

# Aliza Sherman as 'Cybergrrl' propels women and girls into cyberspace

## ■ [Cybergrrl](#)

By Lisa M. Hamm  
*Associated Press Writer*

NEW YORK (AP) - The event was the unveiling of the revamped Godiva Chocolatier site on the World Wide Web, but all eyes were fixed on a thin, geeky, dark-haired woman wearing a gray pantsuit and a Mickey Mouse watch.

It almost didn't matter what she said; the audience would have shown the same rapt attention if she were lecturing on cow manure.

But Aliza Sherman was talking about cyberspace. And although two years ago she barely knew a pixel from a protocol, today the 28-year-old Sherman is "Cybergrrl," self-propelled queen of the Internet.

And people listen.

Craig Rydin, president of Godiva Worldwide, introduced her as "the true expert here tonight." A lot of people in this upstart industry share that opinion.

Sherman's transformation from working girl to [Cybergrrl](#) was sparked by a mugging, of all things. She was working as publicist for a domestic violence awareness group in New York City when she was held up at gunpoint in November 1994. She fled to her sister's home in Santa Fe, N.M., to escape the evils of Gotham.

A month later she saw an ad for a class in HTML, the language used to create pages on the World Wide Web, the graphic-oriented part of the Internet. She had been dabbling with online chat groups for a few years and was curious, so she went.

"For 10 bucks, one hour, I discovered HTML, and began creating my first Web site," said Sherman, giggling like a schoolgirl as she thought back to that day when she stumbled upon her niche.

Smitten by the Web's potential, she decided to face her fears and move back to New York where, with an abundance of chutzpah and a little funding from a friend, she launched an Internet business aimed at women.

Sherman adopted the online persona Cybergrrl, chosen because the growl in "grrl" gave the name "a certain attitude," and created the Cybergrrl Webstation, "The Premier Place for Girls and Women Online."

In her first month of business, Sherman made \$42.50.

But in her "sophomore year" enough cash is coming in from clients and advertisers to support an office in lower Manhattan, salaries for two full- and two part-time employees and computers for a bunch of eager unpaid interns.

"We're out to create places online for people," says Sherman, whose usual business attire is jeans, a turtleneck and black Chuck Taylor sneakers. "But with a particular voice, a particular attitude, a particular world view."

The Cybergrrl Webstation is packed with useful information presented in light, readable style. With sponsors such as Chase Online and Lifetime Television, it features a searchable database of women-oriented information called Femina and a chatty place called WomenSpace for adolescent girls to learn about their changing bodies.

Cybergrrl Internet Media also creates Web sites for a number of clients, including the Avon Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign, the National Alliance of Breast Cancer Organizations, Girls Incorporated and diet guru Dr. Atkins.

A cartoon about the adventures of Cybergrrl, the caped crusader-esque icon of the site, starts in January.

On top of all that, Sherman writes a monthly column for aspiring businesswomen for Lifetime TV's Web site, guest columns for The Net magazine and "how to" articles for the Lycos search engine and other publications. She recently published a book titled "Working Together To Stop Violence Against Women" and has another book in the pipeline. She does speaking engagements and occasionally appears on the MSNBC cable TV channel.

Sherman wears no jewelry and no makeup, so it's easy to see her skin is pale from lack of sun and her eyes are lined from staring at computer screens. Her hands seem almost surgically attached to the keyboard of her laptop.

Her energy level seems limitless.

"I live and breathe all of this stuff!" she bubbled recently while she packed for a California trip to participate in a Microsoft-sponsored panel on women and the Internet. "There's not a waking hour that I'm not doing something Webgrrl-related or Cybergrrl-related."

When she's not working on one of her numerous projects, Sherman is hauling other women up by the bootstraps into the world of new media through a group she formed by accident called Webgrrls.

When she first started surfing the Web, Sherman was curious about what other women were doing online. She found a few home pages she liked, linked them to her Cybergrrl site and dubbed them ``Webgrrls."

``They were artistic, they were funny, they had personality - so I began to e-mail them. A few months later, I suggested that we meet."

Six women gathered for cafe latte and home-page homage one Saturday in April 1995 at the (At) Cafe, an East Village Internet hangout.

Sherman posted a bright little synopsis afterward on Cybergrrl's site: ``In between surfing to each other's pages, we chatted about who we are and what we do, answering questions from passersby and waiters alike and making our presence known!"

Fifteen women showed up for the second gathering in May. ``And I sat there amazed at all of us, women from diverse backgrounds, talking up a storm, about our big common interests - the Internet and the World Wide Web!" enthused Sherman's journal.

Come June, 30 women came. In July, the meeting moved to an office where a lawyer and accountant addressed the Webgrrls' business concerns. Almost 50 women attended.

Fast-forward to Sherman's November 1995 log: ``Yowza - just about 200 women at this Webgrrls NYC meeting, so from now on we are going to have 2 meetings each month so the crowd is manageable. Can it possibly get bigger and better? I guess it does!"

Today the New York City chapter has 1,200 women on its rolls, and more than 60 chapters have sprung up worldwide - as distant as New Zealand and Tokyo, as exotic as Barbados, as techno-geekish as Seattle, as close as Long Island.

``Each chapter around the world is completely different, but I just told them, you've got to have this spirit ... for creating opportunity for one another," said Aliza, sounding like a proud mom when she talks about what she has spawned.

Through Webgrrls, women have found jobs, found each other or simply found themselves. They are welcoming each other into the traditionally male-dominated world of technology. Webgrrls even work with real girls to introduce them to computers.

The group has become a force in the new media industry. The first Webgrrls Expo in New York in October drew more than 1,000 people and gave women entrepreneurs a chance to strut their stuff.

Sherman, who never studied computers, definitely knows a pixel from a protocol now. But what she is really coming to know is power. And - fortunately for other women - she's using it to propel her sisters into cyberspace.