

## How London PR helped an author storm the Amazon chart with a blank book

by  
Shed Simove

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Bam!

It was a simply unbelievable moment. Except that it actually, really happened.

I stared at my computer screen. There, sitting in my inbox was an email that confirmed the world around me had gone totally and utterly, bone-fide, stark-raving, strait-jacket wearing, mad. I read the first line. It said:

*'Shed!!! Your book is number 44 on Amazon... Congratulations!'*

Now, most authors would delight at this news, and of course I most certainly was thrilled, but in my case, the book in question was a little bit different to other books. And that's why my jubilation was, well, let's say, mixed in with a healthy dose of disbelief and abject bewilderment. Because, my book, entitled *'What Every Man Thinks About Apart From Sex'* is completely and utterly blank. That's right,

you read that correctly, my book contains two hundred pages and each one has absolutely nothing printed on it.

Astonishingly, at that moment, I made publishing history. It was the first time since records began that a blank book had got into the top fifty on a bestseller chart. And, just like with the development of the steam engine and the internet, in that instant, humanity made a great leap forward.

So, how on earth did a blank book become a worldwide bestseller? The background behind this remarkable occurrence is a tale of ambition, attention to detail and marketing – and it reveals secrets for anyone writing a book, or indeed selling any product or service.

Ever since I can remember, it's been my fierce desire to write a bestselling book. For me, books have enormous worth. The ability of an author to inform, amuse, move and inspire is a hugely valuable and worthwhile pursuit. To this end, I'd worked hard, but hardly set the publishing world alight. The first book I got published was a little gift book called '*Presents Money Can't Buy*' – fifty thoughtful (and very cheap) ideas to show someone you care about them. This took a long time to write and persuade a publisher to jump on board (over fifty rejections) and, eventually when it was published; it went on to sell very modestly indeed... Or more precisely, it bombed.

My second book '*Ideas Man*' was a far weightier tome and I had huge hopes for it. This book took five (count them – five!) years to write, and then another two years to persuade a publisher to take it on. It's a book I poured my soul into, and it covers the successes and failures in my life, and is written to leave the reader with an instructional manual for success...and hopefully a funny one too... Now, for this book I had the backing of a huge publishing house, plus I also threw my whole life behind it. I built my website around '*Ideas Man*', I included mentions of it on every blog I wrote, performed twenty one shows at Edinburgh to showcase it, I even printed images of the book on all the novelty products I'd sold – over one million gifts worldwide, like the 'Martin Loofah King' or birthday candles that spell 'YOU'RE OLD'. None of this seemed to even slightly dent the book sales and '*Ideas Man*' hardly sold at all, never getting to more than around thirty five thousand in the Amazon rankings, despite floods of great reviews and regular emails from readers telling me the book was a fantastic read...

This really got me down, and puzzled me hugely, too. I've since realised that it's a problem many authors have. They spend years writing a book, then even more years trying to get a Literary Agent and Publisher to back it, and then when their book finally comes out, the author breathes a huge sigh of relief and assumes that their book will be discovered, widely read and will sell around the world in bucketloads. Well, any new author needs to wake up and smell the rankings, because you know what 'assume' does (makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me') and indeed the huge instant success after a book is released often just doesn't happen, as in my case with '*Ideas Man*'. In fact, most books, however well written, hardly sell many copies at all. This is a modern day travesty and I believe it needn't happen. Little did I know, but my 'failures' (or as I prefer to call it – my 'experiments') with my first books were to bring me to a solution that would garner huge publishing success...and bring me lessons that can help all authors, companies or entrepreneurs.

I began thinking about the relative sales of my books and my novelty products. If my novelties were selling so well around the world and seemed to effortlessly capture people's attention (it's amazing how a non-working joke remote control to 'Control-A-Man' can sell over a quarter of a million units) and yet, bafflingly, my books weren't selling well at all, then maybe there was a way of combining both concepts to achieve massive success. In my corporate speeches and presentations to big companies, I talk about techniques for generating new ideas, and one of them is to join two ideas that aren't normally placed together, which then delivers a totally new concept. So that's exactly

what I did. In one 'hand', I took the idea of a 'book' and in the other 'hand' I took the idea of a 'novelty joke item'. And once my mind had decided on a book that was a joke, I knew my new book had to be blank inside. The blank pages instantly become the punchline of my '3D joke', and the 'lead-in line' would have to be the title. After rolling it around in my mind for a while, I settled on the title '*What Every Man Thinks About Apart From Sex*'.

Now, I'm positive that had I gone to any Publisher with the idea to release a blank book (and that's assuming I could even get to see them – which is really tough), they would have told me a) it had been done before and b) it wouldn't sell. In fact, I rang the boss of the publishing house who published '*Ideas Man*' asking to see him so that I could tell him about my planned new book. His P.A. called me back and told me the boss wouldn't see me. I wonder if he cares now the book has become a worldwide bestseller!

I decided to remove all possible barriers to me getting my book onto the market by both publishing and releasing it myself. What's particularly unique and marvellous about the world we live in today is that we have the internet, which both empowers us to find experts to make something happen and allows us to upload our ideas to web outlets that can instantly publicise and sell that something. That's really rather exciting. And no one can tell you 'No!'. Awesome.

The next parts of the process were pivotal – 'attention to detail and 'marketing'...

I immediately searched online for an established printer who specialised in books. I found a few, got some quotes and within hours had a feel for how each one dealt with me over email and the phone (note to companies – this matters!). This enabled me to choose the printer I was going to work with from then on. What was exceptionally important at this point, and ultimately to the success of the book, was that when printing the book, I brought to bear my experience with creating novelty products. I knew that in order to sell well and engage with people, this novelty had to perform its function brilliantly and that was down to DETAILS. I specified to the printer the precise specifications I needed for my book, including: off-white blank pages, a glossy thick cover, ISBN and barcode on the back, professionally bound (they call it 'perfect bound' in the trade) with a pre-creased spine. All these details were to ensure the final product instantly felt and looked like an 'authentic book'. After all, the joke hinged on this, and that's all I had! The punchline of the blank pages inside the book would only be funny if the person holding it expected the book to be a traditional book with words inside – nothing could give away that this was a joke before it was opened.

My specifications might sound obvious, but actually there were many ways the book could have been printed. The pages could have been white, the cover not as thick, and some printers even told me they couldn't make the crease down the side. For me, all these details were – and are – pivotal. And I'm completely certain that the media coverage we got at the start (which led to a global media deluge), most certainly wouldn't have happened if the product had been inferior...

The design of the front cover was also massively crucial. To get this right, I researched dozens of self-help psychology books. I say 'researched', I actually spent hours trawling through 'Google Images', downloading many examples of the genre. I then worked with a brilliant designer I know called Chris Jones, who I'd met through working on previous novelty gifts. Chris came back with three brilliant designs for the front cover and I chose one, a striking design with navy blue and black writing on white. We then worked back and forth for twenty four hours, tweaking the cover design until it was perfect. At one stage, I decided to add the image of a 'brain' to the front cover, as I felt this might give the cover an even more authentic look. I then agonised for hours whether the brain helped or

hindered the overall effect and came very close to dropping it altogether. It seems funny to say that adding a graphic of a brain was a crucial turning point, but it turned out to be a surprisingly big decision.

In the end, when I got some samples made, I sent two versions of the cover to the printer, one with the brain and one without. Even when I had the samples in my hands days later (which was hugely exciting), I was still very close to finally choosing the cover without the brain for the finished release. But a chance meeting with Paul Zimmerman, the amazingly clever boss of Firebox (the hugely successful online gift company) persuaded me otherwise. I happened to casually show Paul both versions of the book during a meeting about my novelty gifts. "Go with the 'brain' one Shed! Hands down!", he said decisively... So I did. And looking back, I firmly believe that this was one of those seemingly tiny, but actually hugely influential decisions that led to the end mammoth success. It might sound ridiculous to ask '*Would the book have made it so big without a brain on the cover?*' But in my opinion, no, it wouldn't.

At this point, everything started to happen very quickly. It had taken me just nine days to get the finished book in my hands and I immediately ordered a thousand copies and set up an account on Amazon, which is actually harder than getting a degree from Oxford. (Amazon please note: your system is SO un-user friendly!). I battled through the bureaucracy, overcame the headaches and finally had both a product and a sales outlet where millions of people could buy it from. Yes, I was all ready to go.

Cue the tumbleweed and the sound of a distant church bell...

There was just one small snag. I had a great product plus an amazing distribution network, and all this had been created in just over a week. Even God would have been proud. But what was missing was that out of the six billion people on the planet, only about seven of them knew about my book. Two of those were my parents, one was the printer and one was my cleaner (yes, I'm middle class, please don't hate me for it). And this 'inner circle' was hardly going to get the message out to millions. It was time to get the book on people's radar.

I knew from my disastrous experiences of having books published before that it was simply not good enough to have a fantastic product unless people knew about it and it connected with them. This sounds very obvious, but when you're developing a new product – or indeed, writing a new book, a huge proportion of your time and focus goes into making the end item really good, and then it's easy to think "Oh, people will find it, because I've made sure it's great". Not at all. Wrong!

The fact that I had to market the book myself, and that onus was solely on me, was actually a blessing in disguise. It forced me to get expert help. In the past, I've tried on many occasions to promote my products myself. I've called up journalists, built up a mailing list of media contacts, blogged, Facebooked, twittered and done everything the marketing experts recommend you do, but it's never quite worked for me. And over the years, I reached a key epiphany. I've come to realise that there's something fundamentally different about you yourself telling a journalist that your product is great compared with *someone else* telling a journalist that your product is great.

I called up the best PR company I knew – The London PR Agency - and told them my budget. Instead of putting the phone down on me, they clearly outlined how long they could work on my book for the amount I had. Little did I know it'd turn out to be one of the best investments I'd ever made.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. The first stunt to get the book noticed failed abysmally. The PR company had the creative idea to set up a Facebook group encouraging people to knock Jamie Oliver

off the top of the Amazon chart and replace his book with my blank book. Unfortunately, people really like Jamie Oliver and the backlash against the group was fast and firm. What's impressive is that the London PR Agency immediately changed tack, coming up with ingenious marketing angles that were to lead to instant and enormous success.

The London PR Agency started to create clever and beautifully written press releases that reported on *stories* surrounding the book. This is actually a very important point to note for any business. The PR company didn't just say "Here's a funny idea we've had..." or "Hey, look at our great product!" they looked at what was happening around the book and then told the right people. These two abilities are surprisingly rare, and actually worth their weight in gold. **They're the reason my book blew so big.** The head honchos of the company, Steve and Alex, drafted brilliant press releases about how students were using my blank book as a notebook, and that (once the book reached 44 on the Amazon), it was outselling both Dan Brown's The 'Da Vinci Code' and J.K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix'. The first story got the ball rolling in spectacular style and the second story got picked up by TIME Magazine and by AOL, which then led to even more coverage around the world...

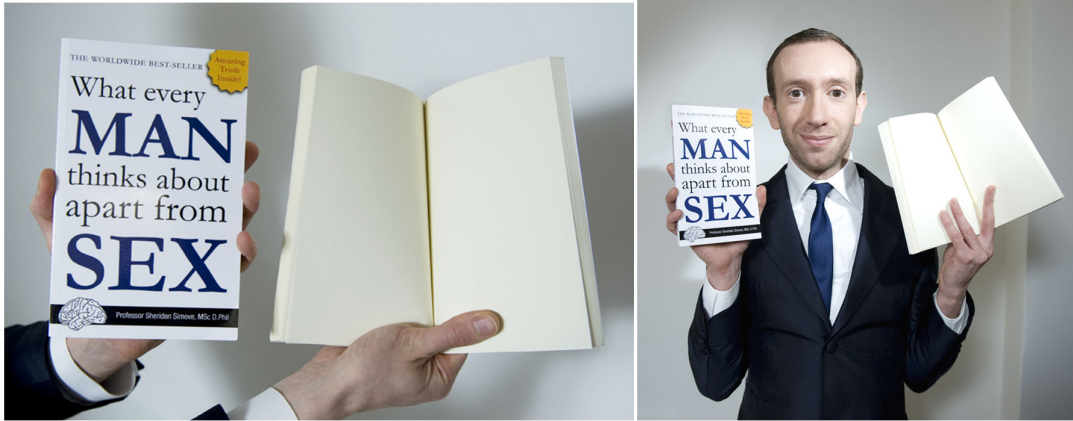
The day after the first press release was sent out, Alex from the London PR agency called me...

"Shed, good news...the ITV morning show 'Lorraine' is interested in the book...can you send them a copy over?"

I did so right away, sending one of my books in a taxi so I knew the person at the TV show would have it in their hands within the hour. The next morning, I tuned into the show and watched with huge excitement as Michael Ball, the ex-singer who was standing in for Lorraine whilst she was on holiday, picked up the book and talked about it. Amazing! I immediately uploaded this clip onto YouTube and Facebook, immensely proud to have national TV coverage. Things were starting to happen...

Even though at this point, we had national TV, press and radio coverage, the book hadn't really become an internet story. And, apart from a brilliant PR Agency sending great press releases to journalists who trusted them, I believe two other factors helped make the story reportable – good photos and a decent video...

I'm lucky enough to know a brilliant guy called David Thorburn who is both a friend and a fantastic photographer. David always supports me with whatever adventures I'm creating and he created three vital shots that I'm convinced helped land the coverage – one shot showed me holding a copy of the book in each hand – one showing the cover and one open on the blank pages, one showed a close up of the two views, without my face and one showed me pulling a funny face at the books... By creating these decent quality images, journalists could now choose a good picture for their story.



As well as the images, I also created a very rough YouTube video of me holding the book, focused on my hands and then opening it. The finished article is fine and functional, but maybe a bit impersonal. I could have left it at that, but for some reason (maybe my ego got involved!) I decided to shoot and upload another video (that was well shot, lit and edited by a brilliant company called Shooting Gap) which showed me speaking to camera, introducing the book. Now, once this video was uploaded onto YouTube, I didn't even link to this video even once, or mention it anywhere. With hindsight I now know exactly how it helped make the book more reportable for bloggers and journalists writing on the web. What's incredible about YouTube is that because it's integrated into Google, when the title of my book, 'What Every Man Thinks About Apart From Sex' is punched in to the search box, any videos related to it immediately pop up in the results. So, from a completely cold standing start, the video could be easily found by journalists and quickly integrated into their stories.

Another call from the PR company came through.

"Shed, the Daily Star are going to run a story on the book...and Aled Jones on Radio 2 might mention it too..."

Incredible! Once again, within twenty four hours, both happened. I uploaded a scan of the Star article to my website and to Facebook (it was brilliantly headlined, "Laughing All The Way To The Blank") and cut a crude YouTube video of the Aled Jones mention on Radio 2 as well.



There were many rejections too. The Guardian didn't run the story, asking for Nielsen book data, which we didn't have, because I was selling the books myself though Amazon. But my PR company doggedly forged ahead and got the pivotal media coverage that swept the world.

An interesting point here is that the PR company had totally nailed the ‘traditional media’ – national TV, national press and national radio and then this gave credence to the story then being reported online. The following day, the Daily Star article appeared on their website. And from then on, we never looked back.

From that day, report after report started to appear on the net and sales on Amazon began to rocket. It was truly thrilling. I got an email every time a book was sold, and suddenly my inbox started going crazy.

It was happening.

Over the next week, a whirlwind occurred. Every day more articles appeared on the net, from ever increasingly obscure regions of the world, I was inundated with interviews from around the globe, the book raced up the Amazon chart and I sold thousands and thousands of books. The day the book hit 44 on Amazon was like a dream. I couldn’t quite believe it happened.



Compare this to the dismal sales of my other book, ‘Ideas Man’ which took five years to write and two years to publish, and which had been selling slowly for over two years. The sales of my blank book overtook that book after six days. I didn’t know whether to jump for joy or weep.

As an interesting aside, what’s important to note is that the idea of a blank book wasn’t new. In fact, in the seventies, a blank book called ‘Everything Men Know About Women’ was released, to some acclaim. Fascinatingly, this book has been for sale ever since. So, when I released my blank book, that previous one was for already sale, and still is. So, why hadn’t that title recently become a worldwide phenomenon like mine did? Because, crucially, I **marketed** mine in ways that had not been used before...and we just shouted louder.

I’ve launched novelty items before, and arguably some have been cleverer or funnier than this book, so why did this book become a global phenomenon?

Reasons the book blew big...

- 1) A Great PR Company - who reported STORIES about the item... The London PR Agency ([www.LondonPR.co.uk](http://www.LondonPR.co.uk))
- 2) A YouTube Video – that showed me and the book too
- 3) Some good images

Frustratingly, I didn't have any books on Amazon.com when some articles broke and I know (from the emails I got) that I could have shifted thousands and thousands of more books if I had. But hey, that's the way it goes sometimes...

The resulting publicity not only sold books in the UK, it also had another, totally unexpected (and comedic) outcome. The sheer amount and reach of coverage the PR firm generated not only delivered the press, TV, radio and internet mentions that followed, but it also brought a deluge of offers from around the world from publishers wanting to buy the rights to translate the books (as hilarious as that sounds!). So far, I've been contacted by publishers in these territories who want to release a version of my book in their territory:

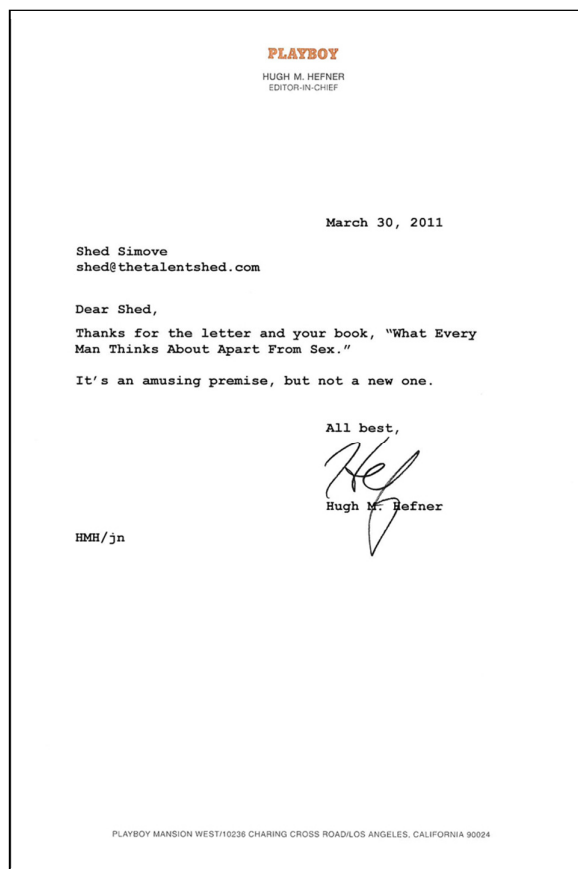
Iceland, Japan, Mongolia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, China, Canada, Spain, Russia, Germany, France, Italy, Wales, Japan, Croatia, Australia, Brazil and South America...

Now, this media coverage and interest from foreign publishers was all very well, but unless I could turn it into sales, this wasn't going to sell any books... I needed a Literary Agent, and fast. This is when another pivotal event occurred. I put out a request on Facebook for anyone who knew a 'Super Agent' and one of my friends recommended Andrew Lownie, the top Literary Agent in the country. I contacted him and amazingly, he didn't look down on me for bringing him a blank book. Within twenty four hours he'd signed a deal with Australia to publish the book down under. Wow! And the rest, as they say...is publishing history...

Even though the response from around the world has been incredible and many publishers will now publish it in their territory, I heard from one famous publisher, who wasn't interested right away. During the period when a whirlwind of emails was arriving for interviews and offers to publish the book, I sent a copy of *'What Every Man Thinks About Apart From Sex'* to the Playboy Mansion (well, it's a good fit, isn't it?!). I simply found the address for the mansion on the web, put a book in a Jiffy bag with a short note and my business card (designed as a banknote called the 'EGO' that I sell online, and now has a higher exchange rate than the Euro), took the little package to my local Wandsworth post office and bundled it off, not really expecting anything to come of it. I mean, Wandsworth and Hollywood aren't exactly twinned are they? I sent the book on the off chance that something would happen. And once again, this is a prime example of how 'failing upwards' is so important. I gave something the best try I could and let the chips (books?) fall where they may. I didn't know if anything would happen but I gave it the chance to do so.

My thinking was that not only was the book would be hugely appropriate for 'Playboy Inc' to publish in the States, in the back of my mind I also secretly hoped for the possibility of being the guest of honour at a launch party for the book at the Playboy Mansion. To attend a party at the Mansion is pretty much every shallow man's dream - and I'm no exception. The thought of me standing in the Hollywood Mansion, holding my blank book, surrounded by Playboy bunnies, is a life event I'd cherish, up there with winning the Nobel Prize or becoming knighted 'Sir Shed' (surely only a formality now?).

But that dream would have to be on hold for a bit. Because, only days after sending the book to Playboy, I received a letter. And this letter has to rank as one of the best letters I've ever received and certainly, most definitely, undeniably, incontrovertibly the best rejection letter I've ever been sent (and I've been sent many!). Scanning down from the top of the letter, I saw the word 'Playboy' in chunky orange letters. 'Wow!', I thought, a reply so soon. Awesome! The next two lines got me even more excited. They read: 'Hugh M Hefner, Editor In Chief'. The Alpha Dog! The Big Cheese! The One And Only Chief Pervert! Incredible. I read onwards. The letter said: "Dear Shed, Thanks for your letter and your book 'What Every Man Thinks About Apart From Sex'. It's an amusing premise, but not a new one. All best, Hugh M. Hefner". Signed above his typewritten name was one hand written word, a signature: 'Hef'. Well, I'm sure you'll agree that to have the legend himself to both consider my blank book and to write to me is a rather big deal. The letter is going in a frame and is another high point in my blank book adventure. And I'm keeping my dream of the Playboy Party firmly alive...



So there you have it. My experience with my blank book, 'What Every Man Thinks About Apart From Sex', has lessons for all of us. It shows that if you have a clear idea, you deliver it well, and then shout about it loudly and in the right way, you can make anything happen...you could even get a blank book to the top of the bestseller charts.