

BOOK MARKETING MENTORS

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BOOK MARKETING: How to Make Publishing eBooks Fast, Free and Easy Interview with Jim Azevedo

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 is a marketing expert. Jim Azevedo is the marketing director at Smashwords, the largest distributor of self-published e-books, serving over 120,000 independent authors, publishers, and literary agents. Since 2008, Smashwords has helped authors around the world publish and distribute more than 420,000 titles to top e-book retailers, subscription services, and public libraries.

Jim's career began more than 20 years ago in the Silicon Valley high tech world, and for the past 15 years, he's been a drummer for Rivals, a popular San Francisco Bay Area hard rock band. Wow, that's quite something. Jim's forthcoming book, *How to Get Your Band Out of the Garage*, will be published in the next few months. Jim, thank you for being this week's guest expert and mentor.

Jim Azevedo: It's my privilege Susan, thank you for the invitation.

Susan Friedmann: E-book, let's start with the basics of how our listeners can actually get started creating an e-book.

Jim Azevedo: I think it's easier than they may feel that it's going to be. I think a lot of authors enter into this feeling like they're just overwhelmed, "How am I going to do this? It sounds so technical," and it's really not. If you're using a computer to write your book, chances are you're already using a popular word processing program like Microsoft Word. Really, that's all you need. We recommend Microsoft Word, and we'll provide a formatting guide to help you through that process of formatting your manuscript to get it ready to be converted into an e-book. That's really all it takes. Working with Microsoft Word, you'll learn how to format your paragraphs properly, you'll learn how to adjust your chapter headings, how to insert images if you have images, how to create a

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table of contents, and do these things properly so that your book can be converted into popular e-book file types, say like epub and mobi for Kindle-type devices that will ensure that readers can read your books on whichever device that they choose.

Susan Friedmann: It seems like today that every day there are hundreds of new titles. How is somebody going to be able to compete in this marketplace with so many e-books that are just, as we say, flooding the market?

Jim Azevedo: That's an interesting question and I'm glad you asked it. I have to tell you that every year, I'm fortunate because I get to participate in publishing conferences and I get to go to different writer's clubs meetings, and I'm always asked that same question: "How am I going to compete with a tsunami of e-books that are entering the market?" Because a lot of authors assume that they're going to be competing against low-quality books, it's all this trash that's entering the market. "How am I going to make my book stand out in this sea of trash?"

What I tell them is that's not your biggest challenge. Your biggest challenge is not competing with the low-quality books, because those low-quality e-books are going to sink down to the bottom of the ocean. What I mean by that is readers won't have a strong interest in those low-quality books, and those low-quality books are going to just fall off the radar screens of the search algorithms that the large e-book retailers like Amazon and Barnes and Noble use. What you're really competing against is a tsunami of high-quality, low cost e-books.

Authors such as yourselves who are listening into this podcast who are educating themselves on how to create a professional quality e-book, those are the types of authors you're going to be competing against. Because self-published authors, now that self publishing has become a thing, authors have really upped their game, especially within the last three to four years, they've really become more professionally savvy.

Susan Friedmann: They certainly have, and I work with a lot of authors, as you know. What is one of the things that you recommend in terms of helping a book stand out in a crowded marketplace?

Jim Azevedo: I wish I can tell you Susan, "Hey, do this, your book is guaranteed to become a bestseller," but as you know, there's no magic bullet to help any book to become a blockbuster bestseller, but there are lots and lots of little things that you can do right. Every little thing that you do right can help give you incremental improvements along the way to help

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potentially spark sales for your books. These include things like bringing on a professional editor. That is super, super important, even for self-published authors, because the book business is a word of mouth business, it always has been and it always will be.

Sure, marketing may help spark some awareness, but books really really take off based on reader word of mouth. Get that professional editor, get a professional cover designer. If you're not a graphic artist or a professional book designer by trade, then I would highly encourage you to bring on a professional book designer to help you with that book cover. I mentioned earlier already that I have the privilege of going to publishing conferences every year, and aside from speaking, I get to listen in on workshops given by bestselling self-published authors. I can tell you Susan, I don't know one bestselling self-published author who does absolutely everything start to finish by herself.

If there are two things that they all tend to agree upon as far as what they'll hire up for, number one it's a professional editor, and number two it's a professional designer. Those two things are super important, but in addition to that, the other things that you do right include your book's description, you've got to make that compelling to pull those readers in. Your story yourself, is your story just okay, or are you moving your readers to those emotionally satisfying extremes, to where when they finish your book, are they feeling compelled to go out and command their friends and family to go out there and buy your book?

In addition, is your book widely accessible? Is your book sitting on those virtual store shelves? Is your book in all the places where readers go to find books? Is your book affordable? Have you priced it too high, or have you given it a fair price? How's your meta-data? How are those categories? Have you categorized your book correctly? Have you added those keyword tags to help your book become more discoverable? Do you have a social media presence? Those little things are very important, and everything that you do right gives you another opportunity to help spark sales for your books.

Susan Friedmann: You bring up some interesting points here, and one of them is affordability. A question that I get asked a lot, Jim, is, "How do I price my e-book?" What's your recommendation on that?

Jim Azevedo: We have some research there, and what we've found is that if we're talking about full-length fiction books, so say 70,000-80,000 words and up, the sweet spot of what we found is pricing at \$3.99. Because what

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we found in looking at the data is that e-books priced at \$3.99 are going to reach between three to four times as many readers as e-books priced at say, \$9.99 and above. Three to four times as many readers, yet those books will still earn the author about the same, or actually a little bit more per book sold. Here as an independent author, this is one of your biggest advantages of being a self-published e-book author.

That is, since you're in business for yourself, you have much much lower expenses than say, a large traditional publishing house would have. Your lower expenses enable you to offer your e-books at a significantly lower price. That lower price enables you to reach many more readers, yet you can still earn more per book sold. What we're seeing here is that you're earning about four times as much per book sold, based on the royalties that you'll receive.

Susan Friedmann: What about non-fiction? Many of our authors listening in are non-fiction authors, so is there a sweet spot for them?

Jim Azevedo: You know, I'm glad you asked that. What we've found by our research again, is that non-fiction authors are pricing their books very low too, around \$2.99 and \$3.99. Typically what we see, to kind of set the stage here, is that as e-book prices tend to rise for fiction, say go above \$4.99, \$5.99 on up, the downloads start to trickle off a bit, but with non-fiction, as the price tends to move up from \$5.99 all the way up to \$9.99 and even a little bit above that, the amount of downloads stays like a straight line. As the price increases for non-fiction, the amount of downloads don't go down.

What you can gather for that for pricing your non-fiction titles is that you can price your non-fiction titles higher, because what we're assuming here is that folks who are looking for a non-fiction title, they're looking for a specific piece of information that's, say for example is going to help them solve a problem, and they're willing to pay for it.

Susan Friedmann: I would agree with that, because actually just today, I was looking for a certain piece of information and downloaded a Kindle book at \$9.99. I thought twice about it, but I wanted the information enough that it made it worthwhile for me to actually pay that amount. Is there any rule of thumb about keeping it under the \$10 limit, or not?

Jim Azevedo: For non-fiction title, or for any title?

Susan Friedmann: Yes, for non-fiction.

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- Jim Azevedo: No, there really isn't. As a matter of fact, there is, I can't remember the name of the title, this is bad, or the author's name, but Mark Hooker, our founder, told me about an American football coach several years ago who wanted to price his non-fiction title at \$25. Mark at the time, I can't remember how long ago this was, I think it was early days, Mark at the time told him, "I disagree with you. You should price it lower, I don't think you're going to sell very many copies," and that book has become a bestseller because this gentleman is an expert in his field. He's well-known, people are really attached to the things he has to say, and he has this strong following. If you're a person like that who has information like that that people are clamoring for, then absolutely you can name your price.
- Susan Friedmann: Smashwords is a e-book distributor, and I know that there are also e-book retailers, can you tell us what the difference is between the two?
- Jim Azevedo: I'll try to make it as simple as possible. A retailer is simply a store. A retailer is where people go to buy your books, so that can be Amazon, that can be Apple iBooks, that can be Barnes and Noble, Clob, or whomever. A distributor is the company that delivers your e-book titles to that store. Smashwords, for example, is a distributor. Our authors and publisher come to us and they see which retailers we distribute books to, and they get to decide which of those retailers they want their books to be in.
- Susan Friedmann: Okay, so you mentioned Amazon. Everyone's heard of Amazon, and they think that just uploading a book to Amazon, they're made by doing that. What are your thoughts about Amazon versus distributing at Worldwide, or just expanding your distribution network?
- Jim Azevedo: That question gets asked a ton, and my answer is you absolutely positively need to have your books at Amazon. They're the largest e-book retailer in the world, so your books need to be there, but as a self-published author you have two major hurdles that you need to overcome. The first major hurdle is that you need to write that superb book that you have in you, you need to write that book that's going to move those readers to those emotionally satisfying extremes that we talked about before. Hurdle number two as a self-published author is that you need to make yourself as discoverable or as findable as you possibly can.
- The easiest way to make yourself as findable as you possibly can is to put your books in all the places where readers go to find books, that

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means the retail stores and also public libraries. If you decide to go exclusive at just one store like Amazon, there are still millions and millions and millions of readers who are shopping at other bookstores like Barnes and Noble, like Apple iBooks, who have no idea that you even exist. If you're invisible to them, you're not purchasable to those readers.

Susan Friedmann: What are some common mistakes that people make when they're actually wanting to publish an e-book?

Jim Azevedo: The biggest mistake, number one, is giving up. It's getting to that point where it's just too difficult and they decide to give up and maybe come back later. Aside from that it's the excitement, almost like the excitement of finally being published, it's almost like they're intoxicated with that idea of finally being a published author, and so they rush their book out. I guess that's the short answer, rushing your book out to the market before it's ready. You've got to have that professional editing done, your book has to have that professional cover design and professional proof-reading. In other words, your book has to look and be just as professional, if not more professional-looking than those books that are coming out of New York and London. Be serious about your craft.

Susan Friedmann: Talk to us about Smashwords and how our authors can use your services.

Jim Azevedo: Smashwords, first and foremost, is an e-book distributor. The way it works is you go to smashwords.com and you sign up for a free account. The next thing we would like you to do, or when you're ready to publish your book, you simply click on the publish button, and at that point, you would upload either a Microsoft Word file or a professionally designed .epub file, but we recommend just a simple Microsoft Word file. At that point, you'll see a wheel spinning on your screen, and that wheel is telling you that your book is now being converted into different e-book file types like .mobi for Kindle devices, like .epub for many other devices, but we also convert it into pdf and html and so forth.

If there is a formatting error, we'll tell you what the problem is, and we'll also give you instructions on how to fix that error. Assuming that your formatting is perfect, in about three to five minutes, your book will be available for sale at the Smashwords store. We have a small retail site at Smashwords store, so we sell books as well, but 90% or 95% of all

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your sales are going to come from our global distribution network. Really that's the value that we provide is getting your books out there.

Susan Friedmann: Then how does an author get paid for the books that are sold?

Jim Azevedo: Once your books begin to sell, you can track us via your author dashboard at the smashwords.com site. You'll earn between 60-80% of your e-book's list price as your royalty. Your list price is the price that you set as you're uploading your book at Smashwords. If you set your book at \$3.99, then that is the price that all of our retail partners are going to honor. That's the price that readers will pay for your book at all the retail sites. Smashwords takes just a 10% commission, so we don't charge fees for distribution or conversion or anything. We only make money if books sell, so we feel that our interest are aligned with the authors' interests.

Susan Friedmann: There's a big difference between 60 and 80%.

Jim Azevedo: If your book sells at the Smashwords store, you'll earn about 85% of the net, which works out to about 80% of your book's list price at Smashwords. If your book sells at one of our retail partners like iBooks or Barnes and Noble, you'll earn about 60% of the list price of your book, the retailer takes a 30% commission and Smashwords takes 10%.

Susan Friedmann: One of the things that I know with Kindle, if you're just dedicated to doing the Kindle Direct, that you can play with the pricing. That's very attractive if for instance, you wanted to do a promo for the first few days of your book at launching, giving it away free or a highly discounted price. Can you offer that same service?

Jim Azevedo: Yes, and more. Are you talking about Kindle Direct Publishing Select, their exclusive program?

Susan Friedmann: I believe that's what it's called, yes.

Jim Azevedo: From what I understand if I'm remembering how they do it currently, if you wanted to price your book at free, they give you five days to do that if you're going under their Select model, which is their exclusivity option. At Smashwords, you can make unlimited meta-data updates. That means you could change the price of your books as often as you like, you can have your books priced at free for as long as you like. As a matter of fact, a lot of our bestselling authors, a lot of our highest earning authors price at least one of their books at free. For authors

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who have series, pricing the series starter at perma-free has been shown to really spark sales of the other books in those series.

Susan Friedmann: Talk to us about perma-free. You just threw that out, I'm keen for you to mention that. Can you talk more about that?

Jim Azevedo: Free books as a marketing tool, we first started talking about this as a best practice probably about five years ago, maybe even longer than that. Authors started experimenting with free. What a free e-book does if you're a new author, free eliminates that perceived financial risk that a reader may have when it comes to taking a chance on an unknown author. It helps create awareness, because a lot of readers search for free books, and you don't have to price it free forever if you're a new author. You can put it out there for a couple of months if you like and see how many downloads you get. It can help you not only start to get some books downloaded, it can also start to result in some of your first book reviews.

Perma-free means that your book is priced at free for as long as you wish, permanently. You can think of it as like a permanently free book, and that has become a strong tool for authors of series. One of our early authors is an author who writes epic fantasies, his name is Brian Pratt. I think it was back in 2009, where he began pricing the first book of his seven book series at free, and that novel was clocking in at about 140,000 words, so this wasn't a short story we're talking about. He started pricing that book at free, and what was happening with Brian is that readers were buying the next six books in the series, which he prices individually at \$5.99, they're buying the next six books in the series sight unseen in one bundle. We've seen it work very well.

Susan Friedmann: That's quite something. Would you just share with our listeners again contact information, if they want to know more about Smashwords?

Jim Azevedo: The easiest way to contact us or the easiest way to learn about Smashwords is to go to smashwords.com, you can read all about us there. Click down to our FAQ, our frequently asked questions, which is very, very comprehensive. We are pretty proud of that FAQ section and we think that 99.9% of your questions will be answered there. If they're not, you could shoot me an email at jim@smashwords.com and I'll be happy to assist you. We don't sell \$25,000 publishing packages, we don't sell any publishing packages, so I'd be happy to answer any questions that you have, because I know this process and this market can seem overwhelming at times.

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Susan Friedmann:

It certainly can, so that's a fabulous service that you're offering. If you were to leave our listeners with a golden nugget of information, what would that be?

Jim Azevedo:

Persist, do not give up. I've heard this over and over and over again from bestselling writers out there. The best possible thing that you can do as an author is to just keep writing. I would assume that you have some listeners Susan, that have been doing just that. You may have some listeners out there who've sent out dozens if not hundreds of query letters to literary agencies and they're still awaiting that traditional publishing contract. There's nothing wrong with pursuing that traditional publishing dream, but if you're not getting the results that you like, just don't give up.

Just keep writing, because every time you write another book, you're improving your craft. If you're putting those books out there as a self-published author, every time you put a new book out into the world, you're increasing the chances of that serendipitous discovery from new readers. These new readers aren't just readers, they're potential fans and potential super fans who are going to help spread the word about who you are and the great books that you just wrote.

Susan Friedmann:

That's great wisdom, so thank you, and thank you all for taking time out of your precious day to listen to this interview, and I sincerely hope that it sparked some ideas to help you sell more books. Here's wishing you much book marketing success.