

Interview With Marcia James, Romance Author + Promotion Expert

Please welcome my special guest today, romance author and super promotion expert, Marcia James.

I first met Marcia right before Lori Foster's Readers' and Writers' event two years ago. It was Marcia who introduced me to Lori's conference and now I'm an avid fan and will be attending again this summer in Cincinnati where I hope to run into Marcia again, too.

Marcia's given us some fabulous promotion tip. I'm always ready to learn something new, in particular to improve my craft and ways to get word out about my books.

So please give Marcia a big hand and leave lots of questions and comments for her.



Ashley: Marcia, welcome! I'm so happy you could join us today. I'm just going to jump in with my questions. You're a writer and you also teach other people how to promote their books. About what percentage of time do you spend on each activity?

Marcia: A tough question right off the bat. ;-) I LOVE promotion, and I definitely enjoy presenting author PR workshops and guest-blogging on the topic -- so I find it tempting to spend too much time teaching and doing promotion. But writing romances has to be a priority. Some days I'll spend up to 50% of my day marketing my books and my author brand. (Presenting PR workshops is just one way I promote my brand.) Other days, I might spend 5% of my time doing some social media networking or updating my Web site (www.MarciaJames.net).

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to promotion. The amount of time spent on PR changes day-to-day and author-to-author. For example, some authors have the support of their publisher's in-house publicist. Others hire an author promotion site, like AuthorIsland, to do the bulk of their marketing. But many shoulder the full responsibility and time demands for self-promotion. In addition, an author's promotion is going to take up more time during a month when s/he has a book or short-story release. Because there are so many variables as to what type and how much promotion a person can do, I've designed my workshops to help authors determine which PR options are right for them.

Ashley: Did you start your writing or promotion career first?

Marcia: It was simultaneous. Since getting a Masters in Communications more years ago than I want to mention, ;-) I've worked writing advertising and marketing materials -- from newspaper ads and radio commercials to sales videos and TV ads. I lived in the Washington, D.C. area until the late 1990s, when my husband and I moved to Columbus, OH. I joined Romance Writers of America (RWA) several years later and started writing romance novels. I worked hard to learn both the craft and business of fiction writing, studying author promotion in particular.

I enjoyed learning about the challenges of selling a book -- whether it's a paperback or e-book, an inspirational or erotic romance, etc. I found that many basic marketing ideas can be applied to promoting a novel. I've written articles about promotion in which I quote other authors on what has worked (or not worked) for them. The articles can be found on my Web site (<http://www.MarciaJames.net/Articles.html>).

Ashley: Please tell us about your online workshop: "GUILT-FREE AUTHOR PROMOTION: Picking the Right PR Options For You" including how to sign up and how it will help authors.

Marcia: I present several author promotion online workshops a year. My latest one just began on April 5th, so anyone who might be interested in taking the class could easily catch up on the lectures. In addition to my own workshop lessons, I have a dozen PR-savvy guest-lecturers who've donated lectures. The San Diego RWA chapter is hosting the workshop, the cost is \$20, and the registration information is on their Web site (<http://www.RWASD.com/Training/Index.html>).

I'm also presenting a two-week author promotion online workshop August 15 - 28. The Northeast Ohio RWA chapter is hosting that workshop, and their registration information can be found here:

<http://NEORWA.com/index.php/Workshops/UpcomingWorkshops>

I've designed my workshops to help authors consider all of the criteria necessary to narrow down the myriad of promotional options available and to choose those that are best for their specific books, budgets, time constraints, and personality. Rather than "shot-gunning" promotional efforts all over the place, authors can target niche audiences and spend their time and money more wisely.

Also, author promotion shouldn't start AFTER getting "The Call". There are plenty of options for aspiring authors to begin marketing their brand and making PR decisions now that will save them time and stress after they sell their first book. So my workshops are geared toward both aspiring and published authors. The Schedule page on my Web site (<http://www.MarciaJames.net/Schedule.html>) lists upcoming workshops and author promotion guest-blogs.

Ashley: What do you mean by "guilt-free promotion"?

Marcia: There's never been more pressure on authors to do self-promotion. Most small presses don't have the distribution or marketing money to launch bestsellers, and large New York print publishers often expect a high sell-thru from even their newest authors. Luckily there are many promotional options available, but no one person can take advantage of every opportunity. So authors begin to feel guilty, like they aren't doing enough self-promotion or spending enough money, or time, or whatever.

Shy authors are expected to step outside their comfort zone to do booksignings, panel discussions, radio interviews, power schmoozing and more. Technologically challenged authors (like myself) are being pressured to do social media networking, learn Web site design and maintenance, host podcast shows, etc. Through my workshops, I help provide the information for authors to choose those PR options they might enjoy (yes, you can enjoy promotion!) -- options that work best with their books, budget, and more.

Ashley: Please tell us about your upcoming panel discussions at the 2010 RT convention: "The Million-Dollar Marketing Plan" (2:30 – 3:30 p.m., Wed., April 28) and "Now That's Funny" (11:15 a.m. – 12:15 p.m., Fri., April 30).

Marcia: I'm pleased to be on two fun panels at the RT convention, which will be held here in Columbus, OH, this year. "The Million-Dollar Marketing Plan" panel consists of authors Tina Gallagher, Twyla Hart, and me, with each of us presenting a different aspect of author promotion. I'll be distributing my "What's Your PR Personality?" quiz to attendees. It's a short test to help authors identify those PR options they would most enjoy.

The "Now That's Funny" panel is being captained by author Sahara Kelly and includes authors S.L. Carpenter, Delilah Marvelle, Judi McCoy, and me. This panel will be more free-form, with each of us sharing how we incorporate humor into our writing and answering attendees' questions.

Ashley: How did you choose a Chinese crested hairless dog as your author logo?



When I was writing my first manuscript, AT HER COMMAND, I wanted to pick an unusual dog breed for my "undercover" DEA drug-sniffing dog character. The tiny hairless "crestie" breed seemed the perfect choice for the humor in that book. Smokey, the miniature DEA dog, was so much fun to write that I had a caricaturist draw my concept of Smokey, and he became my logo/mascot. Each of my books has at least a cameo by a Chinese crested dog now. Just like Alfred Hitchcock appeared in a scene in each of his movies, a crestie always shows up somewhere in my stories.

Ashley: Please tell everybody about some of the interesting things you've done in your eclectic career.

Marcia: In the 1980s, I worked for a military subcontractor writing and producing training videos for the U.S. Navy, predominantly the submarine sailors. I've been aboard a number of subs, a mine sweeper, and other ships on Naval bases around the country. Of course, the technology has changed tremendously since I worked that job, but it was fascinating to see into that world.

I was a freelance advertising copywriter for a wide variety of clients, including banks, hotels, shoe stores, a rental furniture company, a DNA-testing organization, and even a Chinese beer account. I also had a lot of medical and hospital clients, including the Visiting Nurse Association.

Living in Washington, D.C., I was a subcontracted writer for federal agencies, including the Justice Dept, the State Dept., the Social Security Administration, and the Agriculture

Dept. I also worked for a number of the nonprofit organizations in town, such as the YMCA and the American Red Cross.

One of the things I like the most about freelancing is the variety of projects I get -- from how to install neon signs safely to defensive driving tips for bloodmobile drivers. These and other experiences allowed me to add a list of "fun facts" to my online bio (<http://www.MarciaJames.net/Bio.html>) -- something readers enjoy seeing on author Web sites.

Ashley: Who are some of the famous people you've worked with? Do you have an interesting story to share about one of them?

Marcia: I've worked a number of nonprofit events -- many of them at the Kennedy Center in D.C. -- and met celebrities like Paul Newman, Clint Eastwood, Tom Selleck and Dennis Quaid. I have a virtual album of celebrity photos on my Web site (<http://www.MarciaJames.net/Photos.html>). Most of these events were in the 1980s, so I look a lot younger in the pictures. ;-)

One of my favorite times was inadvertently making Steve Martin laugh at an American Film Institute event. I was working back stage, and one of my jobs was directing (from the wings) a young serviceman with a microphone. He was supposed to ask director Martin Scorsese a question. Unfortunately, the young man didn't know what the director looked like. Scorsese was sitting at a table with Steve Martin, who could see me waving my arms frantically from the wings, trying to point out which person at the table was the director. Steve cracked up, while the poor serviceman went from one person to the other trying to figure out who Scorsese was. Luckily the event was taped, so they could edit out that part.

Ashley: That's a wonderful memory. I wish I could see the unedited version. :) What is the single most important thing an author can do to promote her book?

Marcia: The best promotional tool an author has is his/her Web site. You can reinforce your author brand with the tone, text, and graphics on your site, as well as provide information to potential readers -- including book release and purchase information, book blurbs and excerpts, your schedule, your bio, and your contact information. So authors need to make sure their Web site URL is on every type of promotional material they use.

The purpose of print and trinket items (like the thumbcuff keychains I give away at conferences and booksignings) is to direct potential readers to your Web site and strengthen name recognition. Many authors believe bookmarks, postcards, etc. should sell a book; but that's the job of your Web site. The only print item I've found that will sometimes convince a reader to buy a book is an excerpt booklet or first chapter booklet. These give the potential reader an opportunity to sample your story and your writing. But they're more costly than other hand-out items.

A quick note about print and trinket giveaways: You can buy in larger quantities and pay less per item if you order things that promote your brand vs. a single book. And if your item is unique and becomes associated with you vs. other authors, you can make it part of your brand. For example, I've given away over 6,000 thumbcuff keychains, which symbolize the risqué nature of my "hot, humorous romances" and hint at the fact that many of my heroes and heroines are in law enforcement. At last year's RWA national conference, eight different people came up to me to tell me that they saw my thumbcuffs in the Goodie Room. I hadn't put any thumbcuffs in that room, so the keychains had been purchased and put there by another author. If she had Googled "thumbcuff keychains" before buying them, she would have seen how many hits there are for my Web site, guest-blogs, etc. Why spend money on something that is associated with another author?

By the way, I also recommend Googling one's pen name and tagline before deciding on it. When I locked in my domain name in 2001, there were only a couple other authors with "James" in their pen name. Now there are so many that I interview a different one each month for my Web site's "James Gang" feature (http://www.MarciaJames.net/James_Gang.html).

Ashley: What is your favorite way to promote your books?

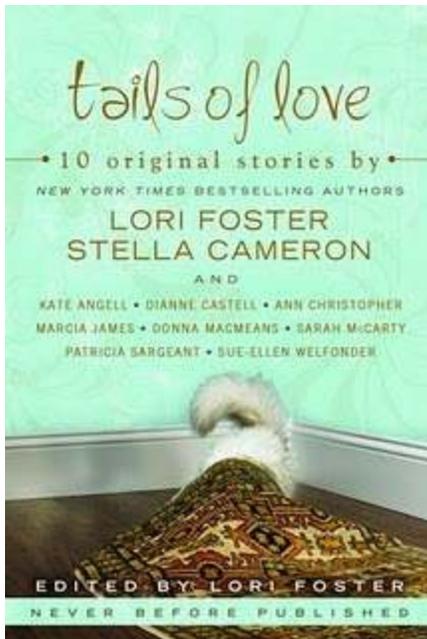
Marcia: I'm an extrovert, so my favorite promotions will always be social ones. For example, I enjoy doing power-schmoozing, speaking on panels, presenting workshops, doing booksignings, interviewing other authors for my articles and James Gang Web page, etc.. In addition, I maintain my Promotion Options WORD file, which I add information to several times a week. I give away the 280-page file for free to any author who would like it. All you have to do is go to the "Contact Me" page on my Web site and email me requesting the file, and I'll attach it to my reply.

Ashley: Please tell us about "Dr. Ally's Sex Q&A". That looks like a very interesting way to promote.

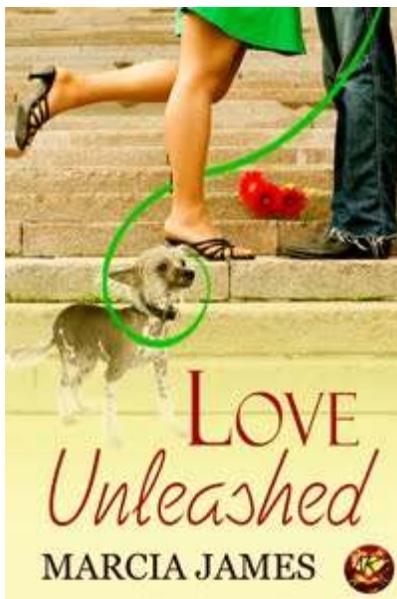
Marcia: ;-D Yes, this advice column has attracted a lot of comments. Dr. Ally Skye, the heroine of my yet-to-be sold romantic mystery series, is a sex therapist in Las Vegas. "She" answers sex questions on my Web site. The column is meant to be amusing as well as informative.

Ashley: You're active in charity work. Please tell us how you support charities and which ones you're active in helping.

Marcia: I worked as a volunteer, organizing and running nonprofit events in D.C., and my husband and I asked our wedding guests to donate to charity vs. giving us a gift. Since moving to Ohio, I've supported charities in other ways. For example, last year, I donated my fee for a workshop I presented to the Best Friends Animal Society.



I was also happy to be asked to contribute a PG-rated short story to TAILS OF LOVE, a Lori Foster--Berkley anthology that raised money for a no-kill animal shelter in Ohio. (Pro-animal charities are some of my favorite causes.)



My February release, an R-rated short story titled LOVE UNLEASHED, was part of an All Romance eBooks fundraiser for the American Heart Association (AHA). Heart disease is the number one killer of women, and the AHA does wonderful work. In addition, I support the Columbus, OH-based chapters of national charities by donating gift baskets to their raffles and silent auctions.

Ashley: Please tell us about your books. What is your favorite genre to write? Why?

Marcia: I read just about every subgenre of romance, as well as mystery and suspense novels, and I enjoy books that genre-blend. As my tagline states, I pen "hot, humorous romances", which gives me some wiggle-room as to what I write. So far, I've written funny contemporary romances and comic romantic mystery/suspense. I have an idea for a lite paranormal series, too. The common denominator, though, is my comic voice. I also enjoy writing love scenes, so except for the PG-rated TAILS OF LOVE anthology, all of my stories will be risqué. ;-)

Ashley: Please tell us more about AT HER COMMAND and Smokey's part in it.



Marcia: AT HER COMMAND is a comic romantic suspense that pokes fun at the alphabet soup of Washington, D.C. law enforcement agencies. In the book, the DEA, the FBI and the D.C. police unknowingly put operatives undercover at the same sex club. The DEA heroine gets a job as a dominatrix to investigate drug-trafficking, while the police detective Alpha hero has to pretend he's a submissive client to discover who killed his partner. They have some memorable club sessions before they discover they're both on the right side of the law. ;-)

Smokey, as I mentioned, is a drug-sniffing dog, and he helps uncover the bad guys, while doing his canine best to move the romance along. ;-) He might be tiny, but he's effective.

Ashley: Is there anything else you'd like to share with your readers and other authors?

Marcia: There are so many little things in self-promotion that can make a big difference. For example, authors should use an email signature in their professional and personal emails -- a signature that includes their Web site URL and possibly a tagline and their latest release information. And, since most URLs are not case-sensitive, it's a good idea to make it easy to see your pen name within the URL. For example, instead of typing my URL like this: www.marciajames.net, I type it like this: www.MarciaJames.net.

You never know who might read your signature information and visit your Web site. I recently entered and won a contest sponsored by a local magazine. When I sent the editor a "Thank you" email, she noticed my email signature and checked out my site. Then she emailed me back to ask if she could interview me for the magazine. That interview garnered a lot of attention and brought additional traffic to my site.

Thanks, Ashley, for interviewing me on your blog! Happy promoting!

-- Marcia ;-)

Thank you, Marcia! As always you inspire and teach me.

Ashley

Marcia,

Thank you for joining us today. I've always admired you and look forward to attending your promotion workshops. I also look forward to reading more of your books.

Ashley Ladd

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