

# 10 Ways to Build Authority as an Online Writer

by [Demian Farnworth](#)



Picture the set of a late night talk show, circa 1983.

Allen Ginsberg is fat, bearded, and sitting in the interview chair. Long hair grows in unruly patches from the side of his otherwise bald head. His eyebrows sprout from his brow like wild hawthorn in bloom. He's wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt with a hole in it. His fingers are stained from nicotine resin.

Ginsberg wanted to talk about the generation gap, and what he was saying about the challenges youth had to face actually made a lot of sense.

But nobody could take him seriously. He simply didn't appear to be [a credible expert](#).

Ginsberg, a former marketing researcher, certainly looked the part of legendary poet (which he actually was). But nobody was listening ...

## Another kind of expert

Fast forward to 2003. There he is: completely bald, with a black, long-sleeved shirt tucked into blue jeans. This time it's Seth Godin speaking at TED — one of the most prestigious speaking gigs on the earth.

In an 8-minute fluid and flawless presentation, Seth explains [how to get your ideas to spread](#). He obviously knows what he's talking about or he wouldn't have been invited to speak at TED.

Business Week said he's the ultimate entrepreneur for the Information Age. Forbes said he's a "demigod on the Web, a best-selling author, highly sought-after lecturer, successful entrepreneur, respected pundit and high-profile blogger."

He wrote the manifesto for modern advertising: [Permission Marketing](#). *[Editor's note: If you haven't read it yet, read it.]* To say he's a credible expert on the topic is an understatement.

Godin can [break 7 of the 12 so-called rules of blogging](#) — and get away with it. Why? Because he’s earned a tremendous amount of authority by showing up day after day for years, delivering something remarkable — concise, well-written expressions of his ideas.

You and I probably aren’t there yet. If we want to find our way out of the wilderness of obscurity, we have to fight for our own audience. We have to earn our authority, just as Godin did.

We see authority in titles like doctor, chairman, or professor. It comes in clothes and colors like police blues, hospital whites, and priestly blacks.

People listen to people with authority. And that’s equally true online, especially with websites.

You won’t build authority by copycatting another writer, even a very good one. But you can improve your influence by following some proven practices ...

## **1. Act against your own self interest**

When you have an obvious agenda, people take what you say with a grain of salt. It’s like the mother saying *her* boy is the smartest child on the block.

But you can dissolve some of this skepticism by acting, at times, against your own short-term interest. Here’s an example ...

A few weeks ago [Ramit Sethi](#) sent this email to his subscribers (titled “What would you do with 1 extra hour a day?”):

I actively take pains to discourage people from joining my premium material. If they have credit card debt, I don’t allow them to join my flagship courses. If I found out they disobeyed me and joined anyway, I ban them from ever purchasing anything from me ever again — for life.

This costs me hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, but it’s the right thing to do.

Sometimes they can’t afford it. Sometimes they’re not psychologically ready. Sometimes they’re not at the place in life where it will make the most difference.

Why? Who in their right mind would openly say that his material isn’t right for everyone, and turn down hundreds of thousands of dollars a year?

Now, self interest says Ramit should take every available dollar that comes his way. His prospects are adults — they can make their own decisions. He could also rationalize it by saying that his program will help them get out of debt or grow up financially.

But he doesn’t. He cares about these people. And when a communicator has nothing to gain — and possibly something to lose — we trust him or her.

This was the objective of the 60s ad agency Doyle Dane + Bernach when [selling the world’s ugliest car](#): they flaunted its dysfunctions. When you mention weaknesses before strengths, you lower resistance to arguments and generate more belief.

## **2. Try the “convert effect”**

Who are you more likely to believe:

- A person who grew up thin, confident, an all-star high school and college athlete raised by Olympic-caliber parents, touting a fitness program based on eating french fries and sprinting up a 40-foot ladder for seven minutes every day ...
- Or, someone who struggled with obesity their whole life, grew up in a family more interested in barbeque than barbells, and is a timid soul — touting the same program?

No question you're going to choose person B. They are more persuasive because they didn't start out as a fit athlete — they *converted* to that status after starting life as a coach potato.

Someone who's taken the path from A to Z is always more believable. We share a sense of familiarity with people who have had the same struggles as us. We identify with the convert, because it convinces us we could make the same transformation.

### **3. Play hard to get**

Most customers expect you to say things to please them. That's [why most of your advice is ignored](#). They sense a little desperation. A little boot licking. And they blow you off.

This is one of the reasons I don't suggest you ever say "I'm flexible" [when in negotiations](#). Say that, and your opponent will suspect you'll do anything for money. You don't care about quality or integrity. In other words, you can be bought ... cheaply.

William Zinsser, in his book [On Writing Well](#), notes that a lot of editors loved working with him because he defended his work. He wouldn't compromise, and when they suggested he make a change before they ran it in their magazine, he would rather pull it and give up the money. Strangely, these people *chased* him.

You do your prospects and customers a greater service when you maintain your independence and integrity, defending your hard work and turning down requests. People will see that you actually have their best interest in mind because you're not falling over yourself to kiss their bottom.

### **4. Avoid influencing anyone**

Did you know you can influence people simply by *not* influencing them?

For example, you're more likely to take the advice to buy a certain stock if you overhear the tip during a whispered conversation between two well-dressed men at the table next to yours than you are if a broker called you up with the same information.

Give away a [massive amount of high-quality content](#) without asking for anything in return, and you'll find a much warmer reception when it does come time to promote a product.

### **5. Establish a reputation for one outstanding quality**

Your reputation should be simple, based upon a single, sterling quality — strategic thinking, say, or persuasiveness. This becomes your calling card. It announces who you are and gets people to shut up and listen.

Seth Godin has a reputation for passionately spreading important ideas. That's how he got the opportunity to stand in front of a TED audience and mesmerize it. How he can publish multiple New York Times bestsellers.

Allen Ginsberg commanded attention because of his extreme individualism. Disenfranchised youth flocked to hear him speak. (Their parents, not so much.)

Discover that one quality that defines you — and work it to the bone.

## **6. Court attention**

Pablo Picasso dreaded the idea of getting lost in the crowd. So when his name started to get attached to a particular style, he would deliberately destroy that perception with a new painting style.

In other words, he destroyed his own popularity and re-created himself.

Don't be afraid to re-invent yourself. Don't be afraid to draw attention to that single, sterling quality that elevates you above mediocrity.

Sure, you may be attacked. You may be slandered. No worries. That fate is much better than being ignored. All professionals ([even introverts](#)) must have a bit of showman about them.

Audiences want larger-than-life people.

## **7. Be confident**

Remember that timid soul back in tip number 2? The once-overweight hyper-athlete who lost weight through a diet of potatoes and a daily twelve-minute assault on a ladder?

That gig would never work if she were an insecure communicator.

The more self-assured and confident a communicator you are, the more likely people will accept what you say. For instance, get rid of hedging words in your content. William Zinsser shares this sentence as an extreme example of hedging:

Any yet, on balance, affirmative action has, I think, been a qualified success.

A 13-word sentence with five hedging words.

Don't do that.

Say what you think. And say it with backbone. Audiences want people with conviction. It will please those who matter to you. And probably piss off those who don't.

## **8. Ship**

Here's an interesting series of tweets I stumbled across the other day:

Never discount someone's skills because of a low profile. The smartest people in online marketing are low profile. Except for me, of course.

— Brian Clark (@copyblogger) [November 20, 2012](#)

Well said. But it was the responses that were revealing:

@[copyblogger](#) Often, the low profile ones are doing the most innovative work. High profiles are consumed with twiends, confs, and shoutouts.

— Jesse Semchuck (@jessesem) [November 20, 2012](#)

@[copyblogger](#) quite. The low profile ones are taking care of their customers, rather than their egos. Also, they're often one man/micro biz

— Chris King (@chrispking) [November 20, 2012](#)

Then, in an unrelated tweet, [Ricardo Bueno](#) summed it up:

No amount of Twitter notoriety can replace doing the f\*\*king work — [bit.ly/Wwa0kD](#)

— Ricardo Bueno (@Ribeezie) [November 21, 2012](#)

Ricardo then linked to an article about comedian [Robert Delaney who said this about Twitter](#): “You have to remember, Twitter pays no one’s bills. It can lead to opportunities, but you still have to get up every day and work.”

Work. Everyone needs to do it. Especially if you want credibility. If you want to be that expert.

You have to [nail down that book](#). Build that software program. Rehab that house. Bust those bad boys. If you don’t *ship*, then what you say carries zero weight.

Few people respect talking heads. We respect those who get up early in the morning and work late into the evening. Who seldom complain. And who deliver products we love.

## 9. Charge premium prices

We’ve always been taught that “you get what you pay for.” In fact, it’s not uncommon for a prospective customer to write off a product because it’s too cheap.

Yet, when it comes to setting prices, we often shoot much too low. This is a mistake.

Marla Tabaka noted in [You Don’t Charge Enough — Here’s How to Fix That](#) there are 5 questions you have to ask yourself when it comes to pricing:

1. What are my success stories?
2. Is it true that people can’t afford my services?
3. Do I believe that anyone can do this?
4. How can I save the world if I don’t have any money?
5. What’s my true vision?

Let’s explore that third one.

All through high school, and into my early years as an adult, I used to think that everyone could write. That writing was no different than walking or doing cartwheels. I didn't value what I did as unique.

It was my wife who pointed out this simply was not true (reason number 428 on why I married her). What I did was truly valuable. And only [grew in value through training and experience](#).

I had a client bring this home to me when he said, "We could do this ourselves by spending the next 15 years learning how to write — or we could hire you."

I no longer believe anyone can do what I do. And neither should you.

Charge accordingly.

## 10. The Rule of Scarcity

Here's the deal: that which is rare is appealing.

Long lines during gas shortages.

A run on bread and milk before a blizzard.

Black Friday sales.

People are motivated by the thought of *losing* something — even if they don't need it. And this appeal is stronger than one based on *gaining* something of equal value.

Show genuine scarcity in the most tangible way you can. Point out what will be lost by not responding. Here are three ways to do that:

- **Limited number** — Produce only 100 copies of your art work. Hand-make a car. Give away only 1,000 invitations to your software.
- **Limited time** — A sale that ends in 24 hours, or a clogged work week that only allows for two openings to clients.
- **Large population** — You can create scarcity by indicating the number of people you're making an offer to: "And I do suggest you reserve that property immediately. Why? We are only releasing two retreats to a list of 44,540 people. (Do the math. That's one retreat for every 22,270 readers.)"

## Over to you ...

So, if Allen Ginsberg had shaved his head, groomed his beard, scrubbed his fingers, and put on a suit and tie — might people have taken him more seriously on the topic of the generation gap?

Possibly.

If we put a well-groomed Allen Ginsberg in the same room with a sloppy-looking Seth Godin to discuss the generation gap — would we take Godin more seriously than Ginsberg?

Hard to say.

Now, if we put Godin and Ginsberg in the same room to discuss web marketing ... would we take Godin more seriously than Ginsberg?

*Absolutely.*

But, if they spoke about artistic liberty or the mechanics of a great poem, we would probably take Ginsberg more seriously.

See how that works?

We live in a message-dense, decision-rich environment. It is an information onslaught. And to make sense of all of this content, we want narrowly-defined authorities. We want credible experts.

That's why your reputation is critical. As [Robert Greene](#) recently said:

Since we must live in society and depend on the opinion of others, there is nothing to be gained if you neglect your reputation.

Don't let others decide how you are perceived. Become the master of your own reputation. Become an authority.

So how do you plan to do that over the coming hours, days, weeks, months, and years? Let us know in the comments ...



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