

How I Built Sales from the Ground Up

By Maggie Anton

Although thousands of good, maybe even great, novels are published every year and most of them quickly disappear from bookstore shelves -- assuming they ever reach a bookstore shelf -- my self-published historical novel, *Rashi's Daughters: Book One – Joheved*, generated over a thousand fan letters and sold over 26,000 copies in six printings, after which Penguin Books bought the rights to my next two titles in the series.

Why was *Joheved* different? Why is it still selling well three years later? I think it's because I did everything I could at the beginning to launch my book properly.

First and foremost, I wrote a good story, the book I wanted to read. Then I hired a book shepherd to ensure a package (cover, interior, printing, etc.) that met the highest standards. My publicity goal -- to get buzz going, to create a critical mass of readers eager to spread the word -- required an excellent product.

We all agree that nonfiction authors should know their target audiences, but this is also important for fiction. I knew that my historical novel, about the daughters of the great medieval Talmud scholar, would appeal most to a niche audience of Jewish women. I also knew that this group reads, and buys, lots of books; plus I had a good idea where to find them -- because I was one of them. An Internet search of "Jewish women organization" turned up more than half a dozen national associations, all of which I joined a year before *Rashi's Daughter* was published.

Soon I was receiving their newsletters and magazines, which I could write articles for and buy ads in (an attractive option for those charities I already supported). Many had book groups, and supplied contact information I could use to let the leaders know that I would be happy to join them by speakerphone. But the best part was that these organizations held local meetings and large conventions, all of which needed speakers.

Now came the hard work. Emails, phone calls, follow-up emails and follow-up phone calls, telling the program directors of these Jewish women's associations (including synagogue sisterhoods) that I had done all this amazing research about Rashi's daughters and medieval Jewish women, and that I would love to share what I'd learned with them. I threw in a few interesting tidbits to whet their appetites, along with a link to my Web site as a source of more information.

The site, www.rashisdaughters.com (I made the address obvious and easy to remember), was up and running for more than a year before my book was out. It included downloadable author photo and cover files, plus sample chapters, an author interview, book reviews, my speaking schedule, and some cool links. A professional looking Web site was a big help in convincing these organizations that I was a legitimate author/speaker. Once the book was available, my site included several ways to order it. Eventually I added a blog.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The incentive I offered for these groups was that I would come address them for FREE! All I asked was permission to sign and sell my books after speaking at their events.

I was relentless, keeping those calls and emails coming, not giving up until someone actually refused me – which was rare. Starting four months before my book's official publication date, I concentrated on my local area of Southern California. Three programs in seven days was a slow week for me, and I actually scheduled nine gigs in one wild week in the Bay Area. I spoke at libraries and a few bookstores as well, but quickly found that the most productive audience was indeed my target niche.

"But I'm shy," one author told me. "I'm too scared to speak in public," another confided. My reply is harsh, but honest. If you can't get out there in front of people to promote your own book, don't bother publishing it unless you don't care how few copies you sell. Nobody will hear about it and only your friends or family will buy it.

The first printing of *Rashi's Daughter* was gone a month before pub date, and 15,000 copies sold the first year, half of those at events where I was the speaker. Eighteen months after I opened the box from the printer and held the first copy in my hands, there was a bidding war among Penguin, Crown and Harper Collins for books II and III in the trilogy.

For *Book Two – Miriam*, which came out in the fall of 2007, I knew that I would still have to promote like crazy, despite my prestigious big publisher, and I learned a few new things.

I learned to be more conscientious about getting names and addresses from everyone who attends my lectures. When Penguin released my second book, over 4,000 post cards went out to my mailing list from Book I, but that list was smaller than I could have provided if I'd only collected this info more diligently.

I learned that on-line reviewers, book sites, and blogs weren't the most effective way to reach my niche (maybe Jewish women spend more time reading than surfing the Internet). Searching the Web for appropriate sites to link or pitch my book to could easily take half a day, with little to show for it. But joining online groups for small publishers and Jewish book marketing was helpful. I learned a great deal from these groups and I got a big break, a nice review in *Library Journal*, because I saw a call for Jewish fiction from the LJ religion editor on a group's site just as I was sending out galleys.

But most important, I learned that writing a good book is only the beginning, that just because the final word is written doesn't mean I can sit back and relax. In fact, publicizing and promoting a good book never ends, not if I want people to keep on buying it.

Maggie Anton is the Ben Franklin Award-winning author of *“Rashi’s Daughters,”* a series of historical novels set in the household of the great medieval Jewish scholar, whose daughters studied Talmud in a time when these sacred texts were forbidden to women. You can reach her through her website, www.rashisdaughters.com.