

Building a platform

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So you have this book bursting within you. You really, really want to get published. You start lingering at the bookstore tables at major conferences in order to talk to people in publishing about how to do it, and they say, “It’s all about the platform.”

You scratch your head and think, *I was not talking about shoes, or boats, or concerts, I was talking about books. What is a platform and what does it have to do with this amazing idea in my head?*

Basically, they want to know if you have enough people who respect you, like you, and/or would buy a book if you wrote one. Your platform is the conferences at which you speak, the number of people who read your blog, your Facebook friends, your followers on Twitter, the readership of the other blogs for which you write, the articles that you write.

And so you think, *Are these publishing people just greedy? Do they only care about the bottom line? What about God's calling? What about my idea? What about my art? Isn't that what matters? What's wrong with these people?*

I think it's helpful if we break it down a bit. I'm not a publisher. I'm a writer. So I'm informed by rumors, snippets, and innuendo. Through my sketchy sources, I've heard various numbers, but I'll toss out the ones that I've heard or read and if there are any publishers out there, you can chime in on this.

Most books used to sell about 1,000 copies. Since the rise of social media and digital consumption got all tangled up with the economic downturn, books don't sell as well.

Not only has the market for books gone down, but physical availability has also become difficult. If you're writing religious books that are not particularly conservative in nature, you have very few outlets in which to sell them.

We were all outraged with [Rachel Held Evans' vagina-gate](#). And many of us threw our arms open and said, "Welcome to the sisterhood! There's no way we would have ever gotten into Lifeway either!" While the Southern Baptists dominate with Lifeway, we have the [Methodist stores](#). But now some Cokesbury bookstores are closing down, even when they are smack, dab in the middle of a seminary campus.

Even Amazon can be problematic. They are a major source, but they frequently sell out. When I was preparing for a big "launch" of my last book (authors typically sell the most right after a book comes out), Amazon was sold out for months.

Why don't publishers switch everything to e-books? you may be asking. Well, for someone like me, e-books are tricky because I sell a lot of my books at conferences. Even avid e-book readers want to have the paper signed. Providing the hard copy is still beneficial to many publishers.

One acquisitions editor I spoke to recently explained to me that publishers sell about half of what they used to—so that would take the number that an average book sells down to about 500.

Each book has an extraordinary amount of editing, artwork, layout and marketing that has to be done to prepare for it to launch. Think of how much those jobs have expanded! While publishers used to have to get the book ready for the printer, now they also have to format it for Kindle, Nook, iBooks, and Sony Readers. When marketing used to be sending out a press release to a handful of key magazines, now it means websites, digital reading communities, email blasts, Facebook, Twitter, and keeping up with any and all social media developments. Publishers have less

income, many have to let go of their staffs, just the jobs are becoming bigger.

With all of this in mind, it's more difficult for publishers to take risks. They need to be sure that an author can sell before they publish them.

Not only that, but let's look at this from the author's point of view. I have just become a full-time writer. I sold more than 500 copies of my books, but I'm not on any *New York Times* bestseller lists. I write for [Alban](#), a high-quality, small niche publisher. Alban authors write books for church leaders.

Authors might make an advance (starting at about \$1,000 to 1,500). An author starts out making 8-15% of the sales price, let's say two bucks a book. Then the author tries to "cash out" (he or she tries to sell enough books to make up for the 1.5k). If the author cashes out, then she starts getting royalty checks. All that to say, the average author may make \$1,000 on a book. It's still possible to make a decent living as a writer, but (here we go again) you have to build a platform.

You need a platform to get published. But (here's the rub) it's hard to build a platform if you're not published. So what is a writer to do? If you're not hosting a show on CNN and your not related to anyone famous, how can you break into publishing? The next few days, I'll be providing some tips on building your platform. I'll start with some big concepts, and then talk about the little things.

The first tip? Understand that it's not a platform (more on that tomorrow).