EPISODE 112: GREAT WEBSITE DESIGN FOR AUTHORS – WITH DAVE STANSBIE

Speaker 1: 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: Hello, and welcome to the Self Publishing Formula Podcast, with Mark Dawson and James Blatch, on a gray Friday.

We're not actually recording this on the Friday it's going out, but I'm guessing it's gray, because we're in the U.K., and that's how it rolls here.

I think something went down in Salisbury, Mark, because we've been recording for the last few minutes, and I keep hearing sirens in the background. I'm assuming nothing else has kicked off.

Mark Dawson: Nothing new, but I know that they're talking about those who haven't been keeping up with my exciting life, the Salisbury ex-Soviet spy, which sounds pretty weird to say, was poisoned, literally, thirty seconds from where I am right now, and is still in the hospital, as we record this. He's still alive, as far as we know.

They're still decontaminating Salisbury city center, so there's quite a lot of it that's cordoned off, a pub and a restaurant, the Sainsbury's car park. Every now and again, you'll see on the news officers in hazmat suits, tromping around an area I know very well, a playground that I've taken my kids to.

It's all very weird. I was talking to a few local businessmen, and now business, for all it's down. It has had an effect. It's pretty weird. I'm completely blasé about it. I don't think that there's any risk whatsoever.

James Blatch: It's strange that dropping nerve agent into the middle of a town would have an effect on it.

Mark Dawson: Well, yeah exactly.

James Blatch: Who knew?

Mark Dawson: It's weird, but life goes on. Nothing changes in my little office, that's for sure.

James Blatch: There's been some good conspiracy theories going around. In fact, somebody posted in one of our Facebook groups, "Come on boys," he said. "It's no surprise that it's happened there right next to the U.K.'s Porton Down."

Porton Down is the U.K.'s NCBC center. I've been there actually in the past, a BBC a course how to survive nerve agents, and it features in my novel, would you believe.

But it's a bit of a conspiracy theory to say that the British have developed this nerve agent and they've gone to the nearest possible town and dropped it on somebody, who the Russians happen to want dead.

Of course, funny enough, when the Russians finally started speaking about it, what was the first thing they hinted at? Basically said, "Maybe it came from Porton Down."

Mark Dawson: Yes. That's known as a false flag. Thriller writers like me have been writing about false flags for ages. So yeah, I can't really see that. I

suppose it is possible, to say it is extremely unlikely would be underestimating.

James Blatch: It also happened just before Putin's election, and that happens every time he gets elected. He saber rattles, and looks macho and strikes a blow for Russia, and it seems to get him reelected.

Anyway, the reason we talk about it, it's not just a random bit of news, but this is the stuff of a lot of people's novels, and it's not too far away from the stuff that you write about.

Mark Dawson: Very similar.

James Blatch: So, it's fascinating that it's happened on your doorstep.

We're going to talk about websites this week, Mark Dawson. We have touched on this subject in the past. Obviously, it's the subject of a lot of thought that goes into most authors' platforms.

We talk a lot about landing pages, very precise types of websites, that have a single purpose, but authors also need a web presence, a shop window. People will search for you, once they start getting interested in you.

You had a pretty good website for a long time, but then you decided to go to a new company, and that's the guy who we're going to interview today.

You've had your website now, probably 18 months, something like that, I think your new one?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, something like that, yeah.

James Blatch: So people can look it up, markjdawson.com. You being a man who used to hang around in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame type of

people, having fights with rock stars in L.A. restaurants, and that sort of thing.

You've gone with this guy who actually has built his career making websites for the rock and pop industry, so people like Katy Perry, much to my amazement, Pink Floyd and David Gilmore, he works with. I'm big fans of them.

I don't know if that's what drew you to him, but it's all about aesthetics for him, as it should be with a modern website.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, I was looking around. I had wanted to change it. I'd had the same website for four years or so, and it is the one that we use in the 101 course, and the reason for that is because it's bloody effective.

It worked really well. It does exactly what it was meant to do, and it wasn't expensive to replicate it. So we were able to show students what they should be taking from that.

One of the side effects of selling courses quite successfully is, suddenly, everyone copies your website, which is fine, because it's kind of what I told everyone to do, so I certainly don't mind that.

But I decided that it was time anyway for an update. So I started looking around, and I saw the Robert Galbraith website, which is J.K. Rowling's website, and I looked at it, and I liked it quite a lot. It was very design-focused, and having a great designer like Stewart on the team, I knew that I could make it look nice, or Stewart could.

So I looked into the company that had designed it, and they're called Creative Corporation, and then I looked to, my surprise, and found that they had designed the website for Nine Inch Nails, which is probably my favorite band, Pink Floyd, Beatles, they've done some for Oasis, Katy Perry,

tons and tons of stuff. Really, not kind of two-bit bands, but some of the biggest artists in the world.

I dropped them a line and said, "Oh, hello. You've never heard of me before, but I'm a self-published author looking for a new website. How much would it cost for you to do one for me? Just out scraping out ideas."

I'll be honest, Dave's not cheap, but he's brilliant. He's not overly expensive. I think you get great value for your money.

James Blatch: Not massively expensive, but not the cheapest option, that's for sure.

Mark Dawson: It wouldn't be something that I would recommend for anybody. I'm selling enough books to make this. Obviously, it's a write off as well. I can justify this.

We started chatting and I thought, "Yeah, let's do it." So Dave then, over the course of a month or so, started to redesign my site for me, and it has been a very pleasurable experience.

He's extremely professional. He's really good. He's got a great team as well, so he also hosts for me now, as well.

It's gone down really well with my fans. I've got lots of bells and whistles, like Spotify playlists that we've embedded into each book. The music that I'm listening to, whilst I also wrote a particular book. Readers can check that out.

There's a lot of functionality, but at the same time, it is very pretty. It's design-focused. It works on all platforms. Everything I wanted, he basically did for me.

We haven't really touched on websites specifically, or best practice, so I thought it would be really good to get him on, and to bring a very professional, creative, website design perspective to the podcast.

James Blatch: It's a very modern company. I think everyone works from home, which is why this interview takes place in what appears to be the boiler room of Dave Stansbie's house, but it's the modern way, and that's how we operate, as well.

Let's hear from Dave, and then Mark and I will have a chat off the back.

David Stansbie, welcome to the Self Publishing Formula Podcast. It's a little bit unusual for us, you're not an author. Normally, we're talking to authors, even if they've got a product, or website, or service, they've started as an author. But I think I'm right in saying that you're not an author.

You come at this from a slightly different angle, don't you?

David Stansbie: Yeah, I'm not an author. I'd like to be, but I'm not good enough at coming up with creative writing. I'm good at coming up with creative images, and campaigns, and websites.

James Blatch: If people want to have a look at what we're going to be talking about today, if you go to the creativecorporation.com, you will see some very smart, very striking imagery, very smart imagery.

David, you better set this up a little bit, because I have to say, you had me at David Gilmore, when I read through the people who you work with. I'm a huge Floyd fan, but wow, you've got a guest list to be envious of, the people you have worked with.

Tell us how you got from where you were to where you are now.

David Stansbie: Quite lucky really. I've been a graphic designer for 28 years. I started just before computers, so I learned the old craft of graphic design.

I set up a business in 1990, and I've been freelance ever since, actually. So I moved down to London, managed to move in with a girl that worked for Robbie Williams, and she said, "Look, our studio is looking for somebody to design a book." This was about 2005.

Designed a book, and before you know it, every record label was calling me to say, "Would you like to work on digital campaigns for us, websites." Yeah, so I was kind of in the right place at the right time.

James Blatch: Yeah, right place, right time, exactly right. In exactly the same way that Pete Best was in the wrong place at the wrong time. In rock and roll, sometimes it works for some, not for others. I think, Dire Straits, Mark Knopfler's brother, who I think left the band just before they made it big.

But you are the guy who just said, "Yeah, I can do that," and now, you've got Yoko Ono, I think, Katy Perry.

We could name drop quite a lot, can't we, for the people you're working with now?

David Stansbie: We're a very different type of company. We're a very modern business, because we all work remotely. We're a big network across Europe, filmmakers, designers, project managers, SEO specialists, and we all collaborate on projects together.

James Blatch: One of the things I'm interested in, because the thing about website building is, website building came about ... all of this stuff's came about over 15-20 years. We can go from zero to where we are now quite quickly in this industry, but you do get two different types.

You get people who can build a website. They say, "What you want, mate?" And they can build it.

And then you get people who are designers first, and actually building the website is a small part of it.

It's very clear to me that you are designers. That's what you bring to the table here.

David Stansbie: I kind of split it into three, actually. Strangely enough, I've just been talking to an author that approached me because of Mark's website that we built. I just said the same, it's kind of these three things, really.

You've got your planning. What you want to do? How does it integrate into your business?

That then moves on to creative. How do you want it to look and feel? How are we going to present your work?

And then, obviously, we've got the development side, building the website, and then making sure it's easy for that person to maintain. It needs to be properly planned, basically, and yet creative.

James Blatch: Yeah, sure. That's very obvious, and people can also have a look at markjdawson.com, of course, as being another example of your work.

That's really why we're talking to you, because I think, for authors, every little edge they can find somewhere in an increasingly competitive market is going to be important for them. How you present yourselves, your shop window, obviously, is crucial. Mark is a fussy guy about that. It's very important to him that his brand and his image is absolutely right.

How would you have started that conversation with him? Would it have been a functionality discussion, or would it have been a brand discussion?

David Stansbie: A little bit of both, actually.

First of all, Mark had a very strong idea about what his objectives were. He's obviously had some form of various different websites in the past, so it was really just sitting down and agreeing what his objectives were for the website.

What he wanted to do over the next 10 years. What framework we need to have, in order to achieve that.

I then also noticed that he had a very creative designer, who had produced all the book sleeves. So we decided we would work with the designer to bring some extra elements, which aren't just the book cover, into this different series, to really get a bit of a cinematic feel for each of the different books in the series, something which you don't really see. It's really kind of a new thing.

James Blatch: Yeah, it is. But I think you'll be turning some heads around the place, because people do want to move beyond the kind of routine, and there are a lot of routine websites.

But, I suppose, that does also beg the question what the website is for, and that can be quite a difficult question for some authors to answer. They understand the point of having a landing page you drive people to, and have a very specific purpose. That's almost a minimalist design.

Is it important, in your view, to have this shop window for yourself, as well?

David Stansbie: Yes. It all depends. It's a bit like a music artist, really. Authors are similar in that way. You might get somebody that would like to have a regular blog, and have that as the focus of their front page.

You might get somebody that's going to produce a lot of different video material to support the book, and they want to showcase that. Or you might have many, many different products, and that's the most important thing. So it's really what the objective is.

With obviously Mark, and rightly so, it was creating a fan base, developing the fan base, and rewarding those fans with some of the first few books downloaded for free. So it's making sure you've got the right objective.

James Blatch: Do you find now with artists, obviously it's a lot of music artists that you work with, are they creating websites for specific campaigns for a period of time, rather than my website for a bit. Because I notice that Pink Floyd, every now and again would do a new box set. "Discovery," I think, perhaps was the last one, and the whole website is all geared around that.

So there's a shelf life to some of the projects you work with.

David Stansbie: Good question. Very good question.

The budget sometimes, like with Pink Floyd, they will pay to have a shop window to that particular product on the Pink Floyd website. It's usually just a quick fix for a short amount of time, just to promote that product, but a well-designed website will have that type of promotion already thought about and quite easy to adapt.

There's a lot of websites now, where you get a splash page at the front of a website. That just means the website has been designed badly. If you need to put a fix the front page, you haven't really thought about what you're doing properly. So yeah, it's a good question.

James Blatch: Is your idea, your aim, that the artists themselves, once this is handed over, this is something they can do?

David Stansbie: Yeah, exactly. So we build all of our websites on WordPress. They've got modules for each element, so it might be a blog, a news page, the books.

Each of those, you can just literally login, and you can drag and drop the order of things on the page. So you can move many books around, and then edit the content and the images. Very simple nowadays.

James Blatch: You're the head honcho. This is your company, right?

David Stansbie: Yeah.

James Blatch: You've got this team of people.

Do you employ people, or do you have people freelance around the world for you? How does it work?

David Stansbie: We're like a network really. We're a network over the last 28 years, just like many of the people in different industries, you know. Even authors, you've got this large network of people you've developed.

We've got designers in Barcelona, Scotland, Wales, developers in Poland, in Bristol. Basically, we all work from home.

We do meet every now and then. We just work. We've got flexible working hours. We collaborate, and we put a team together, based on each project. It's a really nice way of working, really, and making sure you've got your life, as well.

James Blatch: Yeah, that does sound good. That's not too dissimilar to the way SPF works, except I haven't worked out how to get the life bit yet, but it seems to be too much work.

You're very familiar with the type of productivity tools that we use every day, the Slacks and that sort of thing?

David Stansbie: Yeah, exactly.

James Blatch: Which does make this working arrangement work, basically.

David Stansbie: To be honest, I think it's the future. It has to be the future, it has to be.

James Blatch: Yes, I think so, and I think the people who are still on the commute into New York, or London, wherever it is, every day will be sitting there, counting the days until it's the future for them, as well.

Really it is becoming, for some companies, a very old-fashioned idea that you've got to have the rows of people sat in front of you, when what you really want is the work done. It doesn't really matter to you too much what time people get up, what time they go to bed, and how they do it, and I guess that's probably how you work.

David Stansbie: Yeah, exactly.

James Blatch: So you've built up this industry. I can see, as I say, quite a few big names on here. People will probably get the impression this is very high-end.

Is this a very high-end option for authors, or is this accessible for some authors who are starting out?

David Stansbie: Yes, of course it is. I've been thinking about this recently, because people will be familiar with templates, which are out there. I had that conversation earlier.

As you said, templates only go so far. They don't really have some of the really essential details, because that's something, which you do when you create a bespoke website. So somebody set it out.

I think a template would be fine. For most people it is, just to get yourself established, and maybe familiar with how websites work.

But then, as soon as you start to take off, it's good to invest just a little bit more, and craft everything around exactly what you want, and that's when people tend to come to us. They'll say, typical thing is, "I've had a website for four, or five years, I'd now like to do something, and I've got a very good idea of what I'd like to do." And that's where we come into it.

James Blatch: Okay, so realizing their vision, and I guess some people are fussier than others. I'm not fussy as a rule. But I have a more specific idea in mind than others.

Do you prefer that, or are you happy if someone comes along and says, "Look, this is my business, what do you suggest?"

David Stansbie: Either way. People are very different, so you have to work around what the objective is. We're not an expensive agency.

You've got your very large, global digital advertising agencies, and digital companies that charge thousands per day.

We sit somewhere in the middle.

James Blatch: I think the problem is, when people see Katy Perry and Nine Inch Nails, they might think, "Am I using the same person that does those websites? Can I afford that?"

David Stansbie: Music is one of the tightest budgets in the industry.

James Blatch: Of course, they've had a real drop of revenue, haven't they, since the whole digital revolution.

David Stansbie: The perception is that, but that's not the truth.

James Blatch: Well, your job is to make it look a very rich industry, and make it look incredibly glamorous, and you've done that with these websites here.

I'm interested in the fact that you hand over the websites. I'm just thinking from a business point of view, is there a recurring income for you? You don't do the hosting, or maintenance?

You try keep a contract going with people, or do you do the design work, allow people to host it wherever they want, and then say goodbye?

David Stansbie: Again, whatever the preference is.

Mark asked us to host, which we do. We host Nine Inch Nails, the Soundgarden website, but we're just as happy to put it onto a hosting company, and there are many fantastic hosting companies in the world today that don't cost very much at all.

One of my friends said he registered the domain name, built a website, and hosted it for one ninety-nine. Not even per month, one fee, one ninety-nine.

James Blatch: That's ridiculous, isn't it.

David Stansbie: That's not bad.

James Blatch: Yeah, that's not bad at all. But the reason I ask that is because, there are people falling into different camps here, but there are quite a few, particularly in the author community, of people who are frankly quite scared of doing any hands on thing with their own website. For them, it's money well spent for somebody else to look after the whole thing. But that is a service that you can provide?

David Stansbie: Yeah.

James Blatch: When you say hand it over, then people can update that, there are some people listening to this thinking, "That's the bit I don't want."

David Stansbie: Exactly, and if they do, then we have a daily fee, and we put an agreement in place, and then somebody will say, "These are the changes I'd like to make," and we make those changes, usually within 24 hours.

James Blatch: Does your work come by referrals, David?

David Stansbie: Yeah, it's all referrals. Strangely enough, we're a design and marketing company, we're typical, we don't really promote ourselves very well. We don't manage our socials as well as we manage our clients'.

But then I've never noticed that we really get any of our work through social channels. It all comes from the old traditional word-of-mouth, which is quite reassuring.

James Blatch: Well it speaks volumes for the work that you produce that that's what people want. I guess it's also quite nice, because Mark is a bit of

a wanna be Rock and roll guy. I mean he has had his moments. He'll tell you about a moment with Lemmy in L.A., if you get him drunk at some point.

David Stansbie: Rainbow.

James Blatch: Rainbow, part of your part of the world, aren't they? Birmingham. But I think there's something to be said, and now that I've noticed you've got Pink Floyd on your site, I'm now obviously thinking that I want the same designer as Nine Inch Nails and Pink Floyd. So, that's got to be a helpful draw.

David Stansbie: It was actually very nice working with David Gilmore. He was a very nice person. Very nice.

James Blatch: They're well brought up boys, the Pink Floyd lot from just down the road, in Cambridge, from where I am.

I realize different projects are going to require different quotes and so on, so without constraining you.

I've sort of hinted at the entry cost for somebody, can you give people a ball park?

David Stansbie: Obviously, you've got the template solution, which there are some good templates, which are fifty pounds. You install it on a server. You put all your content in and you know that can be a thousand to two thousand pounds to set that up.

Then you've got everything ranging to midway about the five-thousand-pound mark and then if it's very bespoke, and you've got to develop and build a store, it goes above the ten-thousand-pound mark. It all depends, really.

James Blatch: It is such a strange industry, website builders. I used to do a bit of work as a freelance for Ogilvy and WPP, and these big agencies, and we would be on the periphery doing some video work for clients that will pay a hundred thousand pounds for a website.

I would look at this website afterwards, and I would think, "That is not a lot different from my cricket club's website," which we did ourselves. It's an incredible stretch, range and a percentile of how much people will pay for a website.

But the fact that you are talking about these extraordinarily beautiful-looking, high-end websites, that kind of figure, I think is probably the industry becoming more realistic.

David Stansbie: Yeah, exactly. Those types of companies, and those sorts of budgets, it's all taken up with budget managements and meetings and, as you say, it's nuts. The world has got real really, when it comes to budgets.

James Blatch: I think they're losing clients, as well. I try not to libel any of these big agencies, because they've got a lot of money still, but they pay for large buildings in expensive parts of London, and New York, and L.A., and so on.

I think they probably do start of feel probably a slightly outdated mode. Maybe they'll adapt to survive. Well look, that's great.

If people want to get hold of you, I guess it's to go to thecreativecorporation.com.

David Stansbie: Yeah, exactly.

James Blatch: And have a sort of an obligation-free discussion would be a good start.

David Stansbie: I am always up for having a conversation with anybody.

Actually, since developing Mark's website, I think I've spoke to five or six other authors. Some that I think have been working with you guys, said very good things about you both.

James Blatch: Oh that's nice.

David Stansbie: I've enjoyed the conversations. I'll always help somebody. If somebody wants to give me a call, I'm more than happy to show them, and talk them through the different options.

James Blatch: Thank you, David.

I really urge people to have a look at markjdawson.com to see how a brand can live on a website, and then go and have a look at thecreativecorporation.com, because there are some stunning examples of a long way from the old days of festooning your front page with a million links to everything, which seemed to be what everyone did about, probably not that long ago, probably five or six years ago.

Now, there's these beautiful frames, I guess you call them, don't you? That just tell a story, tell a narrative in just a few moments of moving the mouse. So yeah, great, brilliant. So nice to talk to you, David. Thank you so much. From snowy England. We're not so used to the snow, are we, so it's been a bit chaotic.

David Stansbie: Yeah, a-dieu , it was very nice.

James Blatch: Excellent. Thank you very much, David, and good luck with it.

David Stansbie: Thank you. See you.

James Blatch: I'm very jealous that he had David Gilmore sitting next to him, designing his website. I would have fawned a lot on that occasion.

If it's about a shop window, obviously there's a form and function argument, as we touched on in the interview, but the form has never been more important, I think, than it is now.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, it's crucial. There's no point in having a very beautiful website that doesn't do anything.

For us, for authors, there's two functions really. It's lead generation, so it's finding a way to harvest our readers' email addresses. That sounds terribly cold, but to enable us to connect with our readers by web mailing lists. That's the most important thing.

And then it's telling people about our books, and making it easy for them to find the links that they need to go to the stores that they want to go to, to buy the books that they want to buy. That is the other main function of it.

And provided that those two functions are catered for, then you can start wrapping it up in prettiness, nice design, atmospheric design. That's the way we went about it with Dave, and I've been extremely pleased with the result.

James Blatch: If you've got a website, and you're interested in getting a professional critique of that, and an opinion of it, Dave has actually offered to take up one person who is listening to the podcast episode, and give you a full feedback on your website.

So basically a health check, to make sure it's doing the right job, and it's looking as good as it could be, and a discussion about that. If you want to be in with a chance to be selected for that, if you drop us an email go to selfpublishingformula.com/webcheck, webcheck all one word.

Drop your email in there, and we will then pass that over to Dave. We'll select one of you to go through to have that chat. It's a really good offer from Dave.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, again, it's something that would cost quite a lot if you went to ask him independently, so a really good opportunity to get some very qualified opinions on what your website looks like.

James Blatch: Now, just a heads up, if you're in the United Kingdom, and you are around in the London area, we are going to have a little drink-y booze-up at the London Book Fair.

Come and meet the amazing Mark Dawson, and you may even get a pin. We may hand out a few pins to selected individuals.

Mark Dawson: We will.

James Blatch: We'll announce the venue and the time. It's probably going to be on the Wednesday night, in fact it is going to be on the Wednesday night.

There's another drink on the Thursday night with our friends at Alliance of Independent Authors, but we will do Wednesday night this year. So, that is going to be the 10th.

Mark Dawson: Tenth.

James Blatch: Eleventh?

Mark Dawson: Yep, it's the 11th, yeah.

James Blatch: Eleventh of April, in Olympia, so it'll be very close to the Olympia Exhibition Center. So even if you're not registered for the London

Book Fair, if you want to make it up in the evening, check into the SPF Community Facebook Group.

We'll announce the exact location to be decided at the moment. Come and have a drink on us.

Excellent. Mark, thank you. Survive the week. Dodge the hazmat area nerve agent in Salisbury.

We're going to be talking about Twitter next week. I love Twitter. I love the fact that we have to talk about it every six weeks, because they change everything, and make it almost impossible for authors to decipher.

Luckily, we have an expert on hand, to tell us exactly what authors should be doing with Twitter, to make it work for you, and try and use that platform to sell your books.

Next week's episode is going to be a Twitter special, and there's a good giveaway with that, as well. So tune in, or whatever you do with podcasts, turn on, drop out, for next week.

Thank you very much for listening. Have a great week. We'll see you next Friday.

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