

PODCAST 79: A RISING TIDE: AUTHOR COLLABORATION – WITH NICK STEPHENSON

Announcer: Two writers, one just starting out, the other a bestseller. 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: Hello, and welcome to the Self-Publishing Formula podcast with Mark and James. Hope you had a good week, a really productive week.

I hope you enjoyed our last couple of episodes where we talked to authors about how they write, what they write, what makes them tick, what's working for them. We always like those author interviews, and I think Tracy and Mel are both quite different, actually, in the way they've approached things in their journeys, but equally inspirational for struggling writers like myself, and you.

Mark Dawson: I'm not struggling.

James Blatch: No. You're not struggling. As he pulls up in his Porsche in the morning. "I'm definitely not struggling."

Today we're back to some of the nitty gritty, some of the marketing tricks of the trade, some of the angles, some of the hacks that you can take advantage of to try and advance your career, and make things work. We're going to talk about collaboration, which I guess is something not completely unique to the indie world, but certainly much more prevalent in the indie world than it ever used to be in the trad world.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. I think it's easier to collaborate with digital products than it is with physical books. There are ways you could do it, but it's much more convenient to work together with something that isn't tangible. It's an intangible item that you can package together quite easily. We looked at something like this ourselves, actually. It's one of those weird things. Nick and I obviously often have the same kinds of ideas around about the same time, which is a bit weird. He's looking at Facebook messenger bots at the same time that I was looking at them, which was quite interesting. Obviously I would do it better than he does.

James Blatch: Of course.

Mark Dawson: But one thing he did better than us, actually, he looked at author collaboration around about the same time we were playing around with that idea ourselves.

We had a cycle of the Book Locker that we were looking to see if we could develop as a place where writers could get together to collaborate and offer their books to readers as box sets and collections, and things like that. For one reason or another, that didn't really suit what we were doing, so we put that on the back burner.

Nick, on the other hand, has pushed on with his, and he's created what he calls the Dream Team Network, which is what you'll be talking to him in this interview about. It's a good idea.

It's a place where writers can meet up. They can get inspiration from one another, and they can then collaborate to try and reach each other's readers. So it's a pretty good way of doing things.

It's the same thing that Instafreebie are doing. Of course, we have a kind of residual effect of that thing that we've started to do, in that we've got a number of SPF genre groups on Facebook.

If you're in the SPF community, this is all free of course, you can join up in the thrillers group or the Romance group, or there's about 20 or 25 different groups that you can join up with and meet other writers, where you can work together. The same sort of thing that Nick will be talking about, but we can mention that when we come back at the other end of the interview.

James Blatch: Yeah. We should say Nick's is a paid service, and he goes above and beyond what we do. Obviously, we have lots of authors in our community.

It's a natural thing for us to have a place where people can meet each other of similar genres, and then get on with their own collaborations.

Nick's taken this whole idea a step further, but he is offering a free trial to listeners of the SPF podcast, so details of that at the end of the interview. That's an opportunity for you to join up and test the waters, see if it's going to work for you. So let's hear from our friend, Nick Stephenson.

Well, Nick ... you were one of the very early guests on the SPF podcast, when we had no idea what we were doing. Here we are, a year and a half later with still absolutely no clue.

Nick Stephenson: I was going to say, "Have you figured it out yet?"

James Blatch: No. We go from week to week, but somehow it works. Well, we get really interesting people on, and that looks after itself. So no pressure.

Nick Stephenson: Perfect. No, none at all.

James Blatch: You are one of the interesting guys. There are lots of people in the world, in this space, who look at a couple of people who are the pioneers and the voices and the enablers for the vast majority of us who are

starting out writing novels, and three names always come up, which is you, Jo Penn, and Mark, sometimes called the UK Brain Trust.

Nick Stephenson: I like that.

James Blatch: Yeah. It's not a UK-specific thing. They're three voices that are very significant in the world of self-publishing.

How do you feel about that, Nick Stephenson?

Nick Stephenson: It's very cool. It was unintentional, and I hear this a lot as well. People will email in and say, "You, Mark and Joanna have really helped me do XYZ," and that's really cool, because it wasn't really deliberate.

We all kind of got to know each other a few years ago, with the idea that there's probably some way that we could work together to do stuff. The fact that people have picked up on that is really cool. I guess it's because we're all from England. Kind of helps.

James Blatch: Although that's almost coincidental, I think, isn't it?

You are three significant voices in your own right, and they all slightly come at it from maybe slightly different ways, but coincidentally live in this sort of triangle of a few hundred miles.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah, it helps. We can meet up in London from time to time, which is always useful.

James Blatch: Yeah. Let's start, then, with asking you about the state of the nation. This is something that people post on every now and again, some people, with a little bit of a glass-half-empty view, saying, "Oh, Facebook adverts are too expensive now. Everyone's doing them, and we've reached saturation point. It's impossible to get your visibility anymore."

Other people with a glass-half-full saying, "What an exciting time to be an author and a writer, and being able to do this without having to go through some stupid, pompous gate keeping that used to exist."

Where's your take on the industry at the moment?

Nick Stephenson: Well, I think it's like you said, it's the most exciting time to be writing and publishing. I think that's true even compared to just a few years ago.

I have a blog post I think I wrote four years ago that says, "Everybody is complaining because Kindle has reached saturation point, and the Kindle gold rush is over." We hear the same variation on that theme.

Every few weeks someone comes out with some upsetting kind of perspective on things. I think people just have that view, you know what I mean? Like you said, the glass-half-empty, glass-half-full.

I'm very much, "The glass is both half full and half empty at the same time, so let's try and figure out the best way to go forward."

I try not to get too emotional about it, but from my perspective, the way Kindle opened up the ability for people to publish and just get their words out there, that's been around for a while now. But the technology that's required to make that easy is getting better every single day.

Back in 2008, 2009 when it first became technically possible to do, nobody was doing it, because it was incredibly difficult.

Now, nearly 10 years later, you can set up an entire business structure online using tools that you rent month-to-month. You can set up pretty much any kind of automated systems, marketing systems, sales systems, anything you like now.

Even a couple of years ago, when I first started doing teaching and courses, the technology has changed so much in just a couple of years, that while the kind of basic, "I can publish a book," idea is still there, your ability to get it in front of more readers is now easier than it's ever been.

Facebook advertising took off. Amazon ads are taking off. Other ways of doing advertising is coming in every single day, new ways of reaching people.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we started using Facebook's Messenger bots as well as a way of getting people in, and talking to them and connecting with them one-on-one, and it's just incredible.

I can be talking to somebody in Russia or the United States or Australia, and I literally was. I was sat there doing this experiment. I just sent out a message saying, "If you want to talk to me on Messenger, here's a link. Just ask me anything and I'll reply to you. I'll be sat here at my desk for the next couple of hours."

I think I ended up having 150 conversations open, talking to people from all over the world about their books, and what they're doing, and how they're getting on. The feeling from them, talking to those people who were talking to me, was very, very positive.

Some of the people were saying, "I'm writing my first book, and I don't know what to do next," or, "I've written a few books. Should I be focusing on writing or marketing, or whatever?" I was able to connect with them. You can do that to your readers as well. The possibilities are opening up now more than at any time I can remember. For me, I think it's just getting better and better every single day.

James Blatch: I completely agree. I think we always say, we have to remember that. Although lots of books are going onto Kindle, and some of these glass-half-empty people or whatever, they put their stats up saying, "Look. This is why we can't get visibility."

But we talk to each other, who, people who are aware of marketing. They've followed you, possibly your courses. They've followed us, possibly our courses as well. They're thinking about how to communicate with people. That's probably 1% of the people who've put books on Kindle, are thinking like that and doing that.

I meet people all the time who say, "I've got a novel," and they literally don't even know how to upload the book to Kindle. If they've done that, they don't know how to do anything else.

Don't be fooled by the growth of the amount of books available on Kindle. There's a small fraction of people who are working hard at marketing and finding readers, I think.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah, absolutely. You don't have to be in the top 100 constantly to make a decent living out of this. There's people who have five, six books, 10 books, two books, who are kind of sat quite happily in that undiscovered region, where they're not household names.

They're not blockbusters. They're not hitting the top of the New York Times, but they have a few books bringing in \$20, \$30, \$40 a day, and that's enough to make a full-time living for a lot of people, or it's enough to supplement a full-time income, and get people doing what it is they love. That's the goal. The goal isn't, for me anyway, super stardom or getting movies made out of your books, or becoming a millionaire.

The people I've talked to, their goal is to have this thing they've written read by people. Getting read is the main goal, and making a little bit of money to help support that, is the goal as well.

You don't have to be in the top .1% to make that happen. If there's six million books on Kindle, you can bet that 95% of them have just been stuck up there and forgotten about.

It's that 5% that we can gain access to, using these tools that I've talked about today already, to get that exposure and really get some good results out of it. It's just aiming for that spot and really just working at it.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Nick Stephenson: Absolutely possible.

James Blatch: Some people would say you are a superstar, anyway. You've begun crashing sports cars, I believe, which I think is a superstar move, right?

Nick Stephenson: Yeah. It's a bit of a diva move. It was the most boring crash in the universe, ever. It was so slow. It was literally just a very wet road and a corner that I accelerated out of, slightly too much, and the car went sideways at like 20 miles an hour, into some soft grass.

I like to pretend it was more dramatic than that, but unfortunately it wasn't. James Blatch: Well, for the YouTube viewers, we'll stick a picture up and show them. It looks more dramatic, the picture, than the way you describe it.

Nick Stephenson: It does. It's the angle. It's my photography skills shining through.

James Blatch: I think old Rowan Atkinson, whom I'm often unfairly compared with, "Mr. Bean lives up your way", and he does occasionally have spectacular crashes in his McLarens and stuff.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah. He lives fairly close, actually. His kids went to my old school, actually. I never had the chance to meet him, but he is in the news from time to time, because he's crashed a McLaren or something into a tree.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Nick Stephenson: That's much more rock star than me.

James Blatch: It was quite a serious one, as well. But he walked away okay. Okay, look. Now we're talking about, there's this group of people, maybe it's not 1%, 5% whatever, of the total number of people who listen to you, listen to Mark, Jo, and a part of this bubble of people who are being active about marketing, and being proactive about, and thinking what's going to work, and being agile and all the rest of it.

Actually, one of the things I like about you, Nick, is you think a lot about how we can help each other, how we can collaborate with each other, which sometimes is completely free of charge, right?

We've both done our own work with our own lists, and it's a bit of an easy, low-hanging-fruit type move that a lot of people don't make, or don't think to make because they perhaps don't know how to start.

But this is something I know you're thinking about a lot at the moment.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah, and it comes under the heading of "author collaboration". This was something I was keen on right from the very beginning, as I was starting to build up an audience.

I thought to myself, "Let's say I've got 500 people on an email list, and I want to do a promotion or I want to do a launch, I want to reach more people." Now, at the time, I was researching "How can I expand the people who might be seeing this?"

Something that came up was a term that we're familiar with now, which is called affiliate marketing, where you would recruit affiliates and you'd say, "Right. For every product that you help me sell, by promoting it to your audience, I'll track that and I'll give you commission."

I knew that wasn't going to work for Kindle books because there's no real way of doing that. You can't really say, "If you promote my book, I'll give you 50% of the purchase price." It's potentially feasible, but it's not something that's worth digging through.

But the concept was there. Can I get my books in front of a bigger audience, by offering something in return to those people who have the audience?

So instead of giving them commission, maybe I could just give them the same thing in return. The idea being that, "If you help me promote my launch this month, I'll help you promote your launch next month, so it's mutually beneficial."

I spent some time reaching out to people who were in a similar sort of niche to me, similar audience size, as best as I could guess, and built up those relationships over time, and then eventually said, "We've got similar books, similar audience. We're both growing an email list. I'd like to do a launch of my new book coming up. Can you help me promote it? If so, I'll do the same thing for you next time you've got a launch or promotion." That was the very basic premise behind it. As you can imagine, when two people with 500 readers on their email list get together, that's suddenly 1,000 people seeing the book.

Or if you team up with two other people, that's 1,500 people seeing the book. You've just tripled your audience, and you've not paid anything. All you need to do is reciprocate down the line, and it started from there. But as you can imagine, trying to find these people and build up that relationship and do that over time, it took quite a long time. In six months, I had like two people that I could email up and get promotional help with. That thought stuck with me for a long time, because over the years we have grown together. We now have much, much larger audiences, and we still help each other out.

But what about someone who is starting where I was, who has maybe 100 people on their email list, or doesn't have anybody on their email list yet, but wants to, or is really trying to grow that? How do they build those relationships, find those people, and do that collaboration without it taking them six months? That's where this idea came from.

The question was, how do we do that?

So I decided to try and set something up that would allow authors to be able to just hit the ground running, just go in there and get started, because it boils down to two things, I think.

Familiarity, so knowing somebody, being able to send them an email or a text message and then respond, and two, mutually beneficial.

If you can have those two things, chances are, you're going to get a great collaboration relationship going on.

I decided, let's set up a community, a private community, that allows those two things, that familiarity and that mutual benefit. Let's put that out there, so you can start off knowing that that's the case.

I built something called the Dream Team Network, which is a private Facebook group, essentially at the beginning. All it was, was I said, I invited some of my customers in, my paying customers in.

I said, "The goal of this group is solely to do joint promotions, group promotions. You all know each other, because you're all doing one of my courses. You're all growing an email list. You're all in the same place. You all want the same thing. I want you to work together, and I'll help you find each other so that you can do some group promotions."

And people were like, "This is fantastic, but how do I do a group promotion? What should I be doing, if I meet someone?"

I was like, "Okay. Good point," so I put some training together.

There's four types of group promotion.

There's a cross-promotion, where one person will email out one month, and then the next person will do the same thing the month after.

There's a joint promotion, where a big group of people can join together, and everybody is kind of blasting it out everywhere.

There's anthologies, like you're doing a box set, and everyone's promoting the box set, trying to get it into the charts.

Then, there's contests and sweepstakes as well, where you can be offering prizes and getting people onto different lists, and offering free books to get them on there. So these are the four main ones.

I gave them some training on how to do it. Then people started implementing it and saying, "Right, okay. I'm a sci fi author. I write this kind of sci fi. I want to do a cross-promotion in August. Leave me a message if you want to team up."

This person might get 10 or 15 messages from people wanting to join in. The promotion would run, and each person would get some more readers on their email list, get some more sales.

It all came from them getting that foot in the door to meet people writing in their genre at the same sort of level as them, so they can use these group promotion strategies to get more readers, and it doesn't cost anything. It's great. You don't have to pay 600 bucks for a BookBub ad. You just have to follow the training I've set out, and just join up with other people, and you're done.

It was something I've started experimenting with last year, and then I put it into a more streamlined package, to help people really get there as quickly

as possible. It's been working amazingly well. That's kind of like my pet project at the moment, and I'm really enjoying it.

James Blatch: I'm going to ask you a couple of questions about the results, and how it's been working. I should just point out that a small naked child did appear behind your right ear during that answer.

Nick Stephenson: Oh, he's on cue is he? He's very well-trained.

James Blatch: Yeah. He was on cue. I'll probably stick a little blur on that, just to save him for future years, this being dragged out and used against him at his 16th birthday or something.

Nick Stephenson: Very wise.

James Blatch: So just, people may be wondering why a blur appeared during that answer, on your right-hand side. Okay, so you've set it up. We've done a little bit of this ourselves in our own group. We've got genre groups of people talking to each other. Actually, it's a really obvious thing when you've got a community, to enable people to talk to each other. What are the key things you've noticed about when it works, and perhaps when it doesn't work so well? I mean, I'm thinking the most obvious one is dovetailing of genre, and like minded readers.

Nick Stephenson: I think what's been really interesting from a psychological point, is looking at the kind of people who get success from this.

People just want you to give them a checklist and go, "Right. Here's a bullet list. Do these five things, and you'll have sales, and you'll have readers."

And people are like, "I'm comfortable with that. I can take this, and I can be quite passive with it. I can sit in my office or in my bedroom in the dark, and mull it over, and get round to it." People are very comfortable with that.

But when you go to them and you say, "Hey. I want you to go and meet this person. Go and talk to them, and go and form this kind of promotion together as a group," people go, "Ooh. Oh, hang on a minute. I've got to

go out and do something. Now I'm not sure. I'm not entirely sure how I feel about this."

I literally get emails from people saying, "You're expecting me to do a promotion? What?" It's just been very interesting to see that different mindset shift.

A lot of people who are naturally very proactive ... the minute they join up, they're just jumping in there and they're going, "Right. I've got this launch coming up. Let's do it. Let's join up. Let's do something together," and they're getting these results quickly, you know like within a week they're seeing these results coming through.

Then there's other people who are kind of in the latter camp and the former camp. They kind of lurk there for a bit, and they kind of see what's going on, and they maybe leave a couple of comments and they kind of scope it out a bit.

Then, eventually, they're seeing how people are getting results out of it, and then they go, "Right. I'm jumping in. I'm going to jump in, and I'm going to do this," and they post their first promotion.

We help them fill it by kind of promoting it to our network and going, "Hey, Bill's got this promo coming up. Go join it if you write this kind of book." Then, all of a sudden, they've got 15 other authors all helping promote each other's books, and they're just kind of like, "Wow. Why didn't I do that a month ago? That's just crazy."

But we're working on a way to educate people into how to do this for the best success without putting yourself out there too much, because we're all a little bit introverted, I think. We don't really want to be up on a stage going, "Look at me. Look at me," but we do want to get the results. So we've been working behind the scenes on ways that we can nudge people up that mountain, to post their first promo and get involved. When

they do, they really do see some amazing results. It's been really cool. And like you said about the genre, is, we started tracking who's writing what. We're tracking, I think, 47 different genres at the moment. We don't want to get too granular, because what you'll end up with is, everyone thinks they write this unique genre, so you just end up with like 3,000 people all writing in a different genre.

We're trying to group it a little bit. But we're seeing interesting things. We've got mysteries and thrillers, and romance, and sci fi/fantasy are all the big ones.

Then we see all the sub-genres and spin-off genres are coming in as well. There's lots of people writing Westerns and cowboy fiction, and all kinds of different combinations thereof.

We use that tagging to try and match them up a little bit, and see who's writing this, who's writing that. Let's try and target you with what you're interested in, and try and help you that way.

It's very key that we make sure people are kind of at the same level-ish, and writing in a similar genre, so that that's a good mix. By the merit of them being in the group, I believe that they are kind of a good fit for themselves already, because they've shown that initiative, and they're actually in this group doing work. So that's been really cool.

James Blatch: You're absolutely right about the introverted nature of most of us who are writers. I include myself for this.

I noticed yesterday somebody posted in our Facebook group. They were asking if anybody knew how old a pub was that we all met in at the London Book Fair. Somebody posted back saying, "Well, why don't you phone them and ask them?" And I'm thinking, "Because that's exactly the sort of thing I would hate to have to do."

Nick Stephenson: I never phone anybody. I hate to.

James Blatch: Exactly. Me as well.

Nick Stephenson: It's like, I'm hungry. I want a takeaway. Can I order it online? No. I'm not going to eat it, then. That's fine.

James Blatch: I'm the same. I'd be quite happy if I could do everything through the keyboard in orders.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah.

James Blatch: When I walk into the bank and there's all those automated machines, I love it. Then someone walks up to you and says, "Can I help you do that?" And it's like, "Get away from me. There's a machine."

Nick Stephenson: Can you not see? I'm putting my PIN number in. Leave me alone.

James Blatch: Exactly. I don't need help from humans. Anyway, so we're a bit like that.

To make the system kind of a little bit automated or as easy as possible.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah. Among the things we're doing is, we're saying ... it can be a bit nerveracking. I don't like picking up the phone to talk to even a restaurant. Generally, I'll email them.

It's the same with Facebook groups. If they're very introverted, they don't necessarily want to post something on Facebook to get replies. Because then they're like, "Well what if no one replies? What if people are rude to me? What if they're horrible?" It's a whole big thing, and I feel that sometimes as well.

So what we're doing now is we're saying, "Okay. Fill in this anonymous form and we will post it for you, and we will get you people into your promo, without you ever having to put your face out there, so to speak."

That's something that's going to be very cool as well. We're trying to work around the built-in introversion that we all have. It's a challenge.

James Blatch: The introversion model. How's it going? Have you seen some good successes?

Nick Stephenson: We have, yes. I think one of the cool things is that because you're not paying to run these promos and because the technology now is there as well with BookFunnel and the Instafreebie, MailChimp, ConvertKit, whatever you want to use, it's so easy to set up a promotion.

It's so easy to get email addresses and send stuff out, that people are doing promotions once, twice a month now, for different things.

Especially authors who have multiple pen names, they might be doing two or three promotions a month for their different pen names, and getting people involved.

They might have, each promotion gets them 500 new readers. They're doing that three times a month, all year, plus everything else they're doing as well, their mailing list is just going up, up, up, up, up, up, up.

Then of course that means you can then sell to the email list later on as well. It really is a no-brainer, and like you said, low-hanging fruit, I think that's a great term. It's there for the picking. That's what we want to just encourage people to go get it.

James Blatch: Are these all aimed at giveaways, to build your mailing list? Or are people also running these to cross-promote books for sale?

Nick Stephenson: It's a mix, really. I think the majority of the promotions are for building email lists. That's quite easy. It's not as scary as doing a sales promotion, and because then you have that email list, you can use it later. Some people are saying, "I'm launching a book next month. Can I get some people to help me promote it, and then we'll return the favor next time." That's been useful as well, getting those extra eyeballs on the launch. We do have some testimonials put together from people who have been getting some cool results as well.

The speed that people are seeing results with is incredible. Once they understand what to do, like, "How do I run a cross-promotion? How do I run a joint promotion?" Once they know what to do, it's very, very quick for them to get the people on board, get the team put together, and then just go, go, go.

It's been really impressive watching people, because it's all their own initiative. We're giving them the structure and the community and the framework to make it easy for them, but they're doing the work. They're getting out there and really being proactive.

That's what's most satisfying for me, is seeing people take that initiative, and go and get great results with it. It's been fantastic.

James Blatch: And from a reader point of view, I think the term ... obviously if you've got readers on your list, and they like your books, you're not going to produce enough books for them to be reading.

If you're Mark Dawson, you might do three or four a year. The rest of us, you'll do one every two years. Am I right?

But the point is, that it's not a bad thing for your readers to say, in between your launches, "I love this guy's writing. He's a bit like me. I think you're going to enjoy it." There's no harm in that, also.

It should be focused around the reader, anyway, shouldn't it?

Nick Stephenson: It is. I did an experiment with this a few years back, kind of before this idea of networking and systemizing it came about really. I was working with another author in my genre, and then we were going to do an experiment. We were thinking, "Can we influence each other's book sales by kind of getting our books linked together with Amazon? Like the algorithm, will it link them together?"

What we did was, we ran a promotion together, and in our emails we were promoting each other's books, so one of mine and one of his. I would email out about it and say, "Hey. My book is on sale, but so is this other author. You should grab them both because they're both like 70% off." And he did the same thing.

What we found was, yes, we managed to double our sales because we were both emailing about it, which was kind of the obvious outcome. But also, because the same people were picking up the same books both at the same time, they got really heavily-linked together in Amazon's 'Also Bought' section, and the recommendation engine. They were very strongly-linked.

What we found was that for quite a while afterwards, for several weeks and months afterwards, we found that our sales ... And we plotted them on the graph. As they would go up and down, the other guys would go up and down as well.

When someone had a promotion and they'd get a big peak, the other guy would get a bit of a peak, as well. It was just really cool to see how you could ethically manipulate that engine, because it's still readers enjoying one thing, and enjoying the other. We're just putting more of that through in a shorter period of time.

That's a really cool kind of extra bonus you get from this. That saying, "The rising tide raises all ships," is trying to get into that as well, because readers

will buy two books. They won't buy mine and then think, "Well, I bought Nick's, so I'm not going to buy that other guy's."

They'll probably buy both, if it's compelling enough, so why not team up? Only good things can happen, and we kind of proved this with data and graphs, so it was very cool to look at.

James Blatch: Yeah, those algorithms, I mean obviously they're tiptop secret inside.

But you can start to demystify them and start to unravel them, if you do exactly that kind of experiment, in a way.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah. It's just, what does the reader want? That's what the algorithm is there to do. What does the reader want to buy? You can use that as the principle for your promotions. Put the reader first.

James Blatch: I suppose one step further forward to that would be to go into full collaboration with somebody who you're on a very even keel with, to perhaps do a joint box set.

Is that something you would encourage?

Nick Stephenson: Yeah. That's the same thing as well. You could do both, actually, and this is why I like box sets.

They are a distinct and unique title as far as Amazon's concerned, and the other guys are concerned. So, the best situation is to have your individual books for sale, and then you have a boxed set or an anthology that's like an extra title that you can use for specific promotions.

That can work very well as well. You have to take into account pricing rules and stuff, but let's say you've got five books and someone else has got five books, and you team up with a bunch of other authors, and you all put your

first book into this box set, that becomes a new title, and you can use that to do short-term promotions.

You can launch a new title, you can make it permanently free. You can do whatever you like with it. That's an extra way for readers to discover you and other people at the same time.

There's just so many options and possibilities for this. This is why we've set up the Dream Team Network, which is to say, "You want to do this. Here is a big bunch of people who all want to do it, too, and here's your genre. We'll help you get in touch with the right people, and we'll show you what to do. You should start seeing results pretty quickly." That's why it's so exciting. James Blatch: You've given this idea a title and a brand, Dream Team Network. How do people get involved?

Nick Stephenson: Well, I believe we're going to set up a little link, possibly, underneath the video or on the podcast, depending on how you are consuming today's media.

James Blatch: Well, I can make up a URL, and then my-

Nick Stephenson: Go on. This is some pressure for you.

James Blatch: ... my servant, John Dyer, will then create everything in the background. So if we say selfpublishingformula.com/dtn?

Nick Stephenson: Sounds perfect. I like acronyms.

We have set up a free trial. This is one of the things I wanted to include was the ability for people to try this out for free.

Once you're in there and once you've figured out the learning, and you're getting to know people, you can run these promotions, join them and host them, as often as you like, as much as you want.

I want to be able to give people that chance to try it out and say, "This is awesome. This is really working for me." Then, if it's not working for them, you have this free trial. You've not spent any money, and that's cool. The idea is for me to get as many people involved as possible, so we can try and educate people on, A, it's not that scary. B, we'll show you how to do everything, and C, we'll help you hook up with the right people, the right authors in your genre, so that you can do these promotions quickly and start seeing results.

So, we've got that free trial set up for you, 30 days free. You get access to the community, all the video training. We also have a messenger notification system as well, all kinds of extra-cool things that you can see, and it's all going to be at that link for you, if you want to check it out. I'd love to see you over in the group, and we'll definitely help you get set up quick. James Blatch: Just visit selfpublishingformula.com/dtn, Delta Tango November, and you can get involved in that. Great. Well, you mentioned bots. We mentioned those at the beginning.

Is there anything before we sign off, Nick, that's hot that we should know about? What's new, what are you pioneering with?

Nick Stephenson: Bots is the focus at the moment, and it's been very interesting. I think if you have been aware of the internet marketing space over the last couple of months, you'll have seen all this excitement about messenger bots and all these courses coming out about it.

I try to take everything with a pinch of salt, because most of these new platforms tend to do okay, and then dwindle horribly over time. But what I wanted to do was really test this out, because it has a lot of potential. So if you have a second way of reaching someone directly, that's only going to be a good thing. But I wanted to make sure all of these crazy stats that people were talking about, like 100% open rates and 70% click rates, were actually true, and do they hold up? That's the key thing.

We've been really, really hammering it for the last couple of weeks. We haven't compiled the data yet, but it does look very promising only if you're using it in a particular way.

So there's a different mindset to email versus messenger, and we're just starting to learn how that affects the metrics.

I don't have a conclusion as yet, but I definitely will soon. That's been really fun to do, as well.

But otherwise, it's the same sort of principles as always. Get traffic to your book pages, get them onto an email list, build trust and sell.

And whatever tools help you do that, it doesn't matter, as long as it works for you. So we're trying to find these new things and make sure they work, and then we'll tell everybody about them if we think it's worth doing.

James Blatch: Yeah. It's funny how the different ways of talking to people require a different tone.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah. Exactly.

James Blatch: It's an important thing that people need to understand. There's no copy and pasting in this business. Well, there's actually a reasonable amount of copy and pasting in this business, but for different channels you have to have a different voice.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Great. Nick, thank you so much indeed. It's been, as always, a great pleasure to talk to you. The odd interesting sight in the background as well.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah. It's different every time. It's usually a dog or a cat.

James Blatch: There's a lot of stuff coming out of the fridge. We should say it is 90 degrees in the UK today.

Nick Stephenson: It's ridiculous.

James Blatch: We're not used to this, us Brits, are we? We sort of start bursting into flames.

Nick Stephenson: No. We like it because we can then complain about it.

James Blatch: Yes, exactly.

Nick Stephenson: It's like, "It's hotter than the Bahamas today."

James Blatch: Which is a problem.

Nick Stephenson: The whole country shuts down. And we don't have air conditioning. We only get this hot three days a year.

James Blatch: No. We can sit in our car.

Nick Stephenson: We have to sit and suffer. Yeah.

James Blatch: Well, you can't sit in your car, because it's probably at the shop.

Nick Stephenson: I can sit in my wife's car, as long as I don't drive it.

James Blatch: Yeah. They're the rules. Nick, brilliant. Fabulous. Thank you very much indeed for joining us. We'll catch up again, no doubt, because you're one of our close friends on the podcast and one of our early pioneers in this industry. We'll always revisit, I think.

Nick Stephenson: Pleasure.

James Blatch: So, you haven't crashed your Porsche, yet, in the way that Nick has crashed his. Was it a Maserati? I can't remember what his car was.

Mark Dawson: He has a Maserati. It's a rear wheel drive, and I think he told me he was coming out of a corner on a wet road.

James Blatch: Yeah, he said that in the interview.

Mark Dawson: A little bit too much right foot, and spun the car out. Now my car, on the other hand, is a four-wheel drive, and almost impossible to do that with, so I've never had ... Of course it's raining very heavily in Salisbury today. I felt very comfortable. If I was driving Nick's car, I'd be very frightened, I should think.

James Blatch: Interestingly, though, your car's better than mine no doubt, but I've got a nice Volvo, and I can switch off a couple of the things in there, and it suddenly becomes quite difficult to handle. Your car's computer will do a lot of the work for you.

Mark Dawson: Oh, no, I know. Before I bought my car I had a track day involving things like skid pads and things. You can switch all the driver aids off, and with those all switched off it is terrifying.

James Blatch: Yeah. It's a handful, yeah.

Mark Dawson: With them on, it's very difficult.

James Blatch: It was lovely talking to Nick. At the time we're recording this, that hot spell that we had is over, and it's pouring, absolutely teeming with rain for days in a row here in the UK. Back to normal.

But it was roasting hot, and I mentioned in the interview that I just have to do a bit of blurring, because his son ... I don't know why would he wear

clothes anyway at that age, he'd run around the house naked, ideally not in the back of a video shot, but there you go.

Mark Dawson: Yes, James. Thankfully he's not going to be arrested by the police for a slightly dodgy YouTube footage.

James Blatch: Yeah. But lovely to talk to Nick. An exciting project which we'll keep in touch with. It could be very interesting just to see how that works.

To remind you, again, an opportunity to sign up for a free trial of Nick's Dream Team Network, not too easy to say, if you go to selfpublishingformula.com/dtn.

And yeah, if you join our Facebook community, you'll find a similar set of genre groups you can join without the proactive side from us. It's just an opportunity for you to find like minded authors, or similar-genred authors, I should say, and you can collaborate with them.

Author collaboration ... you've done this to varying degrees. I remember very early on you'd got together with Russell Blake, I think, and you'd done some joint advertising for similar books. I don't know if you're in a position to announce at the moment what you're doing next, in terms of author collaboration?

Mark Dawson: Not really, no.

James Blatch: Keep that a secret.

Mark Dawson: There's some writing going on in a couple of my worlds, but we're going to keep that quiet for now.

But yeah, the Russel thing was good. I mean, the benefit to that is that we're both reasonably well-known, and we can run our Facebook campaign for a

couple of free books, the first in both of our series. Then we can share the subscribers, and half the cost.

So it was a very cost-effective way to add subscribers. I think we each added 2,000 or 3,000 subscribers for maybe 20 cents a subscriber or something like that, so yeah, it was very effective.

James Blatch: Great. Okay. Mark, thank you very much indeed. Don't forget, you can join us. Support the podcast by going to patreon.com/spfpodcast. Patreon is spelt P-A-T-R-E-O-N. You might even get a mug, if you become a Patreon subscriber. I'm keeping this mug now, by the way.

Mark Dawson: Good luck with that.

James Blatch: Property is theft, and possession is 9/10ths of the law or something like that. That's my motto. Good. Have a great week. We'll speak to you next week. Bye bye.

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