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BOOK MARKETING: How to Work with a Ghostwriter to Help Write Your Next Book Interview with Kevin Johns

Susan: Welcome to Book Marketing Mentors, the weekly podcast where you learn proven strategies, tools, ideas and tips from the masters. Every week I'll introduce you to a marketing master who will share their expertise to help you market and sell more books.

Today my guest expert is an author, podcaster, writing coach and ghostwriter.

Kevin Johns grew up reading comic books, watching horror movies and playing guitar in punk rock bands. He has published six books, ghostwritten several more and helped hundreds of writers from around the world get their ideas out of their head onto the page and into readers' hands. He is the host of The Writing Coach podcast and co-host of Write Along Radio. Kevin, welcome to the show, and thank you for being this week's special guest expert and mentor.

Kevin: It is all my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me, Susan. I'm really excited to be here and speaking with you and getting to interact or share some knowledge with your listeners.

Susan: That's great. Let's get started because I would love you to introduce our listeners to this whole concept of ghostwriting. What it is and how it works?

Kevin: Certainly. I think there is a misconception out there that a ghostwriter is disingenuous that that it's someone trying to pass off someone else's work as their own as almost akin to plagiarism or something, when that's not the reality at all. A ghostwriter is simply someone who works with an author, with the author whose name ends up being on the work to help them get that piece of writing created whether it's a blog post or an article or a white paper or in a lot of instances that I'm working on a book like the project.

It's really a collaboration between me and my client. Usually they are someone who is very successful in some aspect of their lives whether they are a coach or an entrepreneur or all sorts of different people that I work with, but generally they are very successful. For successful people, time is extremely precious to them. While they usually have great knowledge and have a really great message to share with the world, they don't necessarily have the skill set get it down on

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paper in as efficient a way as they might like.

Then also if they are charging \$300 an hour as a consultant, it's very difficult for them to justify carving out the amount of time it would take to write a book strictly on their own. These type of people often turn to a ghostwriter to assist them in the crafting of their writing. At the end of the day, that's it. It's nothing secret or sleazy or whatever, it's simply someone with a message to share with the world, hiring someone to help him get that message out there. That's what I do with my clients.

Susan: One of the big things I know with writing for somebody else is getting into that person's voice. How do you go about doing that?

Kevin: I believe that voice is something that people worry about too much a lot of the time whether it's the ghostwriting clients that I have or the writing clients that I work with, I also work as a writing coach, as you said. A lot of the time writers, especially new writers are very concerned with issues of voice. A lot of the time when people are talking about issues of voice, they are thinking specifically of stylistic flourishes in some manner of their writing, whether it's ...

They don't use quotation marks or whatever. Everyone has their own little stylistic flourish that they think defines them as a writer. What I've found as a coach as well as a ghostwriter is that what really defines a writer's voice is their message. It's their unique perspective on the world.

This is why I think it's funny when novelists working on their first book are so concerned about their voice because in my own experience as a novelist, it's only now after I've written three novels that I'm able to look at these three books and pick out the similarities in themes, in styles and approach in the way I see the world. I really see my voice as an author emerging not from any one particular way I construct a sentence, but from the issues and themes that I return to time and time again in my fiction writing.

When I'm working with my ghostwriting clients, it's really about capturing their unique perspective, capturing the special way that they see the world, and that they communicate that message to their readers. I've found in my experience that when I'm able to capture that, then there isn't any concerns of voice. I never had a discussion with a client after I've produced a draft where we've needed to discuss this topic of voice at all. What we're focused on is, is this the best chapter it can be? Is it entertaining? It is drawing in the reader? Did we communicate what we wanted to communicate?

I think the reason I don't have too many of those voice conversations is that really at its heart what we think of as a voice and what superficially comes

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across as style at times is really actually embedded deeper in the writing. It's that beating heart and soul of what you have to communicate with the world. That's really what voice is to me. That's what I look to capture as a ghostwriter.

Susan: I know for instance, when I've had to hire a ghostwriter to help me, let's say with chapters in a book that I didn't care to write so about that I've got a very down-to-earth nuts and bolts technique type style about my writing. If somebody starts very airy-fairy in stories and I'm like, "That's not me."

Kevin: Sure.

Susan: It's got to be down-to-earth, so yes.

Kevin: I think it's common amongst many of the ghostwriters. At least the ones I've spoken with in my circles is that usually there is some sort of interview process going on where unless it's a project where I'm working from a bunch of existing material, and that happens sometimes. Someone might have an existing course or workshop that they want to turn into a book, in which case I'm often primarily working from the existing materials.

Even in that case I certainly am in frequent communication with my clients, but often entire chapters or whole books can be developed just through the interview process between me and the client. I'm recording what they have to say, and then taking those words and turning them into the draft. That process certainly ensures that I'm on track in terms of the way a certain person sees the world. Again, as I said, it's not so much in the specific phrasing, but in their general approach to the world, whether they are a nuts and bolts type of person or whether they are airy-fairy head in the clouds type of person.

Susan: I remember when I first had a ghostwriter, there was this sort of sense of guilt that somebody else was writing this and it wasn't me. Have you come across that before?

Kevin: The biggest thing I actually get from my clients is not that. My impression is the biggest sort of worry that my ghostwriting clients are dealing with is that they are not authors. It's the same thing my writing clients go through actually. It's that self-consciousness that concern that, "What if it's not good enough? What if what I have to say doesn't connect with people? Am I really a writer?"

Part of my process of working with them is to make it clear to them that they are writers. Just because I'm working with them doesn't in any way take away from the work and the effort and the insight that they put into making that book happen. It's not the guilt that I've seen just so much of as the fear that the fear that every writer deals with in terms of, "Can I really do this? Can I put out a

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book under my name and have people like it?" I think that's something every writer can relate to, right?

Susan: Yes, very much so. I've been through that many times, I want to get something out there and I was like, "Is it good enough to get out there?"

Kevin: The scary thing is that it never goes away because the more work you do, the better taste you develop, the more critical eye you have, and also the more you want to push yourself as an artist and a creator. You never ever reach out to that point where you are like, "Ah, I'm great." I don't have to really worry anymore. I think as artists, as creative people and as anyone trying to improve or constantly second-guessing ourselves. I think there is a balance that you need to strike there between pushing yourself to do the best work that you can possibly do, but at the same time not serving as a roadblock to your own success.

Susan: What about actually working with the author and finding that they are procrastinating and getting that author just a kick-start so that you can work with them in the most efficient and effective way? What are some of the techniques you use?

Kevin: That is a great question because that is something that surprised me when I got into this business because hiring a ghostwriter, especially a ghostwriter to write a full book for you isn't cheap. I was surprised that people who hired me for a significant amount of money were still sometimes difficult to keep on focus, to keep on track, but I think that it just speaks to the very reason why they're hiring a ghostwriter. They are very busy people, and so I certainly am respectful of that.

At the same time, there is Steven Pressfield who calls it Resistance, but there is this thing within all of us that wants to stop us from doing the thing that we need to do. This is one of the primary things I'm working on with my coaching clients' time and time again is just the simple butt in chair practice. I say simple because it sounds simple, "Do the writing you need to do."

As any writer knows it's sometimes massively challenging to actually follow-through with the plans that you set for yourself, so something I work on real hard with both with my writing clients, my coaching clients and with my ghostwriting clients is really respecting the time that we are going to be working on that book.

With my writing clients, I call it Nonnegotiable Writing Time. It's the time that they are going to carve out in their day, in their week into their schedule that they are going to focus exclusively on their writing and get that writing done. It's

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the same way with my ghostwriting clients. If we have a meeting, if we have a two-hour meeting scheduled where we need to go over something in the book, that meeting is going to happen and I'm going to hold my clients accountable to that meeting.

They are hiring me to help them out, but part of that process is me making sure that they are doing the things they need to do while I'm doing the things I need to do so that the book can be a success and it can get completed.

Susan: For many years I had a sign above my desk that said bum glue.

Kevin: Yes. It's an amazing thing. It is so funny that we know what we want to do and we know what we have to do. Ultimately the craft side of things isn't that difficult. Anyone can learn the craft of writing or the craft of cabinetry or computer programming or anything. There is some simple skill sets that people can learn if they dedicate themselves to it, but then that's just the beginning, that's the easy part, and the real challenge is actually doing the work.

As you said, butt glue, getting your butt glued to that chair and doing the work beyond when it's no longer exciting and new and fun, and that moment where it switches over and it becomes work. That's when you go pro, that's when you either make the decision, "Okay, I'm going to be a hobbyist." By a hobbyist that means I'm going to write when I'm inspired or I'm going to write when I feel like it, or I'm going to write for fun as a recreational activity.

Going pro means writing according to the schedule that you've set for yourself. One of the wonderful things about having contracts with clients is that you have a contractually obligated deadline. You better meet that, that's a great motivator to get that butt in that chair, but we all need that deadlines. Even if we are not working within a contract whether it's with a publisher or a ghostwriting client or whatever, we still need to create contracts with ourselves in terms of what are we trying to achieve and how are we going to get there, and what steps do we need to take to get there, and then actually taking the steps, which is the hardest part of all.

It's actually pretty easy to say, "Hey, I'd love to do this and I could probably get there if I did this and this and this." It's actually making the thing a reality that's so different, and that you really don't know until you do it. I'm sure as a podcaster going into podcasting you probably thought it was going to be pretty simple. You probably thought, "You hit record, it's going to be easy." I'm sure you like every other podcaster including myself has discovered there is a lot of behind-the-scenes complexities that you never even think about when you are first going into the thing or when you are just on the listening side of it.

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Susan: This leads me right into asking you about mistakes that authors make when working with a ghostwriter. What are some of the common ones?

Kevin: Something I would highly recommend, this is something with my coaching as well. Before I hire or before a one-to-one coaching client hires me, it's funny, I almost said I hire them because it's kind of like that. I have a pretty in-depth interview that I have in consultation or whatever with my coaching clients as well as with my ghostwriting clients where we really get a feel for one another, and make sure that it's a right fit because working with a ghostwriter really is about collaboration.

Sometimes when you're collaborating with someone, there is obvious things you are probably looking for like professionalism and courtesy and politeness and talent and experience and all these things, but there is also some intangibles. Some of my greatest ghostwriting experiences are when I really connect with the author and we've developed friendships. Some of the people who I've worked with as a ghostwriter are now people who I consider really good friends. Those are the people I want to work with as a ghostwriter.

As someone hiring a ghostwriter, you absolutely want to make sure that you have that connection that that spark is there, that the trust and the friendship is going to grow because you are working collaboratively. Even if you are not doing an interview process, you still need to have the trust and the faith and just want to spend the time with that person. I guess at the end of the day it's like any hiring process in any business where you need to make sure that the person has the skill set, but then you also have to ask yourself, "Is this someone I want to work with every day for the next year or the next 20 years?"

I would caution people from rushing into hiring a ghostwriter. I would say make sure you at least speak with that person and get a pretty good feel for who they are and where they're coming at and that they share the same values with you and that you connect. Then also to touch base with some other people so that you have some comparisons and you can get a feel for the person who is right for you.

For any potential ghostwriters listening to this, I would say the same thing. I think when we are starting a business, there is often this desperation to take any work that we can get, the way you actually build the business and find successes by being really good at what you do and leaving your clients very happy. How you do your best work is by working with your ideal clients, by working with people who you resonate with. Those would be kind of my advice for someone looking to work with a ghostwriter, is really feel the ghostwriter out, talk to a couple of different ones and look for one that you really connect with because it is a collaborative process.

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I would say the same thing to a writer asking about, “How do I hire an editor?” or “How do I hire a cover designer?” You want to look at people who have established histories of doing good work similar to what you want to do, but then talk to them and really see whether you connect with them or not, and whether they are the right person for you.

Writer hiring an editor, that editor’s job is to make you look good. That editor’s job is to take what you’ve already got and make it even better. When you’re working with a ghostwriter, their job is again to make you look good for you to shine for your ideas to be communicated in the clearest way possible, so you want to really be careful that you choose the right person.

Susan: That also begs the question, what are some of the questions that an author should be actually asking a ghostwriter?

Kevin: I think testimonials are huge. It’s funny, I do so much client work and yet I’m rarely asked for a testimonial, but I mean I have them all there. I have a collection of little quotes that I could drop into sales pages and things, but then I also have those people I have to ready, I would love an opportunity to introduce a potential client to existing client because I do really great work, and I leave a trail of really happy clients behind me, alongside me, then become my friends. I would certainly ask to speak to other people who have worked with that ghostwriter so that you can get some feedback from them about what their process is like and how they go about it.

I think timelines are huge. Timelines are helpful for the ghostwriter and also for yourself, and also something in terms of length as well is going to be good. When you are going in and you are discussing this project initially, it’s really challenging for a ghostwriter to estimate how much they are going to charge for the project? How much time they are going to be able to dedicate to the project? When they are going to be able to fit it into your schedule?

If you as the author or writer who is looking to hire a ghostwriter don’t know for yourself quite what you want to get out of the project, so go into that discussion with a ghostwriter saying, “I want to write a 30,000 word book on kite flying, and I want to have the first draft done in two months and I want to have a self-published copy ready to go for a conference that I’m going to be attending in five months.”

That’s the sort of thing that a ghostwriter like myself can say, “Okay, great, I know that I’m about to finish up a book. I have a window where I can dedicate four weeks to this and I know I can get a draft on this quickly.” That’s just going to make everything easier for everyone in terms of estimating rates and setting

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a path forward for how you are going to move forward.

I think also just getting a sense for how frequently you can be in contact with the ghostwriter is also an important thing. You do not want someone who, for me I respond within 24 hours. I tell all of my clients, “If you haven’t heard from me within 24 hours on something, something is wrong, I’m probably in the hospital.”

You do not want someone who is going to disappear for days at a time, and you want to respect your ghostwriter’s time and let them do the work that they need to do. You don’t want to be calling them or micromanaging them, but at the same time you certainly want someone who is there to answer your questions or to bounce ideas off or to touch base with or do a check-in who is readily available.

I feel like as a ghostwriter and as well as ... maybe this is a carryover from my coaching work, but I just feel like it’s my job to be there for my clients. Yes, I have family and I have kids and I have time that I need to dedicate with them, and I can’t be working 24 hours a day, but at the same time I feel like any freelancer should be ready to respond within a business day to one of their client’s inquiries. I would ask about that as well.

Of course, ask about what other books they’ve written as a ghostwriter. Sometimes it can be hard to market yourself where some ghostwriters have negotiated deals with their clients where they can’t say, you are the certain ghostwriter’s website. There will be six books there that they wrote under other people’s names, but sometimes clients would prefer you keep it quiet and only reveal that you are the writer on a one-on-one basis or whatever. Certainly, ask them about what books they’ve written, if you can check them out so that you can see if you like them.

Susan: Something I know that you have to be very good at is your time management. You mentioned you’ve got a family, you’ve other working commitments. How do you go about managing your time because you do get an enormous amount of work done, but obviously you’ve got to manage that time. What are some tricks that you use?

Kevin: I’m actually thinking about writing a book about how to find the time to write because this is a question I get asked a lot. People have the impression that I’m very productive so I’m answering that question a lot. I teach a webinar on the topic. It’s definitely been on my mind because I’ve been thinking about whether to do a book on it or not, but the only reason I’m a little bit hesitant to do the book is that I really don’t want to perpetuate this myth of the person who can do everything, the person who is the perfect dad and has three jobs and writes

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six books and does all these things.

I think externally sometimes people like myself, I'll include myself can look like we are doing it all, multiple businesses and family and all of that. The reality behind that what you don't see there is this veneer of success, but what you don't see behind the veneer is really, really difficult challenges and sacrifices that get made in order to free-up time to do the work that you need to do. Ultimately how I find the time to do all the things that I want to do is I make massive sacrifices, I don't watch TV.

I think there is like this hipster thing of like, "Oh, I'm too cool for TV." No, I love TV, I wish I could spend the evening sitting on the couch with my wife watching sitcoms. That would be really cool, but I want to achieve things with my life and certain things like say writing novels. In order to have the time to do that, I simply can't watch TV. It's just part of my life right now. Somewhere down the road, maybe I will free-up the time to be able to do that, but it's not like I'm doing all this stuff and watching TV and going bowling on the weekend and getting drunk with the guys at the bar. I work really, really hard, and I have very little downtime.

That's not a very sexy answer. It's not something that the package up in a book and to sell, but it's the reality. We all have the same amount of hours in each day. Every one of us has to make a decision about where we are going to dedicate our energy and how we are going to spend our time. A lot of the time that involves working when I would rather be spending more time with my kids or relaxing on a beach or whatever. That's just it.

That's how you find success in life is you make the difficult choices that other people aren't willing to make, and you keep pushing on when life gets tough and when you get tired and when the writing is not fun anymore. You ask anyone who has produced any amount of work, that's what they are going to tell you.

There is no secret productivity button, there is no app that you're going to download and suddenly be able to do twice as much. The real secret to productivity, the secret to [inaudible 00:25:06] to write is making the choice to let-go of things that might be more fun so that you can carve out the time to do the things that you need to do.

Susan: What a pity! I really thought there was a magic wand or some potion.

Kevin: Wouldn't it be nice?

Susan: Yeah.

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- Kevin: If you come across it please let me know because man, I would love it. I would love it, but I haven't come across it so far.
- Susan: Kevin, have our listeners know how they can get hold of you.
- Kevin: My website is www.KevinTJohns.com and you can pop over there, there is my podcast there, there is my blog. You can download a free guide called The Novel Writer's Roadmap, and get on my email list and I'll send you updates when I have new things to say. That's best way. That's my home base, best place to find me on the web. I'm also floating around on all the social media, so you can have me down on Facebook and Twitter, on LinkedIn, on Pinterest.
- I've been using Snapchat recently, but primarily just my daughter and I, they have these cool filters [inaudible 00:26:13] I think you have a dog face or whatever, and my daughter just loves it. I haven't been through too much networking or marketing on Snapchat yet, but Pinterest I'd say that one. If there is a social media I'm on it. You can look me up there, but really KevinTJohns.com is the best place to find me.
- Susan: Excellent. If you were to leave our listeners with a golden nugget of information, what would that be?
- Kevin: My focus recently and the advice I've been giving is just perseverance, that ultimately sticking with it and pushing through is really going to be how you are going to achieve anything, and whether it's building a business or starting a podcast or writing a book or finding the right ghostwriter, it's the people who don't give up when it gets tough who achieve the things that they want to achieve and see the success that we all hope for.
- I would just urge all your listeners whatever challenge you're dealing with right now, whether it's self-doubt, unable to leverage things where you're not seeing the momentum or whatever it is that's blocking you or preventing you or holding you back, push through. Don't give up, believe in yourself, keep working at it and you are going to get to where you want to be eventually.
- Susan: What wise words, thank you. Thank you so very much for taking precious time out of your day to listen to this interview. I sincerely hope that it sparks some ideas you can use to sell more books. Here is wishing you much book marketing success.