

# A little help with the business >

## My View

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Editor

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**Excutive Summary:** *Writing, like all businesses, sometimes requires expert help we hadn't counted on needing.*

I suppose it's not surprising that business and marketing work their way into the smallest corners of our lives and take them over, sometimes to the point of dominating.

That occurred to me recently at the Roanoke Regional Writers Conference, which I founded four years ago as an event centered on building a writers community in this region. It was a modest goal, one that had been attempted on different scales in the past without much success. Writing is often a lonely, solitary profession, both by necessity and choice. Writers tend to watch and study, rather than jump in the middle and stir things up. But, I thought and later proved, writers like each others' company, even if they don't say it often.

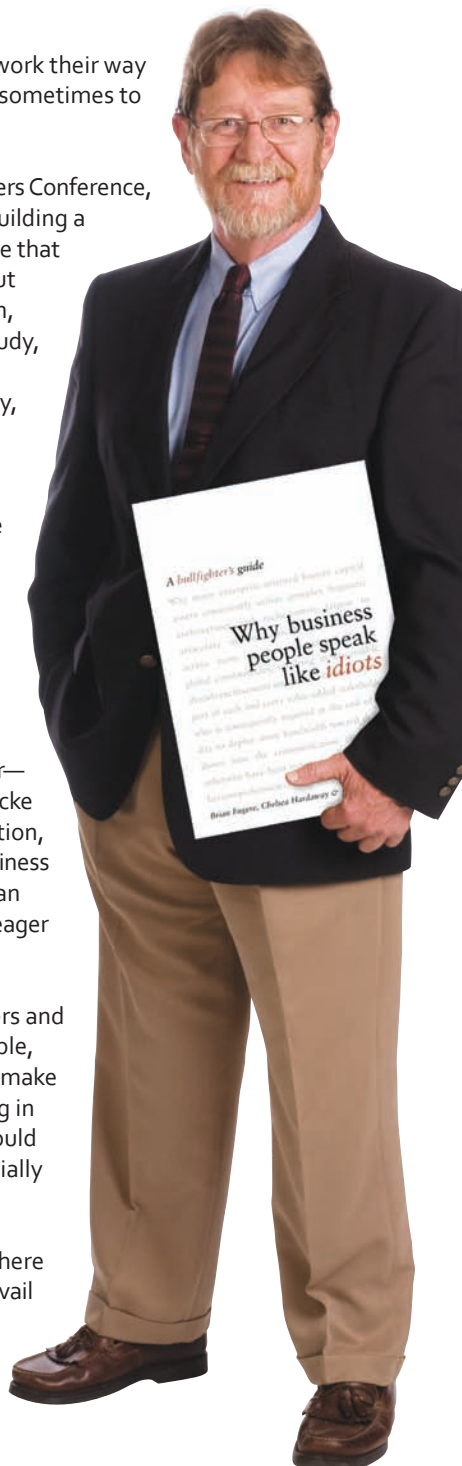
The conference has evolved over four years, retaining its core of writing instruction, but taking on the reality of the market and what that means to the writer and his work. Sometimes it means the protection of the law; other times it means help with marketing the product; still others, it's tax advice. All of that is small business, basic and essential, something we can't escape no matter how pure we believe our work to be at its essence.

It was a revelation to me a year ago when the most popular—and best graded—speaker at the conference was Gentry Locke Rakes & Moore attorney David Cohan, who talked protection, story ownership, pricing, contracts and the very stuff of business to a group of writers who often undervalue their work to an absurd extent. But it was a teachable moment for a crowd eager for guidance in this part of its craft.

This year, there was more of the same. We had two lawyers and a couple of literary agents, those often critical, disagreeable, unreasonable souls who tell us our work is crap, but if we'll make a few adjustments, they may be able to sell it. After sitting in on this class, I thought, "This kind of blunt assessment would be truly marvelous for anybody starting a business, especially when we consider that 80 percent of them fail."

The good advice for the would-be business owner is out there and it's often free, but not many beginning entrepreneurs avail themselves of the opportunity. I'm not unsophisticated in the business end of writing, since I own half of a magazine, but most of what I write outside the magazine is for

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sale, too, whether it's freelance articles for magazines (not my own), books or contract work for classroom teaching aids.


The conference had several classes on using the Internet in areas as disparate as book publishing, blogging and promotions. It was the latter that I needed immediately for a new children's book I had just published and wanted to market. That's where one of our columnists, Janeson Keeley, came to the rescue. Janeson, who writes the NetFRONT column for us, met me in her office (Panera Bread) for three hours and in that time, we set up a Web site (savinghomer.com), a Facebook page, and Twitter and gmail accounts, all with the specific purpose of promoting *Saving Homer*.

When the sites were up and the first messages went out, Janeson issued what might have been her most important advice of the entire session, "Don't forget that these tools exist. Just having the Web site doesn't mean anybody

will go to it. You have to promote it. And that means an investment of time." And how.

I am not unaware in the ways of the 'net, having operated three blogs for more than a year and contributed to our own vbfront.com Web site frequently. But that is part of my day job and it is built into that day. Marketing *Saving Homer* is much closer to an avocation requiring vocational time.

Janeson is proficient in using Twitter and Facebook to maximum benefit, and I thought I was pretty good at it. But I wasn't in her league. Interconnectivity with that community takes time and effort to build and my guess is that's why businesses like Janeson's JTKWeb are springing up all over the place. I know three different people (all women) who have gone into business for themselves in this area recently.

And that, I suppose, brings us to the point: most of us don't have the time or expertise to do this alone and if we're writers, it's especially difficult because that side of the brain is often dead. 

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Smith**

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