must get people to discover you. They met you, got a personalized autograph and they thought you were cool. They will read your book, and if they like it, they will buy another one. It's scary; it's an investment of time and money, but it pays off and it's the next step after you get published.