

# Jami Attenberg Gives the Lowdown on Book Marketing

Contributed by  
Friday, 08 September 2006  
Last Updated Thursday, 10 January 2008

If you've stapled your own chapbook and wondered if you just punctured your chance to be a published writer, if you need hilarious, rock-solid inspiration for getting your book out there, if you seek to know someone who is an absolutely dedicated and cool author then you need to know this girl. Jami Attenberg is a blogging, picture taking, bold writing gem of a girl from New York City.

## Book Marketing from Jami Attenberg

If you've stapled your own chapbook and wondered if you just punctured your chance to be a published writer, if you need hilarious, rock-solid inspiration for getting your book out there, if you seek to know someone who is an absolutely dedicated and cool author then you need to know this girl. Jami Attenberg is a blogging, picture taking, bold writing gem of a girl from New York City. Attenberg is honest enough to admit that she once performed "awful erotic poetry" and lived in apartment with a hole in the floor and scrappy enough to turn, Instant Love, a zine she once sold from her website into a well-received collection of stories that was put out this past spring by Crown/Shaye Areheart books.

An important component (we cannot emphasize this enough on the site) in getting any book to sell, whether put out by a major publisher or a POD, is to take full advantage of all manner of marketing and publicity. Attenberg has first-hand knowledge of this side of the business. She was kind enough to share her observations from the inside out and the outside in.

WAPYB: You have a background in marketing and advertising can you talk a little bit about your experience in those arenas?

Jami Attenberg: I've worked in interactive advertising and content development since 1998, first as a producer, and then as a writer. I started out working for big ad agencies, and then got into working for boutique companies that were focused on the entertainment industry. Eventually I landed at HBO, where I headed up the original content development for The Sopranos and Six Feet Under for three years. These days I do the occasional freelance writing job for ad agencies, but mostly I'm just focused on writing books and occasionally articles and essays. I've also had a blog since 1998. {sidebar id=13}

WAPYB: What had you observed before your book came out as book marketing successes and pitfalls?

JA: I think you mainly hear about the successes before you get published, like Jonathan Safran Foer or Curtis Sittenfeld. Those are just a few authors who seemed to break through in a literary commercial way in recent years. I think it's interesting that people seem to know as much about the author as they do about their work. One story, however well-written, is not enough to sell books.

But once you sell a book and get to closer to your publication date, you begin to meet other writers, and also hear stories from editors and agents, and you are suddenly keenly aware of how many books are being sold out there, or not being sold. My understanding is it is nearly impossible to have a hit book unless your publisher is solidly behind you, and it is nearly impossible to have your publisher behind you, if the big chain bookstores aren't interested in your book. I suspect the biggest hurdle is satisfying a buyer at a bookstore. It dictates your print run, and thus what kind of marketing investment your publisher is willing to make.

WAPYB: How did you end up in Oprah's magazine on the summer reading list? Any other exciting press for your book you'd like to talk about?

JA: I don't know, but I'd love to find out! That was great, being in O, just thrilling. I still hear about it from random people, two months after the magazine came out. People really view that magazine as a bible in a lot of ways. When I visited the Barnes and Noble at The Grove in Los Angeles a week after the book had come out, they had already sold a bunch of copies of the book, and the bookseller I spoke with told me that always see the influence of Oprah in their sales. Other stores, not as much, but still I'm amazed by her influence.

I've mostly gotten press on the web and a few alt weeklies, all of which has helped tremendously. I've been really grateful for everyone's support, and it's exciting to see when people really get the book. I have friends in the publishing industry who insist it's more valuable to show up on a blog then to get a review in a daily newspaper, but some people totally disagree. I think my audience found my book, but I know there are more people out there who would probably enjoy it and haven't heard about it yet. A review in a daily newspaper would probably help with that.

I was on the Daily Candy summer reading list, which was exciting. I did a few local NPR interviews. The one in Chicago was just fantastic, and it was more personal than a review. Also there was a great profile in ASAP that really helped to show who I was as a person as much as talk about my book. And as I mentioned before, that seems to be just as important as anything else. I wish that weren't the case, of course.

WAPYB: What are your thoughts, in general, on the state of book marketing? Why do so many amazing books get lost in the shuffle?

JA: The publishing industry puts out, what - 170,000 books a year? Let's say maybe most average readers will buy a dozen of them. And then that average reader might be aware of a dozen more titles. I think the publishers are pretty much buying a ton of books up and throwing it at the wall and seeing what sticks. And so their marketing strategies can be haphazard.

My impression of publishing companies in general is that a lot of them don't understand how to work effectively with the internet. For example, I will occasionally get some publicist contacting me with a book that is totally inappropriate for my blog. (One look at my site and I think you'd realize I wouldn't want to talk about a book on fun dating tips.) They just shoot a bunch of stuff out there to bloggers, and don't realize that we're individuals, we're not making money off this, and we won't talk about any old book just because you want to send us a free copy. Sometimes it'll really tick bloggers off.

But I don't want to be entirely critical of the publishing industry. These people - the editors, the publicists, the production folks, and everyone else - are passionate about books and know how important it is for people to keep reading. They're not in this for the money, because publishing industry salaries aren't particularly high, especially in New York. And they certainly understand how to work with traditional media.

WAPYB: What would you change about the way the publishing industry markets books if you could?

JA: I'm not in love with the way they market women. Too many books are put in that chick lit box and needn't be, for

starters. I think we need some more creative thinking in that area.

I hope they get a better understanding of the internet. There's so much power to be harnessed there, and right now they're largely wasting it. It would be interesting if the higher ups were all forced to have a blog for a few months.

It might be helpful if publishers developed a basic marketing class for their authors. I learned everything I know from reading the websites of other authors and talking to people who had already been through the process. But what if publishers already had a set list of suggestions for their authors? Things they could do cheaply and easily. So three months out, all authors know they have to start setting up readings at bookstores if their publicists aren't going to help them. I talked to someone the other day who was with a small imprint of a major publisher who had never done a reading before, and now, one month before his book was supposed to come out, was frantically trying to set up readings. Surprise, surprise, everyone was already booked up.

We're all so thrilled to have a book out, I think we would do anything to make sure people would read it. We just need access to information.

WAPYB: Finally, what steps can authors take to help assure that the word gets out about their book?

JA: Get a blog immediately. Like, as soon as you sell your book. Network with other writers. Contact booksellers whenever you can, by signing stock or just introducing yourself and telling them about your book if they don't have it in stock. Do readings. Write for websites, magazines, or newspapers, no matter the size or the pay. Put up a profile on MySpace. Read industry websites to find new trends. And remember, you can extend the life of your book for a few months by doing all of the above well past the two-month mark after release. You don't need to give up on your book even if your publisher has moved onto their next project.

Attenberg's new novel, *The Kept Man*, will be published by Riverhead Books in 2007. Check out her kickin' blog @ [www.whatever-whenever.net](http://www.whatever-whenever.net)!