How to Set Up a Successful Book-Signing Event

You can set up and star in a successful book-signing event even if you’re not a natural at marketing yourself. Here’s how.

By Julie Burtinshaw

A newly published writer, caught up in the euphoria of holding her first book or seeing her work reviewed in a publication, seldom realizes that a world of work lies ahead. After the rewriting and editing is finished, the book jacket finalized and the dedication penned, a first-time author breathes a sigh of relief and waits for the public to start clamoring for copies of her book. As days roll into weeks and months, dreams of a J.K. Rowling-like existence are usually replaced by reality.

The best bookseller is the author. You know your book better than anyone, and no one has as much riding on its success. By nature, most authors recoil in horror at the thought of pushing their own wares. But in the highly competitive world of publishing, this is a necessity.

Don’t be afraid
Many bestselling writers built their fame by selling themselves. Public speaking is a skill that can, and must, be learned.

If the thought of standing before 400 to 500 fans scares the you-know-what out of you, get some help. Join Toastmasters (www.toastmasters.org) or a local community college speakers group.

The first time I stood before a large audience was on a main stage in Calgary, Alberta. I feared that, at best, I might faint and, at worst, I might be sick. I survived and, to my surprise, actually started to enjoy myself.

Once you’ve mastered public speaking and have learned to channel your fear, read what other writers say about promoting their work. You’ll quickly find out that you’re not alone with your stage fright.
Get the gig
After you’ve dried your sweaty palms and feel ready to test your skills, it’s time to schedule book readings.

Public libraries often sponsor author appearances and can be one of your best sources for finding speaking engagements. Face-to-face meetings are most effective. Go boldly in, book in hand, and describe to the librarians your purpose and background. Visit your area libraries and, when you travel out of town, introduce yourself at libraries there, as well. Librarians are wonderful resources. They’ll happily put you in a database of speakers and pass your name on to online newsgroups, chat groups and listservs.

Give librarians your business card and a simple pamphlet outlining your fee, your preferences on group size and ages, and a short description of your presentation. This isn’t the time for humility. You’ve written a book—a feat most people consider as impossible as sprouting wings. Few of your potential listeners will ever guess how insecure you feel. Also, contact your local booksellers to schedule appearances. Let them know you’re a performer. Create a graphically appealing, well-linked Web site, and make sure your name, book information and reviews appear prominently. Internet presence is much cheaper and more effective than sending out fliers to schools or colleges, and it’s a lot less tedious than licking stamps.

The big day
Now that you’re booked for an appearance, the pressure’s on to shine. Remember to enjoy yourself. Use props: something visual, like a first-draft manuscript stained in tears and coffee. Bring some rejection letters (we all have them) or describe how you named your characters or developed your plot. For a nonbookstore signing, bring your own stack of books to sell, then employ a friend to handle the cash while you sign.

Talk about the writing process, but add humor if you can. I always tell a story of the time I lost a 60,000-word manuscript to computer heaven and then locked myself in my bedroom for a day.

Give a little bit of yourself away. After all, these ideas came from your mind, your emotions and your experiences—show the readers your human side. Some of the best readings I’ve ever attended involved the author sharing her life experiences, both the pain and happiness.

Find out through a question-and-answer session how readers feel about scenes in your book. Did it make them cry when your main character was left heart-
broken by her cheating boyfriend, or did they cheer her on to a quick rebound? Could they relate to your protagonist’s situation?

Don’t be afraid to ask for what you’re worth. Any professional writing association will advise you on a minimal fee to charge. You can contact the American Society of Journalists and Authors (www.asja.org) or the National Writers Union (www.nwu.org) for help.

Writers don’t write just for the money. We write because we have something to say. But somewhere after the initial high of getting a first book published, we need to pay the bills. Self-promotion means that one day we can quit our day jobs and keep doing what we love most: writing. WD

Julie Burtinshaw is the author of Dead Reckoning and Adrift (both Raincoast Publishers) and Romantic Ghosts (Lone Pine Publishing).