

Chapter 3

Put On a Good Show

Just go out there and do what you have to do.
--Martina Navratilova

This is it! More than at any other time during your whole book experience, now is the time you are really the STAR! Everyone has the jitters when they first face a crowd and get up to speak. Use this excitement to your advantage. The adrenaline is flowing and it can be a great help if you channel it towards your presentation. Use the rush to transfer that energy to the audience and put on the show you've been preparing for since you first thought of doing a book.

Reach Out

When you arrive at the store, introduce yourself to the person with whom you made the arrangements. In most bookstores, they are called Customer Relations Manager, also known as the CRM. In Borders Book Stores, that person is the Area Marketing Manager, AMM. That person will usually show you what they had planned for the event. If they don't, ask what the plans are and request any adjustments you think are necessary. Now is the time to get the final details. Remember you are a guest in their place of business. Listen to their suggestions and anecdotes about experiences in the store. You may learn some valuable techniques.

At one of my book signings, the bookseller had prepared a lovely table for us with a tablecloth and a striking floral arrangement from the gift shop next door. EVERYONE loved the arrangement. It drew customers to our table like flies. However, we spent more time directing people to the gift shop than signing books. Don't overdo the display; keep the focus on your book.

--Dorothy Howell signing as Judith Stacy
The Last Bride from Texas
Nominated for a Rita Award

Walk around the aisles to acquaint yourself with the store layout. Introduce yourself to the staff, both those behind the counter and those stacking the shelves. Also, remember to write down the names of the staff people you wish to thank for their assistance. Be positive of the pronunciation of their names. Some students of human psychology will tell you that the sweetest sound to the ear is one's own name. Your recognition of them will serve you well.

Go to the section of the store where your book will be found and greet any prospective customers who may be browsing there. Their presence indicates that they may be interested in the topic of your book. Ask them to join the discussion.

Shake hands with the people who arrive early. Introduce yourself to them individually while they are waiting for you to begin. Be yourself. Acquaint them with the type and style of event you are going to hold. Tell them about your book and encourage them to buy it. This is a great opportunity to sharpen your focus and have an impact.

As more people wander into the area, they will see and feel the electricity from the crowd you've been talking with and they will become inquisitive. This may very well cause them to join in and see what the seminar is all about.

Reach out and issue a personal invitation to sit in on the discussion. This is the secret strategy of a seminar. You are going to share something of value with them, for *free*!

Become the drum major for your own little band. Build up the atmosphere. Be sure that all the people in the audience have access to a copy of the book. The physical, tactile sense of holding your book while you are talking directly to them about it is very binding and emotional.

Are there any props or visual stimuli available to draw attention to your book on display? Anything unusual will work. An antique typewriter, perhaps, for a story on old-time newspaper reporters. A set of elaborate masques and beads for a book about the attractions of Mardi Gras will bring out the flavor of that festival.

Lynn Gardner, author of *Opals and Outrage*, and other books using gems in the titles, uses colored stones on a black velvet tablecloth to attract attention to her signing tables.

Create Excitement

Your job is not necessarily to do the actual physical selling of the book. That is for the store to do. Your goal is to have an opportunity to speak to the group and motivate them. They are there to gather information from you. This should stimulate enthusiasm and a desire to own a copy of your book.

Rick Frishman, co-author of *Guerilla Marketing for Writers*, said in a January 2001 chat hosted by iUniverse.com, "If you go and actually do some type of speech or seminar where you are teaching, you'll have a better chance of someone coming to a book signing."

Before your event, you pretty much know whether it will be a mini-seminar, a reading, or just questions and answers. If you are scheduled for a discussion, you probably will not have a seated audience. You will be expected to greet people as they come by the table where your books are and talk with them one-to-one. Organize your thoughts to get the most important points across first. Add detail and stories as they continue to listen. Keep your focus. If you are conducting a mini-seminar, you probably will have a seated audience.

Your event will usually be announced to people in the store ten to twenty minutes before you begin. This is your sales pitch. It is important that you prepare that

announcement. Do not rely on store personnel to write it for you. No matter how experienced they are, they have a lot of other work to do. And they are not as familiar with your book as you are.

Someone from the store will usually introduce the author to the assembled audience. The introduction, which you have written, will lead right into your presentation, which is usually 15 to 30 minutes long. The presentation is sometimes followed by questions and answers (Q&As). The grand finale is the book signing.

Act Like a Star

If you already are a professional speaker, you have an advantage at this stage of the signing. If you have little or no experience in speaking to groups, find opportunities to practice before doing your first book signing. Local service clubs generally welcome interesting speakers. Become acquainted with the local Lions, Rotary, Elks, or other groups of that type and ask to speak to them to get a feel for their individual style of meetings.

As you begin, be animated, at ease, and smile. You are now the leader of the group. Be friendly and have fun. Stand up and move a bit as you talk. It will keep you breathing properly and eliminate a slouchy posture. Open with a startling statement or question. Thank your hosts, and then the audience. Your opening statements will be critical. Make the audience feel comfortable and welcome.

People understand and relate to stories very well, so work an anecdote or two into your presentation. They also respond to humor. You don't have to come across as a professional comedian, but have some amusing tales or jokes that will draw a smile. Don't announce a joke as such. Just tell it. Let them get it on their own.

A speech may be momentous, but it's also exhausting. Give your audience a little ice pack on the back of the neck between rounds. You need to offer a little refreshment so they can maintain their stamina.

--Gene Perrett, Author
*Business Humor:
Jokes & How to Deliver Them*

Make yourself fit in with what's important to your audience. Reading the local paper on the Internet is a wonderful way to find out what the local people are concerned with.

Is there anything you can tie into your book's topic? Is there something you should be aware of that is important to the audience? Pique curiosity to draw more people.

As you move smoothly into the main body of your talk, you should have a well-prepared presentation to share with the audience. Keep it simple and invitingly open.

This presentation may be repeated at each book signing. Keep it up to date and fresh by adding information suited specifically to the locale or current events relating to your topic.

There is no need to memorize your presentation. If you focus on your purpose and have an outline in your mind, you can present a coherent, interesting, and informative session. Keep it light and upbeat.

You may use slides or props; be sure to discuss them with your host in advance and be ready to go at the appointed time. Have everything plugged in and ready to roll.

Use eye contact to hold your audience's attention. Look one person in the eyes for a few seconds, and then move on to make contact with another person. Occasionally look at your book, pick it up, leaf through it, or read a passage. Handle your book in a respectful way to show that it has value. It is the culmination of your talent and experience.

Answer Questions

Interact with the audience. Let them know in the beginning if you will take questions during the presentation or after the presentation. Allowing questions too early may take you off course. One author opened the forum to questions in the middle of his talk and lost half his audience. They were accustomed to Q&A at the end of talks and assumed that the speaker had reached the end of his presentation when he started answering individual questions too soon.

If you can stimulate the audience to ask questions at the appropriate time, you have cleared a big hurdle toward your goal of being a success. There may be someone in the audience eager to ask a question, but not wanting to be the first to speak up. Break the ice for them.

Consider planting a question, that is, having someone in the audience ask a question which you've written for them in advance. You are priming the pump. This requires advance planning and will probably stir up more audience participation.

One technique to increase participation is to use small, pre-printed file sized cards for the audience to fill in. On one side, ask them to write down a question or two they may have for you in the Q&A afterwards. Questions answered concisely and with authority can mean credibility verification for you and potentially more sales.

On the other side of the card, create an order form for a personalized inscription. As your audience is listening to you, they might think of a friend or relative who would be thrilled to receive a hand-signed copy of your book. You may be surprised at how many spur-of-the-moment sales that imaginative idea will generate. Give them a reason to buy.

Having the information written on the card helps you endorse it properly the first time. Your book then becomes much more valuable to the recipient. It is the next best thing to a hand-made gift. It took thought and preparation.

It is important to be thoroughly familiar with the contents of your book. Refresh your memory. Have a trusted friend pose questions so you can practice spontaneous responses. Record such sessions and learn from them. Limit your answers to one or two minutes to hold the audience's attention and allow more questions to be asked.

Add an upbeat touch to your responses. Don't be dogmatic or heavy-handed. Keep your responses crisp, informative, and on target. If the question is rambling or leading away from your topic, rephrase, refocus, and restate it before beginning your response.

Repeating a difficult question slowly will give you breathing room to formulate a suitable response.

Be careful never to embarrass anyone by commenting on the value of the question. Treat all with utmost respect.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Max Ehrmann
Desiderata

Know how to deflect questions that you can better answer privately. You may lose the entire audience while dwelling on one person's interest item. Keep yourself focused on the job at hand, which is promoting your book. If you answer everyone specifically, and at length, you may eliminate the need for at least one or two of them to buy the book.

In a group discussion of one of Jo's other books, two women in the audience wanted more information on how to find a new career path. While the book is titled *Take Charge of Your Life*, it does not go into detail about how to choose a career. The audience was not there to discuss individual career moves. With a bit of finesse, the subject was kept on track and the audience went away satisfied.

Follow the sage old advice:

Tell them what you're going to tell them.

Tell them.

Tell them what you told them.

Then stop talking.

We watched in amazement one day as an auto sales representative kept talking about technical features of a new model, which interested only him, as the potential customers kept trying in vain to buy the car. He was more involved in displaying his knowledge of the disc brake system than he was in hearing the request for a purchase order. The customers left without buying the car.

Don't oversell your audience. Have a prepared conclusion to your presentation. Unless you ask in advance, no one will signal you when your time is up. When you notice folks getting restless, it's time to quit talking and start signing.

Heed Advice from a Bookseller

After a signing at the Barnes and Noble store in Rockefeller Center, we asked a bookseller how authors could improve the results of their book signings. After complimenting Jo's presentation, she said many authors are not skilled in public speaking.

"While their books may sell well, they don't understand the important elements of a signing. They don't know how to use a microphone or how to have a discussion with the audience."

Master the microphone. Be sure it is turned on and practice a few sentences before the scheduled event. The microphone carries your message to a wider area of the store and may draw other patrons to your talk. It also reduces the strain on your vocal chords. Take care in handing the microphone to a member of the audience. While it may seem to be warranted sometimes, you lose control when the microphone is in their hands. It is best to repeat their comment into the microphone yourself.

To improve your public speaking skills, and thus your confidence, join a Toastmasters Club. Toastmasters International is a non-profit, educational organization that helps individuals become better oral communicators. Call 1 800 9WESPEAK or find a club near you on the Internet, www.toastmasters.org.

Enjoy Yourself

Develop and maintain a warm and friendly relationship with the audience. Strangers are merely friends we haven't met yet. Meeting and conversing with a variety of people from different areas provides a wonderful source of information and feedback.

This is somewhat like planting a garden. You plow the ground with intriguing questions. Plant the seeds of fresh ideas. Water it with information and provide the sunshine of your unique perspective. Then you may harvest the fruits of your labor.

Take your sense of humor along to help with unexpected remarks. More than once I have had a person remark to the effect, "What a pity they misspelled your name on your book!"
The first time I was stunned and simply explained that it was not an error. But from that time on I used remarks about the spelling of my name as a mnemonic opportunity. My name is spelled "Juanitta" - 2 t's instead of the more usual 1 t. I tell them the charming story of how this spelling came to be, and if there's a lull, I ask about their name and people warm to that.
--Juanitta Baldwin
Unsolved Disappearances in the Great Smoky Mountains

People don't all come to buy books. Some want only the free tidbits they gain from your discussion, some have other methods of purchasing books at discount, and some simply are not interested. Don't form negative conclusions when people don't buy your book.

Some book signings may sell as few as half a dozen books. Be prepared for ups and downs. You may wonder if there is enough profit in these numbers to make a signing a good return on investment, but be positive in your outlook. There will be long-term benefit if you persevere.

Be prepared for the occasional person who will disagree with your point of view. Do not be drawn into a debate or argument with your critic. If possible, turn the negative into

a positive. Otherwise, gently defer the criticism and offer to talk to the critic in person after you have finished the signing. Planning and positive affirmations in advance will help you maintain your composure and may even win others to your side.

Present a small “thank you” gift to your host after the signing. Sometimes we use a miniature version of the dream catcher. The recipients are often genuinely surprised and always appreciative. Maintain contact with your host because you may want a return engagement.