



THE NEW YEAR BUSINESS REVIEW

*Where will your writing business take you next year? **Simon Whaley** asks three writers about their business-planning process.*

As the new calendar year draws closer, many people start planning what they hope to achieve next year. Businesses make plans too, although they tend not to call them New Year resolutions. The words *business plan* might sound a little pretentious for us writers, but we should take our writing business seriously. Those who do, and apply a business-like approach to their writing, benefit from this process. However, before making plans for next year, the business-like writers start by looking back at what they have achieved this year.

Review The Past

How often do you watch a television news review of the last twelve months and find you've forgotten half of what has happened? It's easy for us to forget what we've achieved in our own lives, so spending a few minutes looking back over last year's efforts can be enlightening. While it's easy to focus on the goals we failed to achieve, it's vital we remind ourselves of our successes.

For children's author Anita Loughrey (<http://www.anitaloughrey.com>) the end of the year coincides with her tax return, which gives her the perfect excuse to look back over the last twelve months. 'I like to look at what I've achieved by going through completed commissions and acceptances in magazines. The process usually begins with having to sort out my taxes to submit them online. I pile up all the invoices that have been paid to me and usually feel quite chuffed with myself!'

Julie Phillips, author of *The Writers' Group Handbook*, and the writers' group columnist

in the Writers' News section of *Writing Magazine*, uses her own business-monitoring systems to review her work. 'I have a spreadsheet where I note down all the articles, short stories, non-fiction books I have done work on throughout the year: one spreadsheet for each aspect of my writing. From this I can see how many I pitched and how many I got published.'

Taking that step back and looking at our writing achievements over the last year can help put our writing business into perspective. It reminds us of our achievements, but it also identifies those plans that didn't go well. It's worth analysing why those goals weren't achieved.

'If I've not achieved something that I had planned to achieve,' says Anita, 'I look at the reasons why. I usually find I put off achieving my goal because I had important commissions with deadlines.'

Put these missed goals into perspective. The one thing we can't plan for is those curveballs that life throws at us when we not looking. What we can do is to re-assess those writing goals, because over the year our priorities may have changed. As Julie says, 'I sit down and look at the reasons why I didn't achieve the goal: lack of time, or something more important came up. I reassess how important that achievement is to me. Sometimes it is no longer a priority and I shelve it.'

This reassessment is important, because it's easy to assume that a missed writing goal



should be carried forward into next year's business plan. But we should only set ourselves the goals we want to achieve (because we're more likely to work harder to achieve those goals). If a writing project no longer interests us, and we have no need to pursue it (such as a contractual agreement) then striving to achieve it is a waste of time.

This business planning process can help us focus what we want from our writing careers. Writing magazine columnist Lorraine Mace, who is also author of the DI Paolo Storey crime series, says this focus helps narrow her review of last year's achievement. 'I think many writers go off and try to do everything. I certainly did when I started out. I am much more focussed now. First, and foremost, I am a novelist. Everything else has to fit in around the books I write each year.'

So when Lorraine comes to review her achievements over the last twelve months, all she considers is her novels. 'I allow myself a very brief pat on the back for novels published, but that's as far as it goes.'

Planning Ahead

Once you've assessed your achievements over the last twelve months, ditched the writing goals that no longer interest you, and identified what your plans are for the coming twelve months, it is time to start putting it all together. Remain realistic. 'My goals depend upon what else I have going on in my life and what other commitments I have,' says Julie. 'I make a list of everything I would like to achieve with my writing for the coming year and then I sort them into whether they are big, middling, or small projects and take it from there. I also prioritise them into what I will enjoy doing the most and what will potentially bring more money in.'

It's vital we have a clear understanding of what our main goals over the coming twelve

months are. From here, we can then break them down into monthly, weekly and even daily targets. Because Lorraine knows she's primarily a novelist, it's these goals she focusses on first. 'At the beginning of each year I decide which novels will be written: one crime as Frances di Plinio and one for children as myself. I have regular work for each month on various magazines and websites, but I also have to take into account the time required to market my books: school visits, book signing events, my own weekly blogs, guest postings, Facebook contact, Twitter and all the time consuming items that are now so much part of a writer's life.'

Anita also finds that having this overall vision of what she wants to achieve during the year ahead helps her writing on a daily basis. 'I set myself general goals for the year and then I make myself specific weekly lists. Then, every day, I prioritise this list.'

When creating these plans and lists it's a good idea to understand how you work as a writer. Then you can break down your goals into the necessary smaller steps that work best for you. For Anita it's about saving the serious stuff until later in the day, when she knows she's better suited to tackling it. 'I tend to do the fun stuff first and enjoy immersing myself in a piece of writing. I will tackle the difficult stuff later in the day, after my brain has got into gear.'

Deadlines are immensely useful when planning our writing year. Anita, Julie and Lorraine all have monthly deadlines for their article columns, which helps with this annual business-planning process. For writing projects that have no externally-set deadlines, they create their own. 'One way I have found works quite well in getting me to focus on the tasks that have not been commissioned,' says Anita, 'is to book myself on a course or a retreat that will make it the number one



priority.’ Taking ourselves away from our normal writing place helps focus us in two ways; it enables us to work on that project without distractions, but it also means we have to be on target with our other writing projects so that we can go away in the first place.

Booking a course, or a retreat like this, also creates a deadline in itself. If any preparatory work is required we can plan when to do it in the months or weeks before hand. Use the course or retreat as a reward for having met previous targets. Staying motivated throughout the year helps us achieve our targets as the year progresses.

Visualise Your Year

Use business wall planners to give your writing goals some visual impact every time you sit down to write. They can also be a great way to see how you’re progressing as the year passes. ‘I have a long, medium and short term plan that I display on the wall in my office,’ says Julie, ‘so I can see exactly what I’m aiming for. I also note down the shifts my husband is working, times I need to be transporting my daughter, and any appointments, with times I have available to write.’

Having this annual overview is also useful for the planning process. Look for quieter weeks, or months, which may be better for tackling

the larger, in-depth projects, whereas busier times of the year are more suited to working on smaller projects. Spotting quieter times of the year can help identify potential buffer zones. In fact, scheduling a couple of quieter moments, spread throughout the year, gives us time to draw upon, should we need it. These quiet slots can help keep life in perspective when things go wrong. ‘If I find myself falling behind,’ says Julie, ‘I allow myself some flexibility. I can then adjust my plan slightly, if I’ve been too optimistic with my planning. Life happens, and you can’t plan for that!’

Julie, Anita and Lorraine are writers who are regularly published, because they take a business-like approach to their writing. At the end of the year they sit down and assess what they’ve achieved and then spend a little time deciding what they want to achieve in the coming twelve months. Any writer can do this. A morning or afternoon spent sitting down listing what writing projects we want to achieve in the year ahead is time well spent. It’s an investment in our writing business.

Be methodical, break things down into small, achievable chunks, and this time next year you could find yourself looking back over what you’ve achieved, and making even bigger plans for the year after. That’s the beauty of business planning our writing.



Create your New Year business plan:

1. List your writing achievements for this year.
2. Identify what you didn't achieve this year.
3. Assess these non-successes. Ditch those that don't interest you.
4. List your writing goals for next year.
5. Identify, or create, deadlines for those goals. Use competition closing dates, workshops or events.
6. Break down each project into monthly and weekly targets.
7. Transfer these targets onto a wall planner above your writing desk.
8. Schedule some free time for flexibility.
9. Review your progress every quarter. Are you still on track?
10. Enjoy next year, and start dreaming for the year after that.

The New Year Business Review was first published in Writing Magazine. For details about the books for writers by Simon Whaley, visit <http://www.simonwhaley.co.uk/books-for-writers/>

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