



A bin of 3D printer-made prototypes of "Fin," the latest sex-toy offering aimed to close the gender pleasure gap from Dame Products at the company's Brooklyn office

the SEX TOY REVOLUTION

Women are crashing through glass ceilings, making big-boy bank, even making a run for the White House—but there’s one gender gap we could still use some help closing: sexual satisfaction. Meet the two women doing just that, one vibrator at a time

By VIVIAN GIANG Photographs by REBECCA GREENFIELD

Late one summer night in May 2013, Janet Lieberman, an MIT-trained mechanical engineer, and her then-boyfriend, also an engineer, were at a bar in Brooklyn trying to operate a sex toy they’d purchased to celebrate his birthday. She’d worn the vibrator around all day to mark the special occasion—her boyfriend had planned to use its remote control to pleasure her whenever he pleased—but their plan failed when neither of them could determine how to turn the thing on. “I felt so dumb because there were such simple instructions, but we just couldn’t figure it out,” Lieberman says. Eventually they gave up and threw the toy away. “If two engineers who design products for a living couldn’t figure out how to operate a vibrator that cost \$160, what’s happening to other people who are buying these products?” says Lieberman, 31. “I thought to myself, *I can make better vibrators.*”

By the end of the following year, she’d done just that, cofounding Dame Products, a company that bills itself as “smart women who make phenomenal sex toys.” In December 2014, Lieberman and her business partner, Alex Fine, proved they had the goods to back up that motto when their first product, Eva—marketed as “the first truly wearable couples’ vibrator”—made crowdfunding history, raising \$800,000 in less than two months on Indiegogo, a 1,151 percent jump from their initial goal of \$50,000.

Eva’s design—two flexible wings that tuck under a woman’s labia, stimulating the clitoris during penetration—was unlike anything on the

market and was honed to perfection specifically with women in mind. “We make products for women,” says Lieberman, Dame’s chief technology officer. “Men buy our products, too, but they do so because they think women are going to like them.”

That’s a revolutionary concept in an industry ripe for disruption. For decades, social scientists and health researchers have known women don’t get as much satisfaction from intercourse. (In fact, we’re four times more likely than men to describe sex as “unpleasurable.”) But even as mounting evidence has proved women need a little help reaching climax, the sex-toy industry has remained stubbornly male dominated, with its toys inspired by porn, modeled on penises, and largely marketed to men to use on women as a way of enhancing male enjoyment. “A lot of sex toys are missing the point if you look at what women say they get sexual pleasure from,” says Fine, 28, Dame’s CEO. Which is why she and Lieberman are taking a different approach. “What we’ve learned is, women want different things sexually,” Lieberman says. “So, how can we make the highest percentage of them happy?”

One way to ensure a wide swath of women will find sexual satisfaction is to have lots of product options available to them. Which is why Fine and Lieberman are now back in their lab, working on a second sex toy—the next in what they hope will eventually be a large line of women-focused devices. Like Eva, their sophomore product, a finger vibrator called Fin, is being designed to maximize female pleasure. When it hits the market this November, Fine and Lieberman will be one product closer to accomplishing their mission of “making the world a happier place, one vagina at a time.”



Sex-toy game-changers Janet Lieberman (left) and Alex Fine inside Dame Products headquarters

the fact men orgasm three times as often as their female partners during sex, and that only 30 percent of women orgasm with vaginal intercourse alone, according to the National Health and Social Life Survey, a large-scale, comprehensive study of American adults conducted in 1988. Fine was alarmed by the findings and vowed to find a way to narrow the gap. She started thinking about how sex toys could help, given that several studies have found 70 percent of women need clitoral stimulation to have an orgasm. "I felt like there was a clear lack of understanding of women's needs among the products that were on the market," Fine says.

The women independently started attending networking events to pick entrepreneurs' brains about getting their ideas off the ground, and kept hearing about each other. "People either thought that we were the same person or we were already working together because there aren't that many young women in Brooklyn that are starting a sex-toy

dame Products is based inside a decrepit-looking, postindustrial warehouse, one of several companies stationed on the grounds of a former rope factory that sprawls across 14-acres of waterfront property in Brooklyn's Greenpoint neighborhood. On the lab's dark-gray walls hangs a map of the female anatomy, along with some on-theme signs (including one that says, "Good Vibes") and black-and-white prints of pinup models from Hollywood's Golden Age. In a corner sits a sex-toy mannequin named Double Dennis, purchased for testing purposes during Eva's production. (He was never used, though, because his penis is comically large.)

Growing up, Lieberman never would have guessed her job would one day include sex dolls. Both of her parents are statisticians and her older sister majored in math, so it was no surprise when she, too, went into a technical field. In 2007, the New Jersey native graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and got a job as a mechanical engineer at Z Corporation. She went on to work at design firms Quirky and MindsInSync, before landing at Maker Bot Industries as a lead engineer on one of the company's 3-D printers, which can be used to create everything from cup holders to high heels. She was working there in 2013 when the faulty vibrator spurred her interest in creating better sex toys. "Most of the time when you have thoughts like that, it's not a realistic impulse," Lieberman says. "But I'd seen companies being built. I was on the design side, but I'd also been involved with the manufacturing, been a quality engineer, and done a fair amount of project management. After a couple of months, I thought, *Maybe this is realistic.*"

Around the same time, Fine, who hails from Long Island, New York, and has a master's degree in clinical psychology from Columbia University, was working at Babo Botanicals, which makes a wide range of organic products for newborns, and volunteering with Planned Parenthood to teach sex ed. Throughout her education, Fine had repeatedly learned about the "pleasure gap"—a term used to describe

company at any given moment," Fine says. "About the third time that someone mistook me for her, I said, 'OK, do you have this girl's contact info? I should just meet up with her,'" Lieberman recalls.

The women met for breakfast in the West Village in June 2014 and bonded over their mutual goal over yogurt and granola and bacon. They were especially excited about the opportunity in the market for their products. "The people making sex toys at the time weren't people who got into the industry to champion female sexuality," Lieberman says. "They got into the industry because they wanted something else to make money on in addition to selling porn. When that's the root of the industry, you can understand why [products are made] without understanding what women want or need." They thought the industry was ready for their innovations. "There's been a recent wave acknowledging that women also have sexual needs," Lieberman says. "When that culture shift happened, it created a great opportunity for women's pleasure products. These are not gag gifts at bachelorette parties—these are products many women use every day."

Looking back on it now, Fine says, that breakfast was the moment the company started. The women say not much was discussed during the initial meeting—not even working styles or how they would interact with each other—but they liked and trusted each other enough that they decided to build their dreams together.

Fine says her parents were supportive of her starting the company from the beginning ("They were already used to me wanting to be a sex therapist, so ..."), but Lieberman's parents took a little more convincing. She told her parents about her idea before she started the company (she describes it as a "coming out" process) and gave them veto power. They were "very anxious," but ultimately, "my mom said her job as a parent isn't to support me in following her dreams," Lieberman says. "It's to support me in following mine." Now, they brag about her accomplishments all the time. "My parents know the values they taught me are the reasons why I wanted to start this company," she says. "Consumers deserve to feel like the products they get are well made and a good value." Still, her "very Catholic" mother hasn't told her church choir and worries she'd have to change congregations if they ever found out.

Four months after Fine and Lieberman met, the Indiegogo campaign

went live. The response was so huge and immediate that neither of them can remember much else about their lives at the time. Lieberman broke up with her boyfriend a week or two before the launch, leaving her no time to process: “I remember telling myself, ‘A week from now, I will have emotions about this, but this week, I have to work.’” Within TK days, they hit their initial goal of \$50,000. Then, the very next day, while Lieberman was out on a Tinder date, they hit the \$100,000 mark. “I hadn’t even gotten the chance to drink champagne yet,” she says. By the time the campaign ended in December, they’d brought in over \$800,000—making Eva the top-funded adult product on any online fundraising platform to date.

Fine and Lieberman scrambled to fill the 6,000 orders that came via Indiegogo. They didn’t have a lab of their own yet, so they holed up inside Fine’s dad’s office space on Long Island (he owns a cleaning business, which Fine calls “literally the least sexy company”). “We took over their conference room for six months,” Fine says. “Everyone in the office knew we were making vibrators and thought it was really funny.” They conducted user surveys and tweaked the prototype’s design during the day, and made calls to China (where the product is manufactured) to hammer out details at night. “At the time, Janet and I had only known each other for a

about Dame’s second product. By then, they’d moved into their lab in Greenpoint and hired five employees (they hired a sixth this July). They brainstormed as many ideas as possible, and the designers and engineers created prototypes of the most promising ideas. Within a few weeks, they settled on creating a finger vibrator, after identifying the product category as on the rise and ripe for innovation. They talked to sex-toy-shop owners, Eva users, and those signed up to be testers on their site, asking questions like: *How would you want to use a finger vibe? What features would you like it to have? What do you anticipate your main complaints would be?*

In early February, they officially started developing Fin. Assembling its parts was kind of like playing Tetris—they tried to put parts where they seemed to fit and tinkered with it until all the components really did fit. Each model was slightly different. Some were wide at the back and pointy in the front; some had the motor on top of the finger instead of below; some required two fingers instead of one. There were even designs that featured straps to secure the toy on the user’s hand. “You start out knowing the basic shape that you want, but not knowing what people like,” says Lieberman. “Some of the things that you think are going to work out don’t work at all.” But if someone with big hands and someone with small hands both say

“THESE AREN’T GAG GIFTS—THEY’RE PRODUCTS WOMEN USE EVERY DAY.”

—JANET LIEBERMAN, COFOUNDER, DAME PRODUCTS

matter of months,” Fine says. “I remember feeling so appreciative that she was there to pull all-nighters with me.” After the crowdfunding campaign ended, they began selling Eva exclusively on their website for \$105; since then, they’ve sold around 35,000.

One of their early users was Meredith, 30, who volunteered to test Eva along with her boyfriend of three years, who had attended MIT with Lieberman. “It’s a totally different kind of product,” she says. “For me, it was really strong—stronger than anything I’d experienced before.” Another customer, Kylie Stone, 43, purchased Eva to use with her husband, who is nearly a foot taller than her. Because of the height difference, most sex toys are awkward for them to use during sex. “I’m so lucky,” she says. “With Eva, I don’t have to worry about that anymore.” She calls the toy “revolutionary,” praising Fine and Lieberman for listening to what women want, and credits the toy for taking her sex life to “a completely different level.”

Once the Eva craze died down, Fine and Lieberman began thinking

they like the same feature, she adds, then it might be a winner: “You keep closing in until you find something most people can enjoy.”

Eventually Fine and Lieberman narrowed the field from 20 down to a winning prototype, which they called Alpha 1. Its small body (about the size of a makeup sponge) was made purposefully unobtrusive so it doesn’t get in the way during sex. This concept, the Dame founders say, is key to increasing pleasure in the bedroom as the toy gives women the clitoris stimulation they need without distracting from the intimacy of the moment or being intimidating to men. They made 15 prototypes—each costs \$250 to produce—and sent them out to testers, ages 20 to 65. Once each Alpha 1 is returned by the first batch of users, the products are bleached and covered with a fresh coat of silicone to go out to additional testers.

Within a few weeks of testing, Fine and Lieberman learned there was division between women who liked using Fin with the straps looped around both fingers and those who wished it were strapless. As a result, on the final model, the straps are detachable. They’ll continue this process of listening to women and tweaking the design based on their feedback until the last possible moment before the toy hits the market this month. (Like Eva, they plan to launch Fin via a crowdfunding site, this time, Kickstarter.) And that, ultimately, is what sets Dame apart from other sex-toy companies: Their work isn’t just about building more sex toys—it’s about creating a world where female sexual pleasure is king. For Kylie Stone and other users like her, all of the tedious revisions Fine and Lieberman make are worth it. “It’s amazing to have a sex toy that actually delivers what it says it’s going to do,” Stone says. “It’s allowed me to enjoy sex so much more, so, from me to Fine and Lieberman, thank you so much.” **mc**

