

Jeffrey Yamaguchi: New York Webutante

Contributed by
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Working For the Man

Designed with simple HTML, bookmouth.com, Yamaguchi's first site, focuses on some of his favorite writers and includes interviews and links to their blogs. His second venture about the daily humor and tribulations of work-a-day joe's, workingfortheman.com, originally a zine, was later made into a self-published book of short stories with the same title. It never even occurred to him to send out a query letter for the project, having been an advocate of independent publishing. "I had to practice what I preach," says Yamaguchi, "There was no pressure and it was as fun as I wanted to make it. Any kind of barrier that came up I just went around it in some way." Having two popular sites helped him spread the word. Once the book was out he sent a copy to an editor at *Fortune* magazine. "She loved the book and wanted to run an excerpt and she paid me money. She paid the printer bill basically." Buzz continued spreading and Yamaguchi got some bigger bites. "I started getting queries from agents - which is ideal, because let me tell you when it's going the other way, you deal with a lot of rejection, a lot of outright rejection where they're not even looking at your stuff." Yamaguchi is embarrassed to admit that due to youthful arrogance he shunned the advances of agents at the time. "I wrote back to one agent about why I didn't need or want an agent - which is just the most bone-headed, disrespectful thing you can do." Yamaguchi squirms and adds, "Someone like me does not get away with that shit."

The ever-inspired Yamaguchi felt the tug to take on a new project. Thus began his third site, 52projects.com, an undertaking that was very close to him. "I didn't know anyone else would be interested in it, I was putting myself in it, more so than other projects, for me it meant a lot." Initially he never really saw it as a book or selling it as a book. "I just started listing project one, project two and the web site touched a nerve," says Yamaguchi. He started receiving a lot of letters from people about the project, "heartfelt letters-something was happening here," Yamaguchi says.

The Yearning Curve

While putting together the *52 Projects* site Yamaguchi was also tackling the ropes of the more traditional route of getting published via an agent. He was peddling a new book idea about (preparing for college). "It was a learning curve thing. If you write a good query you will get requests for the proposal." Yamaguchi reiterated that it is key to do your research on agents and follow the established protocol for writing query letters and proposals- "Do not just dash it off," advises Yamaguchi. "If you find an agent who you know might be interested in your work then go to their web site and Google their name for interviews, there are paper trails out there about what these people are looking for." The learning curve has some switchbacks Yamaguchi says. "I started to see how the process worked, but still this pitch never went anywhere. You can work your tail off on a project and it still won't quite happen."

Doin' it Write

Yamaguchi surrenders that he was probably never really 100% behind that book project which is likely why it failed. Armed with trial and error ammunition he turned his attentions to the project that was sitting right in front of him. "With 52 projects, I'm gonna do it right this time. I'm gonna write my query letter, I'm gonna do a lot of research, I'm gonna buy the Jeff Harmon book on agents, I'm gonna look up web sites for agents who are actually seeking work and see what kinds of books they publish," says Yamaguchi. Again, he got a lot of rejections. Some agents didn't even break the seal on the project before returning a fat, NO THANKS. Also, he received a couple of emails asking for the full proposal. "Again," Yamaguchi says, "they have specific guidelines about what they want to see in your proposal. You'll want to look those up or ask them so you can tailor your proposal based on their guidelines-they may have specific things that without them you'll be overlooked." The proposal may include a sample chapter, likely an outline, information about other books that are similar to your proposal that sold well and how the marketplace dealt with them. "Know your platform. Who you are as author-they want writers who already have an audience-they don't want to start cold with you-they want someone who is a known quantity. Young fiction writers who get a story in the New Yorker get a book deal because now they are known." Yamaguchi's platform came together utilizing photocopies of letters sent to his web sites and acknowledging a decent-sized mailing list. Don't try to snow them, however, because with the advanced tech they can look up the ranking of your site and how popular it is. "Your blog or web site has to be popular -how many people are linking to it, how many comments." He adds, "I was able to prove my relevance."

He sent out several proposals, but like the platitude tune goes-it only takes one. "Then I finally did get an agent who just really 'got' the project, she loved it. Once that happens your process starts rolling." After signing papers committing to his agent, Yamaguchi refined his proposal several times, explaining more of this and that as requested. Parigee became his publisher.

Happily Ever After Word

So, now what, as a writer, you just do a bunch of readings and call it a day, right? "One thing I do know as a writer is that when your book comes out you cannot pretend that you are just a writer and that marketing and whatnot is up to the publisher, you have to get involved, I don't care who you are. One book may be a hit and you'll sell 1,00,000 copies, but your next book may only sell a few thousand copies. It happens all the time," warns Yamaguchi, "You have to understand how marketing and publicity works. Publicity is an art form in and of itself."

Yamaguchi creates mailing lists and takes pride in promoting other projects and books that he digs. "You're not just a writer writing, you're involved with groups, you get published in journals, you work with a journal. I encourage all writers to have a web site and to try and do creative things with it because 1. It gets you writing and 2. It can be your hub for all your activities. I'm doing this event/I was published in this journal/look at what my friends are doing. When my book came out it was not breaking down the (print) media walls, it got some nice write-ups and whatnot, but on the web it got a lot of write-ups. People in that community were so supportive of the book and that really saved it. That alone was why the book was not a disaster because so many books are when they come out. Because you are already part of the community, getting the word out about your book is reciprocal activity."

Review Master

This type of marketing is about drawing people to you-being part of a community, much better than the ominous alternative--pleading for exposure from a void. "I'm actively involved in a community, DIY, Arts & Crafts and journaling, so I'm not just trying to sell a book, I write about other people when they do something cool, I link to them, I feature them." Yamaguchi sent out 100 review copies to some of those connections he made on the web and got 20 reviews out of his queries. Not bad. "You have to email people saying, Hey I like your blog. Would you mind if I send you a review copy to

look at? If you don't have time, don't worry about it-don't feel obligated. I never feel like people owe me, because if you have that attitude then publicity does feel gross." That said, he adds, "You are selling a book and you can't be shy about that. You have to be aggressive during those first few months when your book comes out." Marketing has to be something you are constantly doing, even between projects. "Having a web presence also gives you something to refer to when speaking about yourself-I run blah, blah, blah site. An electronic calling card, if you will. You are part of a community that people can easily refer to." And you just never know what helpful inroad that community might overlap.

About Jeffrey Yamaguchi

Jeffrey Yamaguchi is the author of 52 Projects: Random Acts of Everyday reativity, and runs the 52projects.com website. Both involve more than 52 projects. He also publishes workingforthem.com and Bookmouth.com , and he self-published his first book: Working For The Man -- Stories From Behind The Cubicle Wall.