

BOOK MARKETING MENTORS

Helping authors get their books noticed!



HOW TO SELL YOUR BOOKS ON AMAZON

Interview with Amy Collins

Susan Friedmann: Welcome to Book Marketing Mentors, the weekly podcast where you learn proven strategies, tools, ideas, and tips from the masters. Every week I introduce you to a marketing master who will share their expertise to help you market and sell more books. Today, my special guest mentor of the week is a true book expert. Amy Collins has been a book buyer and seller for over 20 years. In that time, she's worked with Barnes and Noble, Target, Costco, Borders, Books a Million, Walmart, and all the major chains as well as helped launch several private label publishing programs for book chains and companies, such as Pet Smart and CVS. In 2006, she started New Shelves Distribution, a book marketing company for small presses that has quickly become the fastest growing book distribution company in North America. Without further ado, get ready to learn some insider secrets to selling your book on Amazon from my special guest mentor of the week, Amy Collins.

Amy, welcome to the show.

Amy Collins: Thank you so much. I'm really thrilled to be here. How are you, Susan?

Susan Friedmann: Excellent. Amy, Amazon. Amazon's often referred to as the 600 pound gorilla that many authors really don't know how to tackle. What advice would you give a first time author on how to get started?

Amy Collins: I guess the first bit of advice I'd give off there is I would remind them that Amazon and most of what they see on Amazon is not driven by human beings. Amazon is far more of a technological wonder than a bookseller. It is a mini version of Google, if you will. It's a search engine even more so than anything else. It's searchability on Amazon is extremely important. All of the things that I'm going to talk about today are things that you can do without a human being to help you. You can get help. I'm going to give you some secrets to how to get a hold of someone at Amazon if you need help, but a lot of what goes on at Amazon helps without any human being touching your book.

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I get a lot of calls from authors, "How come Amazon did this? How come they removed this review," or, "Why did Amazon change the look of my cover here?" Amazon didn't. A computer robot saw something and there was an algorithm written that your review or your book matched their criteria, and they made a change. I'm going to teach you how to work with those robots and with those rules so that you can increase your sales.

Susan Friedmann: Excellent. I can't wait to get started on that because one of the things that I often hear from authors is, I just have to put my book on Amazon and Amazon's going to sell books for me. I'm sure you've heard that many times too. Let's get started. Let's find out more about searchability, findability on Amazon. How's that going to happen?

Amy Collins: I get so many calls and emails with people wanting to know why their book isn't ranked higher. They're very concerned with ranking. I want to highlight ... I know most people notice, but just for clarity's sake. I'd like to highlight the differences between ranking and searchability. Your ranking on Amazon is where your book falls in comparison to all the other books in your category or, in some cases, all the other books overall. If your book was looked at a certain number of times and if it was put in a certain number of shopping carts over the last 24 to 48 hours, your ranking will improve. It will increase. That is not as helpful as searchability. Ranking will tell you how your book is doing, but it will not help you sell books.

Searchability, findability, that's what we should be working towards and that's what we're going to be talking about today. Having your book ... If you're written a nonfiction how to guide and someone types in the word, "how to save my house plants." There you go. You've written a book about how to improve the life and health of your house plants. You've been killing them for years. You're tired of this. You're going to buy a book about it, then having a book that the key words house plant, how to, improve the health of, keep from dying. Having these keywords will help your searchability. Who cares what your ranking is? What matters is when somebody types in a problem on Amazon, is your book in the first couple of pages? Is it in page 2 or 1? Hopefully it's not past page 3 because very few people will see it. Searchability is so much more important than ranking. If I could get any point out there today, that's the most important one.

Susan Friedmann: I would absolutely agree with you. People always say, "My book ranked number 1." I've even used it. I will admit, but, at the end of the day,

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you're right. It's finding the book that's really important. How do we go about those keywords? What's the mechanism that Amazon has for authors?

Amy Collins:

There's a number of ways to improve your searchability, and I just want to be clear for those ... You were saying that ranking is important. It is, and I certainly was very excited when my book ranked a certain number, but ranking helps once someone's clicked on your book and they're looking and they see that you're in the top 500 of a category that says to them that your book is really good. It gives it a feel of approval, but it doesn't help people find your book. Let's talk about ways that people can find your book more easily.

The first and best way is to link your book to other best selling books in your topic. If Barack Obama has written a house plant book and he wrote a book after his presidency about his own house plant book, you probably would want to link your book to his best selling book about house plants and how to keep them alive and flourishing in any season. You would find all of the best selling books in your category. You would go after the best selling publishers. You'd go after Better Homes and Gardens. I'm sure they have a couple of books about house plants. You would find the best selling books in your category, and you would want your book to be linked to theirs.

If you remember, I said that Amazon focuses mainly on computer decisions. This is not about human beings. Let's talk about the different ways you can connect your book to the other best selling books of your genre. You can buy your book in the same moment as you're buying those other best selling books. You can purchase your book with Barack Obama's book about house plants and the Better Homes and Garden book about house plants and the History Channel guide to house plants ... All of the best selling books in your genre purchased in the same order. Get your mother to do the same thing, your favorite cousin, your best friend, your Aunt Gertrude. Get them all to do the same ... To buy the same four or five books together. That will link your book inextricably, and for a very long time on Amazon with those best selling books. That's one way.

Another way to link your book with best sellers is to create wish lists. If you go to your Amazon account and hover your mouse over the word account in the upper right hand corner on Amazon, there will be a drop down menu. One of them will say wishlist. Put the best selling books in your category in a wishlist with your book, and title the wishlist with a

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very powerful set of keywords. Best selling books on house plants. Best book on houseplants. Houseplant help. You can create more than one wish list with these names. Get your friends to do the same. Those are two ways. There are many others, but those are two very effective ways to link your book with best selling books. When your book starts to be linked to some of these best selling books, a couple of things will happen.

One of them is that when the best selling book by Better Homes and Gardens on houseplants comes up, somewhere on their page there's a very good chance that your book will appear as well. People who bought this book also bought, blank. The blank would be your book. That is a terrific way to get people to see your book in a way that they wouldn't because of course they're going to be on the Better Homes and Gardens best selling book page. It's a terrific way to get your book to peak it's head up a little bit and go, "Hey guys, I'm cool too. Take a look at me."

Susan Friedmann: I've always wanted to know how to do that. This has been worth everything already. We've got to keep going. You know what? I'm getting so excited here.

Amy Collins: You used to be able to buy that. For 1,500 dollars, you used to be able to purchase what was called Buy X Get Y. That doesn't exist anymore. What you can do with this wish list idea, with this shopping cart idea, another way we're going to talk about in a minute ... We're going to talk about review soon. When we do that, you can also see some of your own reviews with best selling books of your competition. Another thing that happens when your book is linked inextricably with some of the best selling books is quite often Amazon will send out an email to the people who bought Barack Obama's book on house plant health and say, "Hey, you bought Barack Obama's book on house plants. Several people who bought his book also like this book. We thought we should tell you about it." Susan, have you ever gotten one of those emails saying based on your?

Susan Friedmann: All the time. All the time.

Amy Collins: Those you can't purchase. Those are created automatically by those same little robots. Human beings are not sitting around with their shirt sleeves pulled up and a cigar in their mouth going, "All right, which books should we promote this month?" No, it happens automatically.

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Computer bots actually pull the books out of things that are created. Use that to pool them into promoting your book.

Susan Friedmann: Excellent. Excellent. That's invaluable, totally invaluable. There's something called Author Central. Talk to us about that and how that can help us.

Amy Collins: Author Central is both my favorite ... I think it is the most powerful tool on Amazon to date and the most underused by authors. I wish I had a nickel for every author who said to me, "I don't know if I have an Author Central page." I would never have to work again. It is such a powerful tool and so underused by authors. I am asking everyone within the sound of my voice to go to Amazon.com/authorcentral. You can also go to authorcentral.Amazon.com. They'll both take you to the same place. Amazon.com/authorcentral will take you to a place where you login with your own Amazon.com account. You just login as any Amazon customer, and it will give you the opportunity to create ... Or if it already exists you edit your author page. Why would you want to do this, you ask? For a couple of reasons:

Author Central has its very own staff of people who sit around all day for 11 hours a day and take emails and phone calls from authors who want stuff and don't know how to get help. The very first and most important thing, once you're listed as an author on Amazon you then have a direct phone call, a phone line, to help on Amazon. I also wish I had a nickel for every author who said, "I can't get a hold of anyone on Amazon." Well, you're right. You can't unless you've got an Author Central page because those people sit around and wait to hear from you, and they want to help.

If you go, you can look at mine. You can look at Susan's, but an Author Central page is made up of six different elements. There's a photo, there's a biography ... Remember how, Susan, a moment ago I said how important it was to link books with keywords for best selling books? My biography actually has a lot of keywords. Book sales, book marketing, bookstore chain, Barnes and Noble. I purposefully seeded my biography on my author page to have the words and the phrases book distribution, book marketing. I did that on purpose because when people go to Google and type in book marketing and book sales, my Amazon Author Page pops up in the first few pages because I purposefully seeded my biography with my expertise.

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You can also link your blog. You can link your blog to your Amazon Author Central page. Why would you want to do that? Because of searchability. My blog is a WordPress site based and on my website. Not a large number of people are just tooling around the New Shelves website, but a lot of people are googling on different topics. I will be writing a blog about today, about our conversation, Susan, about how to maximize your searchability on Amazon and increase your sales. When people are typing in the words increase your sales on Amazon, I want my blog to show up, but it's far more likely that the Amazon version of my blog ... Because Amazon has a much higher search grab than New Shelves Books does. Why wouldn't I duplicate my blog on my webpage? Give people a chance to see my expertise, but, as well, give Google a chance to double the chances of someone reading and finding out about me.

Susan Friedmann: Brilliant. I love it.

Amy Collins: I can put all my events on my author page, anywhere that I'm speaking. You know what I should've done? I should've put today's podcast on my events. I think I will. I will add an event. Not while we're talking, but I'll add the event with the date and time and a link to it so that anyone can [inaudible 00:14:40] permanently. You can put videos. Every laptop and computer in America now is sold with webcams on them, you can actually put a short 20 or 30 second introductory video about your book or your topic or your expertise and post it on your webpage based on Amazon Author Central. There's a number of things that once you create your page, but the most important one is your bibliography.

Claiming all of the books that belong to you where you are either a co-author or an author is a wonderful way to get extra sales. If you liked the first book that I wrote, you're going to love the second one. Your bibliography helps. I am begging you guys. Run, do not walk to authorcentral.amazon.com. Sign up for your page. Get it set up. If you have any questions you can contact Susan or I. We'll help you out. You've got to do this because once your Author Central page is beautifully set up, you then can link all of your reviews and all of your online discussions to your author page, which has a full bibliography of all your books. How awesome would that be? A place where people can see your expertise. They can see all of the books that you've written, even if you've only written one. It is far better, in my opinion, when on an Amazon.com discussion group to link people to your author page than your own webpage because it gives people everything they need to know about you and keeps you there so in case they want to buy your book they can.

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Susan Friedmann: That's a brilliant tip. That really is. How about reviews, Amy? I often get asked, "How can I get reviews for my book?" What advice do you have for authors on getting reviews?

Amy Collins: You can do it the hard way or you can do it the harder way. There's no easy way to do it as much as I would love to say so. This is the way I did it when I got started. I have a theory. I call it the Do Two. It's Do Two. I do two a day. I will go ... I Googled Amazon top 500 reviewers and it'll send me right to the list of all the top Amazon reviewers. I look down the list starting with number 1, going down to number 2, number 3, until I find a reviewer who reviews books. I then have to make sure the reviewer reviews nonfiction or reference books. Once I'm comfortable that this reviewer might be interested in my book, I click on ... Again, you can go to Google right now. Actually, I'll go to Google right now and give you the URL.

You can find the top reviewers right on Amazon. They're all listed right there, and you can click on their name. When you click on their name it takes you to their biography. Right now I'm clicking on Simple Life. Simple Life is in the top 1,000. Simple Life only reviews electronics, it looks like. It doesn't review books, so I'll keep moving. That is the hard way to do it, to go after the top reviewers by rank. Top reviewers are who you want to start with because they're the ones that have all the followers. The top 50, top 100 Amazon reviewers, they've got rabid followers who will check out a book simply because Amos Laughin, he recommends the book everybody's going to want to take a look at it. It's worth it.

Another way, the harder way, to get reviewers is to go after people in the world who are not top Amazon reviewers, but who might be interested in writing a review on Amazon. Again, I use Google. You can go after book bloggers, go after people in your industry, go after experts in your field. If you've written a book on house plants and perhaps you want to reach out and send a review copy of your book to a number of ... Let's say you want to ask all of the top gardening and house plant websites in your area. You can find them simply by googling that. We can do an entire show on how to find reviewers. There are Google tricks. I'm using Google in the same way that I'm using the words Xerox or Kleenex. They're search engine tips that we could get into, but I'm afraid that's a whole other show.

I would recommend against purchasing lists. Purchasing lists, for the most part, in my experience has been disappointing. The lists are usually

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made up of people who did not opt in, were not aware that their names were going to be used, and I have not had a lot of luck at all with purchasing lists. I have had a great deal of luck, a huge amount of luck ... There are some programs out there. There's a few online programs that use web based programs that allow you to search for and find all the top book reviewers in your genre. Susan, if you'd like, I'd be happy to send you some of those links and you could post them. That way, your readers could find out about these programs.

Susan Friedmann: That would be very helpful. Very helpful. Thank you.

Amy Collins: One in particular that I'm very fond of that I've had direct experience with and my clients are raving about, Joan Stewart from the Publicity Hound has a program that she's offering right now where you can find all the top Amazon reviewers. It's an amazing program. I'll send you those links.

Susan Friedmann: Excellent. We actually had Joan a few weeks ago on talking about publicity. She didn't mention this, but we're happy to direct people to her as well.

Amy Collins: I will have to scold her for that.

Susan Friedmann: I know. I know. Would any of these reviewers, these top reviewers, on Amazon, would they ask for payment if you approach them to write a review for you?

Amy Collins: If anyone, and I mean anyone asks you for payment for a review, say thank you but no thank you. Even if Clarion, Foreword, Kirkus Review ... Do not pay for a review, guys. Reviewers are not to be paid. A paid review is instantly ... Not only my opinion, but I was a buyer for many years. Paid reviews are easy to spot, they're instantly discounted, and Amazon knows who's asking for money. Lots of times their reviews are removed from the site almost immediately. Do not exchange money for reviews. If a reviewer is a professional reviewer, it's their job to review books. If they're an amateur reviewer, the books that you give them that is their reward.

Susan Friedmann: Interesting, so you would then send them a copy of the book to review?

Amy Collins: Yes, either a hard copy or an eBook if they prefer.

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- Susan Friedmann: Okay. Okay, but you would ask them that. You mentioned to us Kirkus and see that every time I look at book reviews. Can you talk to us about that organization? Is that someone you would approach to do a review for your book?
- Amy Collins: I would. Yes, Kirkus is an extremely well-respected and long time organization. It is arguably one of the top two review elements that librarians pay attention to. Libraries are the new golden cow for those of us in sales and marketing for books. Libraries are where all the money is right now. It's where a lot of the traffic is, and getting a Kirkus review is a very wonderful way to get a librarian's attention. Kirkus, though also, while they will review books when asked, they only review a teeny percentage of them. They're sent thousands of books a month, and they can only review a few which means that less than one tenth of one tenth of one tenth of one percent of the books are going to get reviewed.
- What they do is they offer for, I believe, 495 dollars they offer what's called ... It's a paid review. It's a Kirkus Discoveries review. It's an honest review. I have to tell you, a lot of them just rip apart the books. That doesn't mean you're going to get a good review. It's an honest review, but it is not a Kirkus review. Librarians know the difference. It is immediately discounted in a Kirkus Discoveries review. If you're getting a review so that bookstores and buyers and librarians will pay attention to your book, I'm afraid a Kirkus Discovery review will actually do the opposite.
- Susan Friedmann: Okay, but that's a paid service, as you said.
- Amy Collins: Correct. There is the editorial review, which is not a paid service and you should send your book. If you go to kirkus.com and arrow down to the bottom, you will see the instructions on how to submit your book. You need to submit it 3 to 4 months before the pub date of the book. There are rules. You need to send two copies. It's all listed there. Just go to the bottom of their page and click on for review, but skip the paid one and go right to the editorial review and see if you can get in. It will be the same as winning the lottery if you do, but paying ... Let's use this lottery. Let's go a little further with that. If you want to win the lottery or if you want to pay someone 500 dollars so that they will allow you to win a 500 dollar lottery, that's in essence what's going to happen. You give them 500 dollars and they say, "Congratulations, you won the lottery. Here's 500 dollars." It doesn't help. You end up right where you started. Actually, in the Kirkus case you wind up 500 dollars less.

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Susan Friedmann:

Let's touch on a few big mistakes that authors make. I think you've implied many of them, but let's talk about some of them.

Amy Collins:

Some of the mistakes I've seen authors make ... Again, today we're focusing on Amazon. Let's talk a little bit about mistakes they make on Amazon. Authors and publishers, if I can lump the two together for this first one, they don't use enough white space when describing their book on Amazon. We are a very lazy magazine focused culture. We have become used to big chunks of white space. On our book descriptions, often I will see a huge block of text. They try and cram everything in and there's not white space or use of paragraphs or bullet points, especially for nonfiction authors. Guys, think magazine cover. We're used to ... Our eyes need a rest. Bullet points are helpful. Help a girl out. Tell me what the book is going to get me, but don't make me search for it through 4,000 characters of text without any white space.

Conversely, I know a lot of authors ... They've got 4,000 characters in which to describe their book on Amazon and they'll write 5 sentences. Use it up. Come on, guys. This is prime real estate. Why would you not use that to convince people of the benefits of your book? I would say that some of the biggest mistakes I see on Amazon involve the description. Not having their book in the right category. If you don't like the category that Amazon has assigned your book, as an author, you can go to Author Central, click on the Help button on the upper right hand corner. Over to the left you'll then see a Contact Us button, and you can email or call a member of Author Central and tell them what category your book belongs in.

I wrote a book called *The Right Way*. It's a book for people who want to sell and market their new book, whether it's self-published or published by someone else. For reasons that defy description, it is listed as a help and nutrition book on Amazon. I called up Author Central and we changed it to book publishing and reference. That was fine. Three weeks later it's health and diet again, so I called Author Central. A second mistake that I often see people make is around the category and making sure that you use the right keywords. Keywords are so important. If someone's going to write a book to help authors and publishers market and sell their own book, you'd better use all seven of the keywords available to you. Why wouldn't I put the words in book marketing, book sales, book distribution? Why would I skip that? A lot of authors do.

Susan Friedmann:

Great information. What's the best way for our listeners to find out more about you and your services?

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Amy Collins:

If I haven't completely annoyed them and they'd like to hear more because, truly, I'm the only one who enjoys the sound of my own voice this much, they can get a hold of me at www.newshelves.com. New as in not old, shelves, what you put books on, dot-com. My email is Amy@newshelves.com. I am a big fan of being of service. I do not charge people for my opinions. That would be silly, but after 27 years of being on the front lines of selling books to chains and to bookstores and libraries and organizations, my opinions are, for the most part, based on what's going on in the industry, which changes every 6 months. You and I are sitting here talking about Amazon and wish lists. If you and I had had this talk 6 months ago, I'd also be telling you about something called List Mania, but Amazon did away with that 4 months ago. Everything changes every 6 months.

That's a final mistake that I would like to mention. It was great you asked. Another mistake I see authors making is that they assume that because something was true 6 months ago it's still true. In the book industry everything changes so fast. Everything changes so often, and one of the mistakes I see is they're not paying attention to how things are today.

Susan Friedmann:

How do you keep up with those trends? It's tough to know, well, what is in vogue at the moment?

Amy Collins:

There's a couple of blogs that I'm an enormous fan of. Let's see. I'll even tell you what they are. Yours. There's a couple of people that I trust very much. Joel Friedlander is one of them. I trust what he has to say, but paying attention to the industry and what's going on ... It could be as simple as getting a subscription to IBPA, Independent Book Publishers Association. I've got a subscription to them. I really like what they're putting out for authors in terms of marketing. I'm not as big a fan of their programs, but I love their articles. Love them.

Again, Joan, who you had on a couple weeks ago ... Joan Stewart, publicityhound.com, my blog New Shelves. There are those of us who are out there who it's our job to pay attention to what's going on in the industry. Books and Such is another one that I absolutely love. That's a bunch of agents that get together and write. Where Writers Win. www.wherewriterswin.com is another site that I use. These sites, I read them every day. I try and pay attention to what's happening, and when I write my articles in my blog it's based on what the buyers are telling me. When Barnes and Nobel told me several years ago, this was a direct quote, "For the love of God, Amy, please tell your publishers to stop

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publishing in hard cover. I am begging you. No more hard cover." I tried my darnedest to get the word out. There are still people who think that they have to publish in hard cover, but not for lack of trying. I am constantly getting the word out. Just pay attention to and find some of your favorite people.

Susan Friedmann: Fascinating. We could keep going because one thing you say leads to another thing to another thing. I want to have you back and one of the subjects that I really want to have you talk about is selling to libraries. I know that you created a course on that and you've got a lot of brilliant information that I'd love you to share with our listeners. If you could leave our listeners with the golden nugget of information what would that be?

Amy Collins: It would be to spend 15 minutes a day paying attention to their book marketing. I would ask them to consider adopting my theory of doing two things a day. If you try and do twenty things a day, you'll be exhausted and grumpy and you won't do anything for the next two weeks. If you don't do anything for a few days, you won't be able to market your book. Marketing your book is a daily touchstone, and if I had any advice to give an author it would be that it doesn't even matter as much what you do as that you do something every day.

Do two things a day. Reach out to two bloggers. Reach out to two librarians. Read two articles. Find two newspapers. I don't care what it is, but my last little bit of advice is every day take a few minutes and do two things. You will be amazed at the results if you don't either exhaust yourself or run away from your responsibility. You gave birth to this book. Now it's your job to raise it, and doing two things a day is a great way to make sure that your book actually makes it all the way to adulthood.

Susan Friedmann: That's wonderful. I could just hug you for saying that. Thank you, Amy. This has been amazing and thank you all for taking time out of your precious day to listen to this interview. I sincerely hope that it sparks some ideas that you can use to sell more books. Here's wishing you much book marketing success.