

WHAT'S MISSING FROM YOUR MARKETING PLAN?

GREAT EVENTS

BY ADAM GILES

THE AUTHOR took the podium and the audience applauded. Two hours later, the author was still talking and people in the audience were looking at their watches. Simone Lee, a bookseller attending the reading out of interest, turned to the person standing next to her and jokingly offered to pull the fire alarm. When the author finally wrapped up, the crowd rushed for the doors.

Lee, the owner of Pages on Kensington in Calgary, shared her anecdote with a roomful of independent booksellers at an education session on event planning at the Canadian Booksellers Association Conference in May. She used it as an example of a dud event. And dud events, Lee and her fellow session panelists said, can mean serious trouble for an independent's bottom line. The stakes are high: industry changes—like the rising popularity of e-readers—are decreasing customer footsteps in many independent bookstores. This, the panelists said, is a trend that makes events, successful events, a crucial part of any independent's marketing plan.

THE SUCCESSFUL EVENT

What is a successful event? Christopher Smith, the manager and co-owner of Collected Works Bookstore and Coffeebar in Ottawa, described one that he attended. A string sextet played. Wine flowed. The mansion had been decked out to resemble a house from the turn of the nineteenth century, and Smith said he felt like he was in the Edith Wharton novel *The Age of Innocence*. He said the event, a showcase for Ralph Lauren clothing and lifestyle products in New York, was the best event he had ever seen.

"I won't tell you how much money I spent, but I left with several bags under my arms," said Smith. "It wasn't a bookstore event, but we have to be open to learning from other industries."

And not just learning from other industries, said Shelly Macbeth, owner of Blue Heron Books in Uxbridge, but partnering with them, too. Macbeth learned about the power of partnership earlier this year. She had read *Tiger Hills* by Sarita Mandanna, loved it, and puzzled over how to bring the author to her store.

"No one would have heard of her at this point," Macbeth said. "So I approached a local cooking school and asked them if they would do an Indian meal and they were thrilled. We sold the event, book-in, for \$75. I thought it was quite pricey, but my partner at the cooking school said, 'Are you kidding, this is what my customers are used to.'"

Macbeth sent out the event notice at 9:00 a.m. and by 4:00 p.m. had sold all 30 spots. She and her partner, Lisa Hutchinson of *The Passionate Cook's Essentials*, spoke to Mandanna and put on the event again.

"I sold 75 hardcovers of an unknown author in a day and the event was brilliant," she said. "The food was great and everyone dressed in their Indian garb. It was wonderful."

DRIVING SALES

Mary Brown, who owns The Village Bookshop in Bayfield, attended the events session at the conference and said she loved Macbeth's idea of building the cost of the book into the price of admission at events.

"It's a great way to drive sales," said Brown, who avoids discounting at her store and at her events. "We sell tons of books at our big event of the year, the Bayfield Writer's Festival, and we don't offer any kind of discount. Discounting teaches your customers your product isn't worth what you're charging. Customers have to understand they're getting value for what we're offering. Like any other independent bookstore, we're offering our expertise and in the case of events, we're offering unique experiences for people."

Macbeth's customers responded so positively to the unique experience they had at her Sarita Mandanna-Indian food event that it inspired Macbeth to team up with her partner again. She and Hutchinson planned a Father's Day event featuring a book called *Steak* by Mark Schatzker. The event included a steak dinner.

"Lisa is doing all the work: the cooking. I'm just showing up with the books," said Macbeth. "I promote the events to my bookstore base, she promotes to her cooking base, and we get to share our customers. But they've been such a hit that we haven't even had to pay for an ad. We put it in our newsletter and that's it."

INEXPENSIVE EVENTS

Smith told conference delegates that the ideal event is the expense-free event.

"There is a lot you can do without spending a cent," he said. "Don't run traditional print ads. If the publisher wants to run one, let them, but on your end stay away from it. Print ads are static. They do nothing. You want a story that has your event mentioned. You want editorial support."

Lee has editorial support. It didn't come easy though. She had to approach the *Calgary Herald* several times for sponsorship of her monthly event *Pages at the Plaza* be-



fore the paper agreed.

"I told them we're bringing in these authors and it's exciting and this is the only place this happens in Calgary," she said.

There is something in it for the *Herald*, too. The paper gets exclusive pre-event interviews with the authors attending Lee's events. Smith described bookstores as "conduits of content" for the media. And because the media is always thirsty for content, it is the bookstore doing the media a favour by providing it.

Once Lee has done the *Herald* a favour—helped the paper fill some space—her focus shifts to event strategy. Since taking over at Pages Books four years ago, her strategy has been to break down barriers between the author and her customers. She achieves an inclusive, engaging atmosphere by keeping the house lights up during readings and asking authors to remain at the podium for book signings. At the podium, the author is at eye-level with audience members. And the other thing Lee does? She offers wine from the start of the event.

"Before I took over, they used to wait until the author finished speaking to serve the wine," she said. "Serving it from the start, we avoid the mad rush that leaves the author standing alone." 📖

A Publicist's Perspective

WHEN Corina Eberle, Publicity Manager for D&M Publishers Inc., plans an event, she offers local media outlets a copy of the book and an author interview ahead of the event. The catch is that Eberle sometimes needs help from the bookstore.

"When we're doing events in smaller communities, it would be great if, right off the bat, the bookstore provided us with contacts at the local paper or the local radio station," Eberle says. "I don't know the local media and sometimes there isn't time to go that extra step to look for it. But if I'm provided with the name of the paper and the name of an editor, that's a big help."

But according to Eberle, there isn't always a story there for local media to pick up. She says it is crucial for booksellers to make sure the author has a local connection before deciding to run an event.

"Authors bring family and friends to events," says Eberle. "If you have an author going to another town and they don't have connections there, who knows what's going to happen."