

Building a Supportive, Successful RWA Chapter

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For many of us, one of the greatest benefits of RWA membership is belonging to a local Chapter and/or online Chapters. Periodically, each Chapter re-examines the services it offers to members, and I'd like to provide suggestions as to some of the things Chapters might consider. I want to move beyond that, too, and also suggest things individual members can do to make their Chapter experience more meaningful and assist their fellow members.

Workshops are one of the most important functions of a Chapter, be they in-person or online. Has your Chapter canvassed the members and found out what they'd like to hear? Craft or motivational? Special interest topics like police or historical clothing? Hands-on exercises? Anonymous critiquing? Talks from local authors who write something other than romance? One of my Chapters had a thriller writer (male) come to talk about pacing and male POV, and it was one of our best-attended meetings.

Do you have the resources to invite non-local authors to present workshops? If you hold in-person workshops, you're looking at travel expenses and probably honoraria. If you want to do online courses, you need the technology and administration to set this up. If you don't have the resources to invite non-local authors, draw on the expertise within your membership. Published authors should be presenting; it's great promotion. And so should pre-published authors; for them, it's terrific experience and exposure. Many pre-published authors present workshops at RWA National, so no-one should think she/he must be published in order to have something to offer.

Conferences and mini-conferences provide members with terrific career opportunities: to present, learn from other speakers, meet with editors/agents, and network. In addition, they're great promo for the Chapter and may result in new members. Putting on even a one-day mini-conference takes a lot of volunteer resources, so be sure your Chapter's ready for this before taking it on. Start small and build up. Or consider combining efforts with a nearby Chapter or writing group.

Support is another huge benefit of Chapter membership. Writing is a lonely occupation and often our family and friends, even if they mean to be supportive, don't truly understand. We are a community of writers. Who else "gets" the concept of a good rejection letter? New members sometimes feel shy about coming to meetings or participating in loops, but there's a huge benefit to be gained if they overcome that shyness. Each Chapter should have a formal or informal welcoming process, perhaps even a mentorship program, to get new members involved. And each member should go out of her/his way to talk to new members (remember what it was like when you ventured to your first meeting?). If you're a new member, the best way to learn and to get comfortable is dive in and get involved. Get your feet wet by volunteering for a committee or small task, and move on from there. If you're nervous about doing this, ask yourself whether you want to be a visitor or a full member. Visitors are passing by and don't get

much out of the experience, so commit to yourself and your writing career by committing to Chapter involvement.

Recognition is a valuable form of support. Many local Chapters give silk roses for book sales, and awards for other writing milestones, from finishing a first manuscript to selling a twenty-fifth book. Often, a Chapter meeting has a “hugs” portion, where people share their good and bad writing experiences.

Information sharing is a service all Chapters, be they local or online, can provide. This includes industry information and research assistance. An online loop is the easiest mechanism, then all you need is a Chapter that encourages this use of the loop, members who aren't afraid to ask questions that might seem naïve, and other members who are willing to share their knowledge.

Critiquing is something many authors, published and pre-published, value highly. Members may organize critique groups themselves, or the Chapter may take a hand in this. Some groups meet in person; some work online. My own has three members in Vancouver and one in Japan and we meet via Skype, a program that provides free long distance conferencing via computers at each end. For occasional critiquing, consider something my two local Chapters have done. Pooling resources, they offer a critique clearinghouse. An author who wants a critique of anything from a query letter to a full manuscript contacts the coordinator, who looks for a published author or PRO volunteer to provide the critique. Also, if you're holding a conference, note that a critique draw can be a good fundraiser.

Writing groups (let's get together in a coffee shop and write for two hours) and brainstorming groups may be organized informally among members, or facilitated by the Chapter.

A number of Chapters sponsor contests. These may be in-house, open to RWA members or open to everyone. For pre-published members, contests provide an opportunity for work to be read by published authors, editors or agents. If your Chapter holds a contest, volunteer to get involved as either an organizer or a judge. After all, you've probably entered—or will enter—your fair share of contests. If you're a judge who's published and you read a fantastic entry, consider asking the author if she/he would like to be put in touch with your editor or agent. Same goes if you're critiquing, and come across something wonderful. Encouragement and practical support from published authors means a lot to the pre-published.

The published authors are often the ones who bear the heavier load in terms of preparing and presenting workshops, providing writing and industry tips, critiquing and judging contests. And they're the ones who have frantic publishing schedules and are supposed to be promoting their books, on top of all their other work and personal commitments. If the burden falls too heavily on them, they won't be able to afford the time and energy to keep participating. So, the pre-published members need to pull their weight too, and the Chapter and its members need to make the Chapter a true benefit to the published members.

There are many ways the pre-published members can participate, including putting together workshops of their own and volunteering for one of the many administrative positions

that keep the Chapter running. Will this help them sell? Experience and networking can only help a writer to be in the right place at the right time with the right product.

A number of pre-published authors assume, or maybe hope, that once you get published you have it made. The truth is, published authors have just as many or more career threats and insecurities. They need as much support as their pre-published colleagues.

A Chapter can support its published authors in a number of ways, such as promoting them on the Chapter website, making sure new releases are announced in the newsletter and on the website, including reviews on the website and in the newsletter, and organizing events at libraries, book stores, local writing conferences, book expos and perhaps with other community groups/programs. Some Chapters hold luncheons for readers and/or for booksellers and librarians. Valentine's Day is always a good time to target local media with a press release about romance fiction, and the local authors who write it. If there are other Chapters in the area, get together with them to sponsor promotional events and advertising.

Every Chapter does some promotion to bring in new members, and one of the biggest selling points for a Chapter is the number of published authors. Every promo piece or event for the Chapter should showcase published authors. And, in return, when published authors attend an event, they should carry Chapter brochures and mention the benefits of membership.

If the Chapter has a brochure, it should include information about the published authors and be updated regularly. One of my Chapters has a separate brochure featuring the published authors. If budget allows, a Chapter can place ads in RWR, RT and perhaps local magazines and newspapers, send out a newsletter to libraries and bookstores, and distribute posters, postcards or bookmarks featuring members' new releases.

Individual members can provide support for their published colleagues by attending events so there are familiar, friendly faces in the audience, and people who will ask intelligent questions if there's a lull in the action.

No published author expects everyone in the Chapter to buy her/his books because, let's face it, we all like different things. But it's particularly meaningful when Chapter members do purchase our books and show up at meetings asking for an autograph. It's even more meaningful if you buy at a local store and, if the store doesn't have the book in stock, ask them to order or re-order it—and point out that this is a local author. Yes, buying online is convenient, but it doesn't assist with local sales statistics or local promotion for the author. Telling a store about local authors might even result in an event/signing and perhaps an article in the local paper—more promo for the author(s) and the Chapter.

If you buy a book and like it, be sure to tell your friends and encourage them to buy it themselves. And consider posting a review at one of the online sites like Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Chapters Indigo.

If you're a multi-published author, a review from you—or that marvellous thing, a cover quote—would mean a lot to someone who's just starting out in a similar genre as you.

If you're an individual Chapter member who's wondering what you can do to help your colleagues, the answer's easy. Put yourself in their shoes. If you're multi-published, remember

back to when you were starting out. For example, think how much it meant when one of the most successful authors in the Chapter came to talk to you at your very first meeting, and made you feel like you belonged. If you're pre-published, envision what it will be like when you make your first sale. For example, imagine your first signing at a local store. Wouldn't you love to look out into the audience and see a dozen or more Chapter mates, all clapping for you and waving your book? We all have writing dreams—and thoughtful, generous Chapter members can help us achieve them.

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