



Episode 28:



Jessica Strawser
Editorial Director, Writer's Digest

Dana Dobson: Hello everyone! Welcome to Episode 28 of the Media Pro Spotlight podcast. I'm Dana Dobson of Dana Dobson Public Relations, and this podcast is a conversation with a member of the real, working media to learn how they do their jobs, and to help you learn how the media operates in case you're interested in getting more exposure for your self or your business.

All my writer friends out there are going to love this week's guest, Jessica Strawser, because she's the editorial director of *Writer's Digest*, North America's leading publication for aspiring and working writers since 1920. She's also a very talented writer who has recently released her own novel called *Almost Missed You* (St. Martin's Press), which has been named to Barnes & Noble's Best New Fiction list in March, and to PopSugar's "Best Spring Reads." Jessica's essays have appeared in *The New York Times' Modern Love*, *Publishers Weekly* and she presents at writing conferences nationwide.

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If fact, if you do that, I will send you a free, digital copy of my new book, “How to Reach Millions with Artful PR.” Send me an email to let me know you’ve left a review, and I’ll send you my book along with my deepest appreciation.

Also, you can download a complete transcript of this interview and view additional links and resources on the podcast page of my website, danadobson.com, click on Podcasts, and then Episode #28.

So now, onto the show. Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like you to meet Jessica Strawser.

Dana: So hey Jessica, welcome to the show, it's so nice to have you here.

Jessica: Thanks for inviting me, thanks for having me.

Dana: Oh, our pleasure. So listen, I wondered if we could just start out with you just explaining who you are and what you do.

Jessica: Sure. I am the editorial director for Writer's Digest, which is a publication for aspiring and working writers. We've been around since 1920. We're the largest publication for writers in North America, and we also have a huge brand of other products and events. Then we have a Writer's Digest book line, we have a very vibrant website and social media following, we have in-person conferences and events that we do throughout the year, including a huge conference in New York City that we do every August, draws about 1000 writers, editors, agents, industry professionals to the Hilton in Midtown, Manhattan. And we do online education, we have a Writer's Digest University that does online courses, we do live webinars, tons of stuff. So all kinds of content serving the writing audience.

Dana: Great. What is your circulation, would you say?

Jessica: For the magazine?

Dana: Yeah.

Jessica: Probably about 90,000 print for the magazine, and then the website I think gets like two million visitors a month.

Dana: Oh my goodness, yeah. Yeah, and I'm on your website now and you've got everything in here from soup to nuts and every kind of genre and every kind of article that any writer would ever want to read. I was just curious scrolling through this, have you noticed a trend or a surge in the popularity of genres that writers are putting out there right now, or trying to put out there right now? Is it memoirs, is it not nonfiction? Any trends that you're seeing?

Jessica: Well, so writers are often cautioned not to follow trends because publishing works so slowly, anything that you're pitching now would likely not be on a shelf for two years or more, so a trend that you're seeing as very hot might already be over if you were trying to pitch it right now. But I don't think it's in nonfiction. Lots of young adult fiction has been very very strong in recent years, and then just ... I think blending genres in adult fiction. Domestic suspense is really hot right now, with books like "Gone Girl" and all the other books with "girl" in the title that have come out over the past few years. But you know, there isn't any one particular trend, and we serve all kinds of writers, whether it's freelance writers looking to get bylines in online and print markets, or novelists or memoirists ... A little bit of everything.

Dana: Great, okay. And you have a novel that's out there right now too, and I definitely want to talk about that more in a little bit, but first could you explain to us the journey that got you from regular human being to the editor of Writer's Digest? What was your life like that got you to this point?

Jessica: I was trained as a journalist. I went to Ohio University's Scripps School of Journalism, which is a really good journalism school and they actually have a magazine track, so I was a magazine major there. I worked for the student-run daily newspaper, so for the magazine, and Writer's Digest was actually my first job out of college. I came on-board as an assistant editor, and then I left for several years. I did a lot of book editing, I spent a year in marketing and public relations, I did

some freelance writing, and then after several years in book editing I came back to Writer's Digest in 2008 as editor-in-chief.

Dana: That's great, so you do have a little bit of a taste of PR and what that's like professionally, so that's ...

Jessica: A little bit, and I think that writers these days are ... More and more is asked of them in terms of marketing their own work, so it would definitely behoove anyone to have that sensibility.

Dana: Right, right. So just in scrolling through all this wonderful content on your website, how much of your material is contributed content?

Jessica: A lot of it, I would say probably about 75% freelance written for the magazine.

Dana: Wow.

Jessica: Yes, we have a very small staff, so lots of opportunities for freelance writers.

Dana: Okay, and what is the best way of somebody to get your attention in terms of a story idea or an article that they would like to contribute to you?

Jessica: Our submission guidelines are on our website, I think it's writersdigest.com/submissionguidelines. There might be a hyphen in there. But the Inkwell department of the magazine is the easiest place to begin. That is our upfront section. I think that's the easiest place to bring into a lot of publications. There tends to be shorter content there so you're pitching the editor maybe a 1000 word or 1200 word article, rather than pitching a longer feature, but there are trend pieces, there are personal essays, there are first person perspectives, but then also more journalistic reporting. Sometimes we even do short little profiles up there, so I think the Inkwell department is the easiest place to break in if you're a new contributor, and it's also where we are kind of the most open to taking a chance on something new in terms of content, even if it seems like it might not fit with something that we've done before.

Dana: Okay, so I will put a link to the contributors' guidelines in our show notes today, so that everybody can go there and read them through and see what's expected and what you might be looking for.

Jessica: That would be great. We also have a column inside that Inkwell department called "five-minute memoir," and it's shorter personal essays that are just like 600 or 700 word reflections on the writing life, and they can be about anything. They can be moving, they can be humorous, they can be insightful, and that's a really good place for new writers to break in as well.

Dana: Okay, wonderful. Yeah, so I was looking at your writer's page for your book, it's called "Almost Missed You." What's it about?

Jessica: So this is my debut novel, and it is a blend of ... It's a book club sort of book, it's a blend of women's fiction and suspense, and it's about a young family on their first family vacation, and the husband takes off in the middle of the vacation with their son and just vanishes, and his wife is completely blindsided by why he has done this, and that's the crux for this story.

Dana: Oh, okay. Well, that sounds exciting. How long did it take you to write it, and what was your process, if you have one?

Jessica: I actually had an earlier novel that did land me an agent, but the agent was never able to find a publisher for that novel, but while that first novel was out on submission for about a year and a half and I was very slowly collecting rejections, I wrote this novel while I was waiting, and then I parted ways with that agent, but I was able to sign with a new agent who sold this novel very quickly, within two weeks.

Dana: Oh my goodness. I bet that was a relief.

Jessica: It was. It was a little bit of a culture shock after I had sort of gotten used to waiting around.

Dana: Yeah. Do you keep the rejections that you get, do you ... Come tack them to your wall, like some people do?

Jessica: I don't ... Well, I have them in a folder in my inbox, but I try not to look at them.

Dana: Yeah. Bad vibes. So you went the traditional publishing route.

Jessica: I did, but we have a lot of writers in our audience who pursue self-publishing as well.

Dana: Right, right. Well, I looked at your website and I am certainly going to put the link to that in the show notes as well because your platform is beautiful.

Jessica: Thank you.

Dana: And clearly professionally done, and I wondered if you had any advices to ... Any advices. That's a plural of the word "advice." What advice could you give to a writer, an aspiring writer or someone who has self-published, to creating a platform? What is a platform and why is that important?

Jessica: Well, whenever I try to define the word "platform," I usually think about it literally. You know, something that you can kind of stand up on to stand out in a sea of people that would allow people who are looking for you to find you. So it could be a successful blog, it could be speaking engagements at certain kinds of events, depending on what kind of writing you're doing. Something that makes you visible, either online or off or ideally both, to your target audience. And for every writer, they're going to ... You should go about building that in a way that makes sense for you and the type of work you're trying to do, but also that you enjoy. I think you don't want to force something that you don't want to do, because it's probably not gonna be as successful. So if you really don't like the idea of maintaining a blog, then don't start one, you know? Find another way to try to be visible.

Dana: Right, right. Just kind of follow-

Jessica: I also think-

Dana: Oh, go ahead.

Jessica: No no no, go ahead.

Dana: I was just kind of mirroring what you said, is just go with your strengths and know what you can deliver well and what you enjoy.

Jessica: Yeah, I think a lot of people feel pressured. They feel that they have to be doing ... You know, when people look up the definition of a "writer's platform" or an "entrepreneur's platform," I think a lot of people feel like they have to check the boxes and they have to be everywhere, and there are so many places to be now. You know, there's Facebook, there's Twitter, there's Instagram, there's Tumblr ... And you know, you don't have to do all of those things. I think you can pick just a few things and concentrate on doing them well, and that is just as effective.

Dana: Right. Right, that's good. It's more, moving with flow. You keep hearing that it's necessary to have a platform or a demonstration of thousands of followers before a publisher will really give you serious consideration, is that true?

Jessica: You know, I don't ... It's one of those things that depends on who you ask, but more and more I've been hearing that, especially for fiction, it's not necessarily true. You just have to be willing to build that and to let your publisher give you a little bit of guidance in building it. For nonfiction, I think it might be a little bit more true. There's so much competition that people are really looking for someone who is maybe a little bit of an authority on something, but it's certainly not a rule. I mean, if you have an idea for a great memoir or personal story and nobody knows who you are, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't write it, you know? And I have also heard too that the magic numbers that we used to ... "Okay, if you have 10,000 followers on Twitter, that is a good enough platform." Publishers are kind of starting to realize that those numbers don't necessarily translate. You could have that many when you start out and then the book does not sell, or you could have way fewer than that and then the book takes off, so there's really no formula. And also, so many people I think are sort of gaming the system. I mean, you can like buy followers now, right? So I think it's

sort of, when enough people game the system then the system doesn't really mean as much anymore.

Dana: Yeah. Yeah, that's for sure. If there's a way around it, people find it.

Jessica: Exactly. You know, I think when looking to build visibility too, I think the important thing is just not to be too singularly focused on what your end goal is. So for example, overall I'm really passionate about my editorial life of course, but in my personal life, I am the most passionate about my fiction writing and really putting my energy there, but I would say two of the things that have garnered me the most outreach to a new audience over the past few years have actually been personal essays that I've managed to place in certain markets. I had an essay in the New York Times Modern Love column, and I had an essay in Publisher's Weekly around the time that my book came out that went a little bit viral online. It was about how bizarre it was to be the editor of Writer's Digest and to be collecting all those rejections in my off-hours at the same time, and so I think even if you're focused on fiction writing or if you're focused on starting a certain kind of business, don't be shortsighted about that. Look for other ways.

If you have a strong voice and you have a good idea for an essay for a really well-read market, you should pitch it. At the end of those bylines, usually there's a bio leading back to you and your website, and so I think just being diverse in your outreach and the places that you look to get yourself out there can be really helpful, regardless of what your primary focus is, or regardless of what your end goal is, and when you talk about platform building too, it doesn't necessarily have to be newer forums like Snapchat. It can be placing an essay in an old, respected venue like Publisher's Weekly, you know?

Dana: Right. Right, okay. So I imagine you see hundreds and hundreds of query letters requesting to get an article published in Writer's Digest. Just looking on the dark side for a moment, what are some of the mistakes people make that are likely to get them rejected?

Jessica: I think the the number one, the most common mistake I see is when it is obvious that the writer has never seen a copy of the magazine, has

no familiarity with the market that they're pitching. You might think that you are pulling off your query or your pitch, you might think that you're faking your way through but it is very obvious to the editor. We can tell, and if you aren't familiar with our voice or our approach, that doesn't give us any confidence that you are going to be able to deliver something that fits within that. So I think the number one thing is that if you're looking to submit to a market, you should pick up an issue. I'm not saying you need to be a regular subscriber or anything but certainly page through and look at the sorts of things that they publish. Don't just query cold. It's going to make your pitch better in ways that you might not have thought of on your own.

Dana: Right, so they need to do their research before they even think about reaching out to you.

Jessica: We have a ton of pitches that are completely outside of what we would normally publish, and it's just ... It makes me feel for the writer too because it's not a good use of their time to be sitting there sweating over a query letter that is not even in the ballpark. Keep the audience of the publication that you're pitching in mind, and particularly with a publication like Writer's Digest. We have a specialized audience of writers and so if the piece is not angled in a way that would appeal to that audience, then it's not going to be for us.

Dana: Okay, yeah. So research.

Jessica: Yeah, research is the number one thing. I think editors will forgive a lot of things in a query if we like the idea. Editors are not playing some game of "gotcha," reading through the query letter looking for a reason to reject it. We are looking for a reason to say yes, so if they like the idea but you don't have any experience, they might take a chance on you. And if you formatted the letter wrong or there was some kind of misstep in there but we still like the whole thing overall, you might very well still get the assignment. So I think it's not so much about following all the rules to the letter as it is about making an honest effort.

Dana: Right, okay. And should a writer write the piece before pitching you, or should they wait to hear whether you're interested before they begin writing?

Jessica: Well, every publication is different and usually departments within it will be different also, so for us, for almost every section of the magazine we prefer the pitch, because we might like the idea but we might want to have some input into exactly what your approach is. "Okay, I really like this idea but we had another article that was a little bit like this last year, so I'd like for you to angle this to be completely different from the last thing we published and here's an idea for how you could do that." So querying us upfront with just the idea gives us the opportunity to work with you on the article and on the assignment, but for an essay column for instance, like the five-minute memoir column that I mentioned earlier in our Inkwell department, for that the success of the piece is very dependent on the execution, not just on the concept, and on your actual writing style. The actual writing style is much more important than the topic for most essay columns, and so for those you would submit the completed essay on spec.

Dana: Oh, okay. Right, right. So-

Jessica: And it's only 600 words, so it's not as if you're spent a week on it.

Dana: Oh, piece of cake. Piece of cake.

Jessica: Exactly. You could do that with your eyes closed, right?

Dana: Oh, that's nothing. So how many emails would you say you got on a daily basis?

Jessica: You mean in the submissions inbox?

Dana: Yeah.

Jessica: Oh gosh, maybe 25 a day?

Dana: Wow. Wow.

Jessica: Something like that.

Dana: And does it matter if you're familiar with a writer? My point is, is that some editors have said that they work with some writers regularly, and when they see a subject line and know it's from that particular writer, they're more likely to open it than they would if they had no relationship with that person. Is it that way for you or do you painstakingly go through every one, or what's the determination of whether or not you open that submission?

Jessica: It's both. I mean, we open every submission. People that I've worked with before are not sending queries to the submissions inbox, they're emailing directly at this point, so we do have a regular kind of stable of contributors that we work with again and again, but we're also very open to new writers and we read and carefully consider every single query that we receive.

Dana: Oh, well that's lovely. That's nice to know. You don't go in there and go, "Delete. Nope, don't know them, delete, no." You're looking at all of them, so that's good.

Jessica: No, not because ... Maybe because the pitch isn't right for us, but certainly because we don't know them. And in fact, we're always looking for new talented writers.

Dana: Oh, very encouraging.

Jessica: And I think too that ... There's actually a presentation that I give sometimes at writer's conferences and it's called, "How to become a regular contributor to any publication." And that is what you want to be, ultimately. I'm not talking about being a columnist, I'm just talking about being someone who regularly pitches feature ideas and has them accepted, and I think that every ... Because you know, once you have those relationships with those editors established, it's less work on your part and it's more steady bylines and checks coming in, but I think that it's important for writers to know that every assignment is an opportunity to become a regular contributor for that publication, and sometimes it's actually a lot simpler than you might think. I think if you do a really good job on your first assignment, then when that

assignment is over, within the next month or so, you should pitch the editor again. So many writers do not follow through and do that, and it's kind of a missed opportunity, especially if you just had a really good experience with your first article.

Dana: So what is a day in the life like for an editor-in-chief? When you walk in, what do you do all day?

Jessica: Mostly I just kind of like hang out on Facebook and let everybody else run the ship ... No, I'm just kidding. Our staff is really small. I think that's probably something that you hear more and more from magazines, publishers have cut back internal resources. So for us at least, our staff is really small. We currently have about three and a half editors, including myself. And so, just kind of depends on where we are in our production schedule on any given day. My role is to acquire and assign the features, and to work with those authors on their articles, with any revisions we need to see, but then I also sign off on everything that goes in the magazine. Everything crosses my desk probably at least three times, including all of the columns.

We have eight regular issues of Writer's Digest, it's kind of an odd publishing frequency but we're eight times a year, and then we also do four special issues that are available only on newsstands every year, so that's 12 issues and two of those newsstand supplements are longer ... We call them "bookazines," they're sort of like a cross between a magazine and a book, and it's a higher price point product. Very often we're working on a regular issue of the magazine and a special newsstand issue at the same time, so a typical day just depends on where we are in that schedule. Could be largely acquisitions, it could be largely proofing things ... And then as editorial director, I also have a lot of responsibilities in addition to the magazine, so I might be working on programming for one of our conferences, or giving my input into what our website refresh should look like. I might be tweeting from the Writer's Digest account about a guest blogger that we're hosting that day. So it really varies from day to day and it's a little bit of everything.

Dana: Wow. In any case, you seem to be very very busy.

Jessica: Very very busy, yes.

Dana: So you've got a writer's conference coming up in August in New York, what happens there? Now I happen to know that going to these writer's conferences is a wonderful, rich experience. You meet lots of people, you meet editors. What specifically goes on at the annual conference that you can describe to people so that they will go?

Jessica: I think one of the most popular features of this particular conference, it's called a pitch slam. We have about ... I think this year it's going to be about 60 literary agents, and they sit in a room to take pitches, and they're timed pitches. You only get a few minutes with each agent, but if you have a project that's ready to pitch, whether it's a nonfiction book proposal or a novel ... If you have a project that's ready to pitch, those can be valuable face-to-face interactions that can kind of take away the pressure of cold querying, because you find out if the agent's interested in person, they request the materials, and then when you follow up and email these materials, you say, "I met you at this conference." And so that kind of puts you above the slush in the slush pile a little bit. Not everybody has to do that, that's an add-on feature for the conference, but it's one of our most popular features.

Other than that, we have writing instruction, we have sessions ... So it's three days, it's a Friday-Saturday-Sunday event. You can register for one of those days or for all three, and the day is filled with hour-long sessions. In any time slot you can choose between sessions in four different tracks, ranging from the craft to the business of publishing, so you can go to a session to learn about how to write a better plot, or you can go to one to learn about how to succeed on social media, or how to self-publish. There are panels of agents, panels of editors, we have sessions for every single genre, and then every day is capped with an inspiring keynote address from a big name author. This year we have Lisa Scottoline on Friday, the thriller writer. We have the Pulitzer prize winner Richard Russo on Saturday, and then on Sunday we have David Levithan, who's the editorial director at Scholastic and a bestselling YA author who's also co-written with John Green. So it's an amazing lineup this year. Every year gets a little bit

bigger and a little bit better. We also have a event just for novel writers in Pasadena, California in October.

Dana: Ooh. Oh my gosh, wow, what a lineup. Holy cow, that's very exciting. I will include a link to the annual conference also in the show notes.

Jessica: That'd be great.

Dana: Just one last quick question, and I want to get contact information from you as well. Writing is, there's a lot of rejection, so what words of wisdom would you give to somebody who's experiencing that rejection and maybe their soul's a little hurt by it? What advice do you give to keep going and to have faith?

Jessica: Yeah, it can definitely be hard. My advice is to keep going and to have faith, but take a little break if you need it. Be kind to yourself. I think it's really important to listen to what the rejection is saying, and see if you can use it to improve. But also, to kind of know in your heart what you're trying to do with your work and to be true to that as well, and it's a delicate balance. I have examples of both from my own personal writing life, because my first novel, the one that I mentioned that never sold ... When I was first querying agents for that novel, I garnered a lot of rejections. There was one agent who called me and gave me an hour-long critique. It was amazing. He told me, in detail, everything that was wrong with my novel, which was pretty much everything. But he saw a lot of potential in the writing, and that was a critique that really energized me.

I hung up the phone, and I felt like I knew ... He had helped me clarify what I wanted to do, and I literally opened up a new blank document and rewrote it, and that is called a revise and resubmit request, if an agent says, "No, but if you revise with this in mind, I would like to see it again." And I did eventually end up signing with him after taking about eight months to rewrite the entire novel. So that is the kind of rejection that I feel like actually can help you, and you can grow from that and you can learn. On my second novel, the same agent and I just didn't see eye to eye on the direction for the novel. He wanted me to make it more of a thriller, which isn't the kind of writer I saw myself as being, and I really struggled with that feedback and I tried to get

energized by it and I tried to do what he was saying, but at the end of the day, I just had to believe in my own story and what I was trying to do with it, and it was very scary to ...

That wasn't actually the reason that we parted ways. We parted ways for unrelated reasons in the meantime, but when I had to go out and find a new agent it was hard because my confidence was a little bit shattered by that, but I found someone who was a great champion for that project. So I think it's a balance of, knowing when to take the feedback that you're getting in those rejections and to use it, and also knowing when it just doesn't resonate with you and it's just not gonna be a good match no matter what, and being true to your own story and your own vision of where you see whatever it is, your work or your career or your platform, and just hang in there and be patient.

Dana: Yeah, just keep going. Keep going.

Jessica: Just keep going, keep at it.

Dana: Okay, so I do know that you've got a couple of social media contact points in here. You are in Facebook and let me know if this is correct, you're at Jessica Strawser, Author.

Jessica: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dana: And you're on Twitter @jessicastrawser ... And again, I will put these in the show notes.

Jessica: If you want, you can also put on Twitter @WritersDigest, and on Facebook at Writer's Digest as well, if people want to look directly to the market, that's where we are.

Dana: Okay, great.

Jessica: And home pages would be writersdigest.com, or jessicastrawser.com.

Dana: Okay, wonderful. Well thank you so much, this has been a great conversation as a sometimes-writer myself, someone who's been rejected because my characters were "right out of central casting." I

have that one, that's a good one. So thank you very much and I wish you all the best luck with your novel.

Jessica: Aw, thank you.