Intro

Hi. My name is Madison Woods. My husband and I own a business called Wild Ozark and all of what we sell is dependent upon my writing. Some of that writing is for support of the products I create or grow and some of it is in the form of books. Most of the books are in paperback and ebook, but some are ebook only and one is paperback only.

I’m here this evening to talk a little about bootstrapping the business side of my writing.

To be honest with you, you should know I’m not making a good living at self-employment. I have my husband to thank for making it possible for me to devote this year to attempting to breathe some life into an idea I’ve incubated for years.

Here’s what I want to cover

I’ll try to stick to my outline because I tend to ramble a lot if I don’t.

Some writers write just because they can’t \*not\* write. I write for that reason too. But I’m trying to build a business from it, and by that very definition, I need to eventually make money. So the foundation I’ve been putting in place this year is critical.

* Most important thing I’ve learned regarding building a bootstrap business is not a \*thing\* but a concept called “minimum viable audience” which in my way of thinking is like the 100th monkey effect.
* Biggest mistakes
  + Built wrong audience
  + Gathered wrong tribe
  + Website focus
* Greatest business assets
  + website
  + mailing list
  + publicity

Minimum viable audience (or 100th monkey effect)

This one is hard. It’s hard to achieve and time consuming if you’re trying to do it without a large advertising budget.

So the “100th monkey effect” has been debunked and it’s not a real thing. But the concept still works for illustrating this principle. What it was was this. Some researchers trained a monkey to perform some new skill that none of the other monkeys knew how to do. Well, monkeys being curious creatures a lot like humans, another monkey wanted to know what the first was doing. So he watched and learned and repeated the procedure. Then another monkey noticed and copied. And so on until one day, about 100 monkeys later, other monkeys who had not actually seen the new skill first hand suddenly began to exhibit the ability to do this certain thing. That moment is called the 100th monkey effect.

When it comes to building a business, you need a base of people to call your audience. These are people who are eager to hear about your products or books when they are released. These people will want to buy your stuff as soon as it hits the shelves and they’ll even tell others about you.

Until you reach the 100th monkey, it’s going to be an uphill struggle to get people to notice you, to buy your things, or tell others how great you are or how wonderful what you’re doing is.

Once that 100th monkey catches on, though, it becomes a lot easier to become noticed.

This principle also comes into play if you’re just doing something small, like trying to get a facebook or twitter meme going.

Do you know what a “meme” is? I started one called Friday Fictioneers several years ago. I would write a 100 word story and post it to my blog and wait for readers. If you’ve ever started a blog you can pretty much guess what happened. Nothing happened. No one just \*found\* my blog and became interested in my flash.

I started sharing the invitation on twitter for my followers to come read and join me by posting a story of their own. Ever done that? If so, you can probably guess that one too. Nothing. No one responded, no one came to the blog and no one retweeted.

So I tried a different tactic. I mentioned specific people to invite them. And that worked. At first only a few showed up, but after a while we all tweeted to each other about it and invited others by name to join us.

It took about six months but soon I had a thriving community called The Friday Fictioneers going on at my blog and on Twitter. It was exhausting to have worked so hard for so long to get some feedback and collaboration and communication and recognition. I was excited and caught up in the fun of it all. Because once that tide turns, when that monkey effect kicks in, it can be exhilarating to watch your project take on a life of its own. It was wonderful.

Except it wasn’t.

That was when I realized my first big mistake.

This thriving community of writers wasn’t the audience I needed to cultivate. These writers were there for the same reason I was – for validation. But we were getting it from each other, as writers, instead of from audiences that were readers.

My online focus has taken a few turns in the past 11 years. It takes a long time to change the focus of an audience, about a year. Before there was Blogger and Wordpress, there were just html websites.

Right focus: I had a blog then, and the focus was the right one: herbs, nature, and my take on philosophy. It attracted readers who were also interested in those things and wanted to read what I wrote because it entertained them.

Wrong focus: Then I started networking with other writers, inviting them to my site to critique and post their own stories. Soon it became a site focused on writers.

Sort of Right: So when I realized what I had done, I sank the ship and built a new one. It took about a year to begin attracting the new crowd of ginseng enthusiasts. This is closer to the right focus, but is too narrow and doesn’t encompass everything that Wild Ozark is about. However, I am strongly entrenched now in Google’s index for ginseng articles and 90% of my traffic is from people seeking information on that topic.

Right: I want people to also look at the other articles I write. The photography of the Ozarks, the other medicinal and edible plants of the Ozarks, the musings on philosophy of life out where I live in the wilderness, the nature sketches. I also write about the homesteading life, things that go wrong and those that go right. Problems and issues I’ve learned how to deal with over the years, like broken water lines and spring fed water systems.

I just implemented some of these changes and expect it to take about another year to see a shift in the quality of traffic Google sends me. In the meantime, I have to start over with the 100th monkey training by trying to get the kind of readers I want to visit my site and share it.

2 HANDOUTS:

These show the search terms Google says is most prominent on both of my sites. One is firmly “nature” and the other is “firmly” ginseng. I want them both to be “nature” but would welcome a ginseng slant on the main site.

A website is important

By itself, a website does very little. By “website” I’m also referring to a blog. Anyone who’s ever started a blog or website knows how lonely it feels to put something up and have no one comment or notice.

Usually, unless you instruct people to go there with enticing facebook or twitter posts, no one will know your site exists.

This, too, follows the 100th monkey concept. Once enough people find your site, they share and spread the word and it becomes easier for others to find your site.

If you design the site right, using methods recognized by Google, you’ll eventually get some traffic from search engines but not unless it first gets recognition from enough people to make Google pay attention to it.

It’s like the proverbial catch-22. You can’t get recognition from Google until you get recognition from people, but people can’t easily find it until Google gives you a decent listing.

So you have to do what I did with the Twitter meme. Ask people to come and comment and share via social media. It’s more effective if you post something people are intrigued enough to click through and read.

There is an art to writing those kinds of posts. And there’s a word for it. It’s called “content marketing”.

I listen to podcasts when I’m taking breaks, washing dishes, folding clothes, taking a bath, etc. When I used to drive to and from work I listened during my commute.

Not all of these podcasts are useful to me because a lot of them focus on tech businesses pulling 6 or more figure incomes, but a tremendous amount of the information is relevant and useful to someone trying to get noticed in the world.

And that’s the other thing. I’m not ashamed any more to admit I am building a business and intending to be noticed. There’s no shame in admitting that I need to earn money doing what I’m doing, just as there’s no shame in just doing it for fun and hobby. But knowing my intentions, I set goals and seek out education to help myself achieve those goals.

HANDOUT:

This is my list of favorite tools, website, and educational resources.

How do I evaluate my traffic/audience?

I use StatCounter to see where my visitors come from, which pages they land on first, where they go after that first landing page (if they go anywhere at all) and what links they click on while they’re at my site.

Why are these important?

Knowing these things tells you an enormous amount about whether your social media efforts are successful, whether people are finding what they need at your website, whether they’re interested enough in your work to click on the links to see your books, if they’re comfortable enough on your landing pages to dig deeper and see what else you might have to offer.

Once you begin using statcounter, if you’re site has been up for a long time and you already have some traffic to it, you can start analyzing the data to give you this information.

I experiment with advertising on my site. Do visitors click links that are text only more often than those with an image? Are most of my visitors reading from a cell phone, tablet or computer? Most of mine are on phones. This means nothing in my sidebar is showing up to them. So if I want them to click on a link, I have to give that link in the body of my post. The entire site needs to look good on phones, too, and this is important.

So you can learn a lot by analyzing the traffic to your website. You can adapt what you’re doing to cause the effect you want to cause, rather than just taking what you get, once you understand the cause-and-effect patterns of the things you write and do.

Summary

Even if you only write for the pleasure of sharing your work with the world, it’s a lot more satisfying if the world actually gets to see what you’ve done.

Learning how your website interacts with the online world can help you share more effectively. If your aim is to make sales of your books, the more people that view the links to your books the more books you will sell.

I see a direct correlation to the amount of visitors I get to my site to my Amazon sales. The same is true for the amount of visitors that go to my online shop.

Right now I’m not making a lot of money at this. But my focus has been on laying the groundwork and understanding the cause-and-effect of what I do. Some of us might gain readerships just through being found at Amazon, but I’m a little more of a control freak than that and I want to do all I can to ensure my books get found.

I started releasing self-published books in 2014 and am consistently making about $100-$200 a month through Amazon, my online shop, and the farmer’s market. I’m finally beginning to see an audience develop around my publicity efforts and I’m getting invitations to participate in things related to my topics of interest – like the ginseng. People are beginning to bring in weeds and plants from their yards to get help with identifying them. Our local shop keeper wants me to come do sketching and herbal crafting lessons and has asked for my help in revitalizing the arts and culture promotion of Kingston.

It takes a long time and hard work if you don’t have a lot of money for advertising to get recognition. Even if you are using a lot of money for advertising, it still takes hard work to earn public trust.

So I hope you keep the 100 monkeys in mind as you’re toiling away trying to get noticed.