

## Literary Trust Agents:

### How a Professional Writing Association Built an Authentic Social Network

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It was getting dark; I thought I could get in one more lap before it became too dangerous to walk alone in the park. I saw him coming from a distance, so I turned and took the shortcut. He took the same shortcut. I started walking faster to lengthen my lead, but he walked quicker to shorten it. I started to jog/walk/jog/walk, but he was gaining on me. He grabbed my shoulder and turned me. I looked up into the face of the Amway salesman. Doug was evangelical about his product. He had an answer to every ailment and a supplement for everything missing in your life. Whenever I see him coming, I run the other way.

My zealous Amway salesman reminds me of *those* emails. You know: the ones that come uninvited and scream at you with red and blue bold font to warn you that time is running out on this great deal. This in-your-face marketing intrudes into our social media when we are solicited to link, like, and log on to some event or cause we did not initiate a search for. People go online to look for information and want to connect, not to be accosted by a pitch.

Enter “The Literary Trust Agent.”

## The Literary Trust Agent

I began reading Chris Brogan's blogs after devouring his book *Trust Agents*. In fact, Brogan coined the term *trust agent*, which he defined as a person "who uses the Web in a very human way to build influence, reputation, awareness, and who can translate that into some kind of business value" (Brogan & Smith, 2009). I had started such a process before learning about Brogan, for the Georgia Writers Association (GWA) began building relationships among and with members when the organization came under the auspices of Kennesaw State University in 2006. The intuitive idea of being a trust agent—a literary trust agent—had already become the guiding principle for every email, press release, blog post, column, and social media tool used by the GWA.

### Serving the Diverse Literary Needs across Georgia

Georgia Writers Association (GWA) is a nonprofit, 501(c) (3) organization housed on the campus of Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia. Under the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, in the English Department, this member-supported professional writing association works across Georgia to "encourage and strengthen the proficiencies of writers in both the creative and the business aspects of the writing life." GWA sponsors monthly writing workshops and yearly conferences. Under the guidance of the board of directors, the executive director, and the administrator, guidelines are set for the establishment of satellite groups, critique groups, and other writer resources. GWA manages grant monies provided by the National Endowment of the Arts for the funding of guest authors to various Georgia counties. Online publications and online social media networks are established in an attempt to "educate and inform the diverse literary community of Georgia. Accomplished Georgia writers are recognized through the Georgia Author of the Year Awards" (Georgia Writers Inc., 2011).

The original idea behind the GWA, which was founded in 1994, was to create a consortium of writing groups in the Metro Atlanta area and throughout the state. This original idea was lost as the grassroots organization took on various projects and the administration of the group struggled to manage the message. Social media networking forced the organization back to its roots by providing members and the writing community with the ability to connect in order to learn about other

writing events, opportunities, and training. Current member and author J. Steve Miller says of the organization's social media:

Through Georgia Writer's use of social media, I've been given multiple opportunities to interact with fellow authors, get the word out about my books, and reap more from their monthly meetings and conferences. From their LinkedIn group, I discover what's going on with other authors and can post information about my own books and activities. Their LinkedIn presence allows me to keep up with people in GWA that I increasingly care about. GWA's website gives multiple opportunities to post and interact. When Georgia Writers set up CrowdVine prior to their annual writer's conference, I was able to connect with seminar leaders and fellow authors . . . making the conference much more effective for networking and choosing classes.

GWA also hosts the annual Georgia Author of the Year Awards (GAYA). Shortly after its founding, the GWA assumed responsibility for the awards, which had first been given in 1964 by the Dixie Council of Authors and Journalists. Winner of the 46th Annual Georgia Author of the Year Award and Scholar in Residence at Shorter University, Dr. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, acknowledges the way GAYA nominees, specifically, are brought into the social writing network:

GWA is a very tight-knit community. Our friendships are formed both via weekly email, Facebook, and newsletters interactions and also in person in workshops and in other tete-a-tete gatherings where we exchange ideas and learn from each other!

Publisher A. Louise Staman, editor of Tiger Iron Press, describes the benefits of membership in this highly networked organization:

The GWA has offered me several important opportunities.

- It has provided me with specialists and contact with people who know subjects I need to learn: creating better dialog; great cover design; marketing advice.
- It has allowed me to pass on to others how to get that first book published: how to query; getting an agent; opening doors.

- It has given me great access to other professionals in my field. It provides me with a newsletter filled to the rim with advice, articles, and future events, all of which I need to know.

## Updating the Dialogue by Changing the Conversation

While there was no strategic plan in 2006 when GWA came to Kennesaw State University, the emerging social media technologies and the need for a new conversation among writing professionals charted the course for updating the dialogue.

The first plan was to change the image or the brand. In *NonProfit Brandraising*, a brand is defined as a “collection of perceptions about an organization, formed by its every communication, action, and interaction. It is what people collectively say, feel, and think about your organization. In short, it’s your reputation, identity, and good will with stakeholders and in the community” (Daw & Cone, 2011).

A brand is not a logo or a new color or even a new web page, but GWA needed all of that and more to refresh a dwindling organization. The message thus was redefined: GWA would be about education and connection. Towards that end, GWA raised the quality of the writing workshops. Workshops and conferences nurtured members to be future event speakers. Other writing groups strive to get the big names and draw big crowds, but GWA established a reputation of helping writers who are what J. Steve Miller calls “low-profile, not-yet-famous authors.”

With a guiding principle, a new logo, a new website, and a growing brand, Georgia Writers Association was ready to connect writers online.

## Composing a Social Media Constellation

Email is not dead—not yet, so long as it is targeted and social. A literary trust agent will not shotgun blast everyone on a list about everything he or she wishes to communicate. Contacts will slowly start unsubscribing if, for instance, they are New York publishers and interested only in GAYA but must continually delete local writing events from their inbox.

Social media, event planning, and polling are all part of today’s digital package at the GWA. While individuals born into the digital world after 1980 do not implement email to the same extent as the generations before them do, even younger authors respond to the right

email management tools: younger writers connect to published emails if they are linked, tweeted, and/or messaged on social media. And with tools like Twitter-Feed as part of the GWA's home page, it is easy to update members with up-to-the-minute event announcements, grant deadlines, and members' book releases.

The GWA began subscribing to the cutting-edge email marketing tool Constant Contact in 2007. Constant Contact utilizes social media tools so that emails can be Facebooked and Tweeted after they are published. It also uses polls that can be used in a variety of ways to connect and clarify client lists. Event planning at the GWA has become, through this tool, simple, integrated, and social. Members can see workshop details, register and pay online, and see who else is attending in a friendly and social atmosphere.

Finally, GWA emails are conversational, informative, and personalized. Using subscribers' names may seem like a trick but is a legitimate strategy insofar as the administrators of GWA are truly on a first-name basis with hundreds of members of the organization.

Thus, for the GWA at least, the email system is the center of the social media constellation. Through email, the fuel that feeds everything, contacts grow beyond the membership lists. Targeted email marketing builds confidence in the brand.

### **Rewriting Author Marketing: Searched, Optimized, and Socialized**

Georgia author Terry Kay commented at the 47th Annual GAYA about the media's reluctance to give native authors the recognition they deserve. But the GWA is changing that by telling the stories of its members.

GWA attempts to expose Georgia readers to Georgia authors by optimizing features, blogs, and/or press releases for optimal searchability by Google. A press release that ends up in only one media member's inbox is missing the power of the Web. When a press release is optimized by being sent out through target email marketing and placed online at various content sites such as columns and features, the chances for greater online traffic for one's site, and thus foot traffic to one's event, are increased.

As an Atlanta Writing Career Examiner, I can write search-engine-optimized content about GWA events, members, and GAYA winners, with video, links, and pictures—each of which will raise our Google rankings.

I am sent Google Alerts (Google Alerts are searches using key words that inform you when your key words are mentioned across the Internet) on a daily basis. I use those alerts as twitter feed for the GWA website. I Facebook what other people are saying about members and then monitor my Google Analytics (a tool that measures how many have come to the site each day—among hundreds of other measurements).

Writing text that is search-engine optimized is much easier when using a tool like My SEO Scribe. The tool takes a press release, blog post, or feature content and grades it. It is not a final exam, and you can retake the test after you apply the techniques suggested by this subscription service. The service helps you find related key words and hyperlinks to add and raise your rankings with Google. You can write compelling content that will be found easily by those wanting your information. After submitting content on several content sites and press releases, I get another alert. A note from my Google Analytics account tells me that the number of normal visitors was topped that day due to our search-engine-optimized press release, Web content, and emails. The result is more buzz and more connections. People are talking about GWA like they never have before.

## The Next Chapter

With the social media constellation growing and strengthening, there is every chance for the GWA to expand its influence. GWA is working on plans to create affiliate groups throughout the state of Georgia. Simultaneously, the GAYA, which is the oldest and most prestigious literary award in the Southeast, is ready to receive national recognition, and social media are the best methods through which to make this dream a reality.

Technology will change; social media tools will come and go. Thinking about what is around the corner and staying current is what the administrative team behind the GWA is all about. GWA, a literary trust agent, will keep a vigilant watch over the changing flow of technology and new social media tools, while at the same time adhering to the guiding principle of developing an authentic relationship—albeit a digital one—with its growing membership.

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