

EPISODE 27: SYSTEMIZED BOOK MARKETING – WITH GABRIEL MERCER

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to Episode 27 from the self-publishing formula.

Announcer: Two writers, one just starting out, the other a best seller. Join James Blatch and Mark Dawson and their amazing guests as they discuss how you can make a living telling stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James Blatch: Here we are back again, Mark Dawson and James Blatch with you with the SPF weekly podcast. Mark, this is a good day today. If people are listening to this on launch day, which is Friday the 27th of August, they can get some really good extra value today, because you are preparing, at this very moment, for a webinar with our friend Nick Stevenson, aren't you?

Mark Dawson: That's right, so that's going to be this afternoon 3pm eastern time, 8pm in the UK. Nick and I are going to be talking about the training that he's offering right now to build your mailing list, sell your books, all that kind of good stuff. They're always good sessions with Nick.

He's got a really good style presentation, works really well, and he's a funny guy. We tend to have a bit of a laugh at the same time, so definitely worth people turning up for that.

The signup link is at selfpublishingformula.com/nick, and if people are interested I would recommend registering sooner rather than later because we can only take 1,000 people on the call and I think we're edging up towards that now. There will also be a replay, and so if you can't attend and if you'd like to be notified about that, then just sign up and we'll send that out probably the day after.

James Blatch: It should say Friday the 26th of August is the day that this is released. Not the 27th, Episode 27, confusing. Friday the 26th of August, which is the release day for this. Sign up now, next few hours. As Mark says, even if you think you might not be able to make the live webinar, you will get an invite for the replay if you're on the list. That URL again, selfpublishingformula.com/nick.

Mark Dawson: Correct.

James Blatch: Excellent. We've got a really good interview this week. Quite an interesting one, actually, and this is going to be one that's going to be of great interest for anybody who's in the stage now of launching a book, or even if you've got a couple of books but you've never quite got yourselves going to really kickstart your career. We are always interested in hearing the stories and hearing the detail about how people make themselves successful as self-publishers. This guy actually emailed me out of the blue. We had a chat over email, and very quickly I became very interested in how he had done this.

It's a very commercial approach right from the beginning. He and the person who he was marketing the book for, the author. He's not, in that sense, self-published. He's done basically the self-publishing job for somebody else, but they took, if you like, a brutalist commercial view right from the beginning, before a word was written on the first book, to work out what was going to be successful. He explains in great detail in this interview how they went through the process, and I think they're looking at a six figure income for the first year of this self-publisher's career, which is obviously fantastic. His name is Gabriel Mercer, and I think you're going to enjoy this interview.

Get contacted from time to time by listeners from the podcast, and when Gabriel Mercer contacted us, we thought this is interesting, because Gabriel talked about a project to get a writer launched. Over a few month

period, they went up to I think something like a \$50,000 revenue. We'll talk to Gabriel in a moment about that, but there were a few things that stood out that were different from the approach that they took. I'm delighted to say Gabriel joins us from the eastern side of the United States. Gabriel, are you?

Gabriel Mercer: Yes, right around Florida area.

James Blatch: Are you in Florida? Sunny Florida. Wonderful. Gabriel, just talk us through this project then, how you approached it.

First, what was the books, the subject, etc., and what was your starting point?

Gabriel Mercer: **I come from a technology background, so books, to me, are completely foreign.**

Or they were, up until probably about a year and a half ago. A friend of mine who knew what I did in tech was talking to me about digital marketing, and said, "Look, I have an author who wants to "pick your brain," sit down with you at a coffee shop, and spend hours trying to learn everything about digital marketing in a matter of minutes," which never works, but I agreed, because it's a good friend of mine. The author and I sat down at a Starbucks local to me, and she had really good questions which I answered, and by the end I thought, okay, that was fun, I need to go back and do real work.

I used my same typical consulting offer that I make. I'm like, "Look, if you want more of my time, you just have to pay me," and that usually will exit anyone who is not serious. She took me aback and jumped all over the opportunity, and was like, "Absolutely, I would love to pay you for time." We started working together from that point on.

The thing about this project was she committed to it in a way that I think I hadn't seen from a lot of other authors. Most people decide that they want to write a book, and then they decide what the book is going to be about, and then they bring it to market, and she reversed that whole process. **She looked at what the market was doing and decided where the opportunity was, and then she went ahead and wrote not just one, but three full novels before going to market.** That process, for us, was what ultimately led to most of the success.

James Blatch: The way that she approached her writing and her business.

Gabriel Mercer: Exactly. It was a commitment to quality, and she treated it like a business from the very beginning. She was disciplined, she was focused, she put a lot of hard work in. She's still continuing to be patient about results, even though I think what she's done is tremendous.

James Blatch: That's something that we do talk about all the time, and you do get some resistance. Some authors don't like the idea of being business people, but I guess that's where you come in then, Gabriel.

Actually, we get asked quite a lot by authors. Mark gets emails, "Can you run my campaigns for me," and his answer, because he's a very busy man, he's got several businesses on the go, is "You wouldn't be able to afford me because of the time I would take out from the other businesses." Actually, if you make it your specialism, and I guess you do do bits and pieces for other people. This is the missing link for some people.

Gabriel Mercer: It is, and I think a lot of the key to an author's success is just acknowledging that, particularly in self-publishing, there is not just one role. There's not just the writer anymore.

This is something that actually goes back to, if you look at old Tony Robbins, his business mastery program, he talked about this exact same thing. In any company, there are three roles, and he calls them the talent,

the leader, and the entrepreneur. For the writer market, it's really the artist, the director, and the producer.

You have the art side, which is this idea of creating fiction, and doing this creative activity that's a form of expression and bringing that product to life. On the other side, you have the other two pieces, which are the ability to run and manage an outsourced team or a project, and then there's the social side. The influencer outreach, the working with readers and talking one on one to other authors, and moving the needle through networking. Each one of those is a completely different skillset, and unfortunately for most self-published authors, you have to be really good at all three.

James Blatch: That is one of the tricks, isn't it? We'll just go back to the point.

Had she finished her first book when she first came to you?

Gabriel Mercer: She had not written anything when we first talked. Not at all. It was pretty surprising. She had just done enough research to know that she wanted to write.

It was an old hobby for her when she was in college, and she was like, "Look, I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what it's going to be. I don't know what that book is going to look like, but I know that this is what I want to try to do, and I want to do it professionally." We talked about how that would look, how long she would have to stay in a day job. I said, "Look, I think the best way for you to approach this is think about romance as a market. Obviously huge. Bigger by twice from the next nearest market down." I said, "You really need to think about what your brand is going to be, because that's really what your focus needs to be."

She started writing and wrote three full length contemporary romance novels, closer to the erotic romance side than the clean romance side, because that's, I think, still what is popular for the most part in that

genre, and then she also made the decision to write New Adult, so another really popular category right now. That, I think, has been the key to her success.

James Blatch: Interesting that, from your point of view, it was ideal that somebody comes to you at that very early stage rather than having created maybe three different cross-genre books and give you a more different marketing task. You could work together, as it should be really, marketing and the product should be very closely aligned.

Where did you start, Gabriel? What was your knowledge area of marketing and selling books?

Gabriel Mercer: I come from a background of tech, and so the way that I got into marketing and eventually information products, which I think books are a part of, is through the tech side. I started being a coder in school. I ended up, through developing software and other information platforms to learning that the other challenge that a lot of businesses have is marketing.

Then I eventually developed into the paid advertising side, which is what led me to you and Mark, what you guys are doing with Facebook ads. That is definitely probably the hottest ad platform that exists right now. My path is completely different than most would take to get to this, but I really think that most coders, especially guys who love to be in the cave and just developing software, I think their artistry is pretty much the same as an author in a lot of ways. I've seen so many parallels between those two roles over the years.

James Blatch: When you say a coder, do you actually mean a programmer? Somebody who writes programming code.

Gabriel Mercer: Right, I was a developer. That's probably the proper term for it.

James Blatch: Yes. I was in a previous life as well, as a computer programmer, in the old COBOL days. I completely agree with you. There's an artistic element to computer programming that people don't appreciate. They think it's ones and zeroes, but it actually is a far more artistic endeavor. You have this outline. You got led to us, to Self Publishing Formula and presumably one or two other areas.

Were Facebook ads your main thing? I think that you said to us when you initially contacted us that you didn't use the permafrees route, which is almost Chapter 1 of the Bible for a lot of people.

Gabriel Mercer: I have really strong feelings about that. Having been in the information products market for as long as I have now, and having built my whole career around that, that's how I made the bulk of my income. It's how I continue to make the income that I need to pay the bills. That's my day job, so to speak.

First of all, I think it's hard to imagine somebody spending the amount of time that they spend building a story or a fiction property of any kind, and then only selling it for what for most authors I think is going to be less than \$20 in every case. I don't think I've seen a book for more than that in a very long time.

That already is hard for me to wrap my mind around, and it's the reason I avoided books for so long, even non-fiction books. The conventional wisdom in my world is that there is no money in books. It's a business card or it's a tool to get to the things that you really want to sell.

It wasn't until I saw what Mark was doing that I realized that the possibility of making a living from fiction is even possible, and that all came together with this author being on my doorstep and saying, "Look, I'm willing to commit to this and make it a professional gig, so how can we do it?" That's when I started to dig. Permafrees, it's not a philosophy that I buy into, and I can get into why if you want to talk about that.

James Blatch: What I'm more interested in is what you did instead of it, because I think you did have some form of giveaway, didn't you?

Gabriel Mercer: We did. We still gave away things, just never the core product. We gave away a Kindle Paperwhite loaded with 25 ebooks that were very market specific, so it would appeal to the same demographic.

The author spent a year and a half doing outreach to various authors in the genre that she was writing in and making connections, and doing the Tim Grahl relentlessly helpful mindset. Or maybe a better example would be the Ryan Holiday canvas strategy, where she just worked for them without taking credit to buy herself some favors later on when her books were out.

All of that led her to the point where, when she did finally release, she got a lot of forward momentum. The giveaways and in particular the way that we kicked things off with the mailing list was just about a \$500 buy in to really, really promote and push and build her list as quickly as possible, and we ended up with 1200 people. In one week, I would say that's a pretty good list building effort.

James Blatch: You got 1200 signups in a week?

Gabriel Mercer: In a week, yeah. The good news is that in most cases, giveaways tend to attract people who are bargain seekers. They're people who are looking for the thing you're giving away.

James Blatch: That's one of the dangers people have warned about with it, yeah.

Gabriel Mercer: For sure, and we were conscious of that, and so we did a really good job of making sure that our offer was very focused and that we took care and nurtured those people afterwards to the point where we have a 75% retention rate after, it's been 90 days now. About 900+ of those people are still sticking around.

James Blatch: You cracked this Holy Grail of a giveaway, a competition, a contest, actually, and with valuable leads, not just people who simply entered to try to win and then went off and didn't engage with you anymore.

You actually had a very positive engagement rate afterwards.

Gabriel Mercer: Right, and I credit the author with that entirely. The strategy was there prior to me ever coming on board. I just simply pushed her to engage and nurture and treat those readers and those early subscribers as if they hadn't entered for the giveaway and that they really did care about what she was doing as a fiction writer.

I think that turned the tide for her a little bit. She did a lot of work with those early readers. She built a launch team from that of 30 people. Again, she's retained 75% of the readers, and now, after three different books, she's, I think 31 reviews on one title, 20 on another, and 7 on another. Each one of those has been organic. She's really done a good job.

James Blatch: Remind me, did you say how much you spent on your ads in that week?

Gabriel Mercer: We went really heavy in the very beginning. We were spending probably anywhere from \$10-\$30 a day just depending on which book we were promoting, but I really went heavy on Book 1, knowing that that was going to be the introduction to the series and hopefully lead to read through later on. That turned out to pay off.

After 162 different variations, we finally hit on a combination of ads that drove clicks at anywhere from 12-19 cents. It eventually leveled off at around 14, and it continues to perform well. We're actually still running it at about \$10 a day right now.

That resulted in a break even and a little bit of positive return, but not a whole lot. It was really more the exposure in the first month that we were looking for.

James Blatch: You went very big at the beginning, had your launch giveaway.

Gabriel Mercer: Right, launch giveaway.

James Blatch: How much did you spend on advertising for that to get the 1200 leads?

Gabriel Mercer: Gosh, to get the 1200, it was probably only a week's worth of advertising.

James Blatch: A few hundred. 3 or 4 hundred, maybe fewer.

Gabriel Mercer: Yeah, it wasn't a lot. Maybe \$100, even. It wasn't a lot of money.

James Blatch: That's a very good value. That worked really well for you. If I remember this rightly from the way you wrote:

You did line up the books to launch in quick succession, and make an impact with the top 10 lists, or bestselling lists as quick as possible.

Gabriel Mercer: If I had to go back and do anything over again, that would be the one thing I would probably change. I would space those releases out a little bit more.

Three weeks seemed at the time to be optimal. It gave us enough time to really push things out and try and brute force the bestseller lists and push the author's books into visibility, where Amazon hopefully then would pick it up and start marketing.

I think that everything I've seen in the data since then indicates that the shelf life of even a new release is actually much longer than I originally anticipated. While there is a drop off at 30 days, I think it's probably closer to 6 months when a new title finally starts to lose steam.

James Blatch: What you discovered is you actually have more time to not worry about momentum dropping away.

Gabriel Mercer: I think a very slow, linear, growth-like build is much better than that exponential spike that eventually drops off.

Again, everything we've seen across all of the books that we publish now to date indicates that it's much better to build slowly over time, and even release at a rate of once per quarter than it is to try and cram everything into a 30 day or a three week window as we did with her books.

James Blatch: You did your launch, and you had how many books? Was it five at this stage?

Gabriel Mercer: She took a step back and was really overworked at one point. She was juggling a full time job as a bookkeeper and, I think, a forensic accountant for a couple of companies that she was freelancing with in addition to writing full time and doing a heavy amount of outreach, again, with influencers, reviewers.

She was even querying at one point looking for a traditional deal until I talked her down from that. Actually, thank you, data guy over at Author Earnings for talking her down from that. It was a lot for her to handle, and she said, if anything has to give, knowing what we know about the space these books should be coming out, I want to dial back and focus on promoting these properties that I have and making the decision to push off books four and five until later in the year. That's slowed her growth

considerably in the last, probably, two weeks to three weeks since the launch of her last book.

James Blatch: In bottom line terms, once you'd launched, you getting towards the peak of your sales, what were you hitting?

Gabriel Mercer: She is probably going to max out this year at six figures, is my guess.

James Blatch: Wow.

Gabriel Mercer: She's going to do really well. There's no doubt. Again, I think that that is an outlier. I don't necessarily think that is normal. I would say that, had we not done literally everything right except for cramming all of these books into one small space as a release window, I think she probably would have come out closer to 20,000 in the year, but it's just something clicked.

I think, whether or not she realized it, what she wanted to write lined up really well with what the market was looking for. It all came together in the right way and just exploded.

Again, I don't think it's as much luck in my mind as it is just following a really good system, working hard, doing all the things that you and Mark talk about on your podcast.

James Blatch: I'm sure it's not luck by the sounds of the methodical approach that you've taken to it.

Did you get involved in cover design and formatting, all this ancillary stuff, as well?

Gabriel Mercer: I did a little bit, yeah. I have some background working as a partner in marketing agencies with design and art direction. I'm by no means an expert. I have an eye for what I think looks good.

I imagine many amateur art directors do, and being able to pair that with, again, a strong testing methodology where this seems like it would work very well, let's test three variations of it and figure out what actually works.

The thing that I always love saying is that I make more money every time I'm wrong. It's healthy for me to adopt this mindset of I'm going to take my best shot, but it's still just an assumption.

James Blatch: Lots of valuable lessons coming out of this, but that constant split testing, constant reevaluation, constant optimizing of your campaigns. We talk about this on the podcast quite a lot, and I've seen today, actually, coincidentally, somebody who's been running campaigns for two or three weeks and is about to throw it all in because it's not working. And you're thinking there aren't many businesses in the world where after 21 days you get it all cracked to measure profit and you can go off and enjoy. It takes some work, but you kept that agility going all the way through the campaign, so I'm certain you're still doing that now.

What have you got running at the moment and where are you in terms of campaigns?

Gabriel Mercer: Right now, we are currently running two campaigns. We were running a campaign for a book club giveaway where we gave away, I think it was, 10 signed copies of her book to a select audience. I think two or three thousand people requested the book. It went really well, and we just mailed those out the other day.

The other thing that we're running is we're continuing to run that same \$10 a day really solid ad copy and ad imagery directly to her book, and that typically comes in at about 120% ROI. Again, it's not earth shattering, but it's

enough to keep her sales at the level they need to be so that when people read through to the other books, books two and three, as a result of those ads, those are all profit for her.

James Blatch: Gabriel, you've proved that you can, I think you said in the email to me initially, you can absolutely jump start a career from zero. This is not a case of having to wait two or three years of slog. If you get the stuff right at the beginning. Obviously you had a quite good genre for this, but we talked to Rachel Aaron a couple of weeks ago. We have lots of authors who have very successful careers in niche genres as well, so I don't think we can all say that's what this is down to. Congratulations on that. It's really good.

Can we know who it is? Is there any reason why we can't know who the author is?

Gabriel Mercer: She's asked me to keep her name private. I'm not entirely sure why, to be perfectly honest. She is just very conscious of getting the wrong kind of attention to her books, and she doesn't want to be known for the money that she's making. She wants the work to stand on her own. I don't know. It's an interesting dynamic, but I'm just respecting her wishes in this case.

James Blatch: I understand that. That's certainly not for everyone.

Is this something you think you can move on to another author with?

Gabriel Mercer: I can definitely say that it can be replicated in romance. We are currently testing the exact same methodology across science fiction fantasy, and soon will be testing with another author in thrillers. There's lots of things lined up.

The only thing I can say for sure is that it worked in this particular case with this author writing full length contemporary romance. I don't know if the

same will be true if we try mystery thriller. I don't know if the same will be true in science fiction, but I suspect that it will be because a lot of the core tenets and principles that we're applying really I think are going to be the differentiators going forward. A lot of that was assumptions on my part when we first started and what I was really pleased to see was that a lot of the data is bearing that out.

James Blatch: If you get around to doing a blog post on it, we'll probably feature you as a guest blogger on SPF, but certainly point people in the direction of anything you'd write down, because I think it's a very interesting way of looking at it.

What particularly is interesting is your lack of emotional involvement in it. We all get emotionally involved in our business, but the fact that you're not the author does make you slightly different in this community where mostly it's people themselves, and being able to slightly disassociate themselves from their author selves is an important part of approaching the business correctly. I think people would want to learn from that, learn the way that you've approached it without it being your babies that are for sale.

Gabriel Mercer: It's really hard to take off that creative hat, something that you've poured blood, sweat, and tears into over time, and look at it as purely an information product and really try to gauge how the market is reacting to that or how your audience is responding to what they're reading. A lot of people don't want to hear it, and that's the truth.

It's one of the reasons I encourage all new authors to go out and get early feedback from any of their writing and engage on how much work they're really going to have to do. Is it going to be a couple of years and a couple of bin novels, or is it going to be 10 years of daily work that you really have to consider? That's a big choice.

James Blatch: Gabriel, thank you so much indeed for coming onto the Self Publishing Formula podcast from sunny Florida, although I have to say, the

two weeks I've spent in Florida, it rained every day. I drove around looking behind cars reading The Sunshine State on everyone's registration plates.

Gabriel Mercer: They don't tell you that the summer is hurricane season and not to show up around then.

James Blatch: I think we're going to be there in September, in hurricane season. Gabriel, thank you so much indeed. It's been really interesting, and we'll keep in touch. Let me know when you put that down in writing, we'll get a link out to people.

Gabriel Mercer: Definitely. Thanks, James. I appreciate it.

James Blatch: Gabriel did things a little bit differently. I mentioned to Gabriel in the interview that you get asked a lot by people, "Can you run my campaigns for me?" You always say "You couldn't afford me," because obviously you're running quite a few businesses and your own publishing empire. But this guy is a digital marketing guy who's had his interest piqued about self publishing, and he's made a real success of this romance author's first three books.

They didn't have a permafrees giveaway, so they gave away a Kindle loaded with the free books that were of a similar genre, and that worked really well for them for an explosive list build over a couple of week period. That was the main difference, I think, between the way that we often talk to people about doing things, but it seemed to work for them, so a really interesting interview.

Mark Dawson: It's interesting on giveaways. I'm a little more sanguine about doing those because I've done plenty in the past and the danger is you get people who want the free thing and they're not so interested in your books. If Gabriel has demonstrated that it's worked for him, it's something that is worth looking fresh at. It's not something that I do, but maybe I'll take another look at it.

James Blatch: It's different circumstances. I think what you give away and how you pitch the adverts all make a difference in that front, but there's more than one way to skin a cat.

Gabriel found us because he understands Facebook advertising, the power of social media advertising, and he was a big fan of what you were doing and the way you were teaching that, so that's how he found us, and then he thought that this story would be interesting.

I have asked Gabriel, you probably heard in interview, if he'll do a blog post for us at some point in the future, because it's quite a lot of detail in the description of how he did that launch, and I think that would be interesting to hear.

Okay, we're coming back to talking directly to an author next week. We are going to talk to the wonderful Rachel Abbott, who is probably quite well known to a lot of Self Publishing Formula listeners. We actually spoke to her, didn't we, at the London Book Festival?

Mark Dawson: At the book fair that we did. It's great. One of the biggest selling KDB authors in the UK. Very well known, is great fun to talk to, so that's definitely going to be something that people should look forward to next week.

James Blatch: We're going to talk to Rachel about productivity and tactics and sales. She's somebody else who's a bit of a fan of yours, Mark, so there'll be a bit of mutual love there, but we'll hear a lot of original and interesting stuff from Rachel without question. That'll be SPF 28.

We're looking forward to talking to you again. Thank you so much for listening. Don't forget, there is a fantastic webinar coming your way today, Friday the 26th of August if you're listening to this on launch day. You need to go to selfpublishingformula.com/nick to sign up, and you will hear Mark

Dawson and Nick Stevenson, two of the biggest, most valuable names you will hear in the self publishing sphere.

Mark, can you give us a sneak peek of what you're going to be talking about?

Mark Dawson: We're going to be looking at finding new readers. That's something that Nick majors on. Something I major on too, of course, but it's going to be a valuable session. I've done webinars with Nick before.

There's always notes to be taken and lessons to be learned, so we're looking at Nick's formula for adding new readers to your list. Definitely looking forward to that when I get on call with Nick later on today.

James Blatch: Great. [Selfpublishingformula.com/nick](https://selfpublishingformula.com/nick) to sign up for that webinar, and you can get all the show notes, of course, and everything else at selfpublishingformula.com. For this podcast, we look forward to talking to you in 7 days time. Have a good week writing and selling. We'll speak to you then.

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