

Kim Grant on Authors & Apps

“I want to find a new way for [authors] to keep doing what we love and getting paid for it – paid a living wage, dare I say.”

Kim has been at the forefront of content creation for mobile apps since late 2009. After working with upwards of 450 apps and authors at Sutro Media, she has an insider’s knowledge of what works and what doesn’t, and can save authors from costly and time-consuming mistakes. In these excerpts from an interview with American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA) in May 2012, Kim offers authors encouragement and tips.

App Strategy 101

Writing an app is always a grand experiment ... Authors have 100% control over their content and can be as creative, instructional and original as they like ...

Reference apps ... are selling about two-and-a-half to three times more than travel apps. That’s fantastic news ... because most reference apps have evergreen content ... I can point to several reference, educational, lifestyle, food and wine, cooking apps and more ...

We all want to make money while we sleep but with travel you have to keep content updated in a way that a lot of reference authors don’t. Mary Beth Klatt, for example, writes two apps for [Sutro Media], one on fabric and one on yarn ... [T]hey provide a steady stream of income. Another app – *iSPICE* – was a great seller right out of the gate. Monica Bhide is probably the spice queen of the United States and did a fabulous app. *Kitchen Disasters & Fixes* by Charmian Christie ... sold about 110 apps in one day, although that kind of spike is unusual without a specific marketing event.

[Another inspiring example is] a fly-fishing app, *Fresh Water Fly Fishing Tips From the Pros*, by Mark Williams. This guy is incredibly savvy; he’s written several books on the subject, he’s a super authority and he knows outfitters all over the country. He got them each to contribute one tip, which gave them exposure in the world through this app, and he linked their entries to their business websites. It’s great branding for everybody.

[S]uccessful apps are alive. They’re also alive with user comments, so the best apps almost become like blogs. [When] users can post questions within the app [the author gets to approve comments before they go live in the app], authors can respond, other readers/users can see these comments too, then users start asking other users questions and there is this very robust, rich community that can form, and the author can certainly help that along.

Work Can Be Fun

No exaggeration, I’d say nine out of 10 people say fairly early on in the process, “This is so much fun – I’ve never had this much fun writing.” It can be a bit addictive. You do an entry, or five or six, and then you can actually test how they look on an iDevice and that is incredibly motivating.

In contrast, consider the book writing and publishing process. We research a travel guide for six months, write it for three months if we’re lucky, turn it in, and then nine or even 12 months later, it appears in book form. Sure, we see page proofs along the way. But in an app, you can finish an entry at 3:30 in the afternoon, push a few buttons, and see how it looks at 3:31. It’s exhilarating and it’s a blast.

How to Get Started

[Two] of the first questions I have when people call are, “Have you downloaded [any] apps? Have you actually used them?” If someone has seen only screenshots on iTunes, I suggest they download and play with an app to help them start thinking expansively about their expertise and content. [One of my apps, *Boston Travel Essentials*, is free: SutroMedia.com/apps/Boston-Essential.] Then we reconvene and talk about whether doing an app makes sense.

Visualize pouring your expertise into an app. How might your book work if you chopped it up into nuggets of information? How you would organize it? How you would categorize it? Then give me a shout and let’s see if it’ll work. I’m delighted every week when somebody proposes a new idea ... it’s so clear to them, and it’s fun. People are always creating unique content and different ways of using the app platform.

I love watching [authors] in the process – I can practically feel and literally watch them getting it, how to think three dimensionally, how to view their work and expertise anew for this new platform. It’s very exciting from both my point of view and theirs.

An Ally on Your Side

Prospective authors [can] provide me with a writing sample or links to samples on the web. Once they're accepted and begin creating their app, I can help them organize the structure and give them as much or as little information upfront as they need to plan the app. Then it’s up to them what to include, whether it’s 125 or 350 so-called “entries” or snippets of information. It’s also up to them whether entries are 100 words or 400 words long. Authors sometimes get caught on the particulars, asking, “What’s the perfect name for an app? What’s the perfect app icon?” These are somewhat subjective, aesthetic decisions, but [I] do have some experience seeing which naming conventions work and which app icons jump off the page, so I can certainly give advice.

On the other hand, if authors have beloved images, their own logos, or their own brands and want to go with that, they can go with that. It’s incredibly refreshing for authors ... but it’s also sometimes surprisingly difficult because there are no parameters and some authors really struggle to organize their ideas.

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I send feedback early in the process so that an author doesn’t unnecessarily repeat a mistake 200 times, and again at the very end to catch little mistakes they might have made and give them final feedback. I’m available in between, but those are the two critical times to touch base.

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Sometimes authors say, “I don’t know how to write an app,” but basically if you can work with a Word document and fill in fields and tag things like a blog post, you can write an app ... Some people just start their apps and are obsessed with them and don’t stop until they’re done. Other people write over three or four months. And still others put the app aside for six or seven months and then come back and do it.

[F]reelance lives are like jigsaw puzzles with a lot of moving pieces and authors have to do the work that pays the bills first. An app will pay some bills, but not until you finish it and not until it’s been out on the market for about six weeks after release ... That’s a New York second, really, in publishing time.