Hosting Successful Author Visits by Rachel McDonald and Paige Battle

Why Host an Author Visit?

(taken from *The Author Event Primer: How to Plan, Execute and Enjoy Author Events* by Chapple Langemack)

Extension of the library's mission to promote books and reading

Enrich your patrons' reading experience by connecting them with authors and other readers

Create a sense of community by giving people a reason to gather and discuss a topic (all-city/all country reads)

Create buzz for the library through newspaper articles, publicity, etc.

Attract non- or infrequent library users to your library

Build connections with schools or other community organizations

What am I Trying to Accomplish by Hosting an Author Visit?

I want to fulfill my library's mission to promote literacy/reading

I want to connect my patrons to authors

I want to give people a venue to discuss a particular topic or issue of interest to the community

I want to put my library in the spotlight with a big-name author event

I want to attract people who do not normally come to the library

I want to strengthen our relationship with a school or local agency

Finding your Audience

Put on your sleuthing cap and research your community. What authors/books are popular? What are people talking about? Who could you partner with to reach these people?

In Rachel's experience, book club buy-in is a must. She asks her teen book club members for suggestions and explains parameters (no, the library cannot afford a visit from Stephenie Meyer). She tries to schedule author visits in lieu of monthly book clubs once a year. This way, she has a built-in audience while also enticing other teens to join book club. If you have a Teen Advisory Board or Friends of the Library group, try to get them involved as well.

Finding an Author

Sure, it'd be fantastic to grab that BIG NAME author all your patrons are reading, but keep in mind that these authors are often booked far in advance. Money and space are also an issue. A local author promoting their first book will likely be much more willing to work with you and may not even require an honorarium. We recommend approaching an author 3 months to a year in advance of your intended date, especially if they live outside of your area.

If you know which author you plan on approaching, finding their contact info is often as easy as googling them. Many authors include information about arranging visits on their webpages, and some even list their honorariums and the types of visits or workshops they'll do, making your job super easy! Some authors will list the name of their agent or publicist, and may prefer that you contact them first.

Not sure which authors live in your neck of the woods? The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (www.scbwi.org/) maintains a databases of speakers that is searchable by state. YALSA has a wiki of YA authors by state. http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/List_of_YA_Authors_by_State SWCBI of Western Washington also provides a list of member authors' & illustrators' websites (http://www.scbwi-washington.org/28/author/illustrator-links.html) as does the Oregon chapter (http://www.scbwior.com/members/index.html) .If you can foster a relationship with a local independent bookstore, they may be able to help you arrange an author visit, often in exchange for selling books at the event.

Authors on Tour

If you do want to arrange a visit with an out-of-state author, one of the easiest ways to do this is to check and see if they're going on tour anywhere near you. You can check the author's website, but some of them aren't great about updating. Try Twitter or Facebook, or even their publisher's website. Just want to know who's coming to town? Many publishers have a list of when and where their authors are appearing, such as Penguin: http://www.us.penguingroup.com/nf/Events/EventSearchProc/1,,all,00.html

Approaching an Author (or agent or publisher)

When you email an author, make sure to tell him or her a little about your community and the audience you'd like to reach (children, teens, adults, school program, non-typical library users, book club members). Note the anticipated size of your audience, type of event (lecture, writing workshop, book club visit, meet and greet, panel with other authors, fundraiser, etc.), length of program and number of events. Give her/him a range of dates or a month during which you'd like to host a visit. Be honest about what expenses you can cover (speaker's fees/honorarium, transportation, hotel, meal costs, etc.). Let the author know if you'll have someone selling books and who that person will be (the library, friends of the library, school, PTA, or a local bookstore). If you are selling the books, find out how to get them from the publisher (they may sell them to you at a discount) or a local bookseller. Ask the author if they will autograph books (most will). State what you will do to publicize the event (inform staff, make flyers, posters, or booklists, promote on local radio, tv, or newspaper). Once your author has agreed to a visit, confirm all the salient details with them (see the sample contract form in *The Author Event Primer: How to Plan, Execute and Enjoy Author Events* by Chapple Langemack). This can save you and the author time and heartache in the long run.

Beware the "Free" Author Visit

This is the person, perhaps even a library patron, that has recently published (usually self-published) their first book and is looking to their local library to help them promote it. While they may be super enthusiastic and offer to do the program for free, remember, there's no such thing as a "free lunch," or a free author visit. Staff time spent organizing the event, booking a venue, sending out publicity materials, and staffing the event translates to money.

Speaker's Fees

For many of us, setting an honorarium/speaker's fee is the most difficult part of the whole experience of booking an author. How do you know how much to suggest? There's no formula, but in our experience, being honest and upfront with the author about what you can offer really helps. For example, if your programming budget is $2000 for the year, offering $200 seems reasonable, while $50 is too little, and $500 would limit the number of other programs you could offer. Oftentimes, newer authors aren't sure what they should charge, either. Think about how many people you expect to attend your program, then consider what you're comfortable paying "per head." If you don't have a budget for an author visit, consider trying to catch someone who's on tour in your town, as their publisher will be covering the cost of their travel, hotel, etc. If you do have a budget and are planning to host someone who's traveling from out of town, consider reimbursing an author for their travel costs ahead of their visit (just make sure to have a cancellation policy in your contract). It's usually okay to give the author a check for their honorarium the day of the presentation (putting it inside a card is a nice touch).

Contracts

Once you have your author signed on, be sure to send them a contract with all the details in it. It doesn't have to be super formal; a description of the program, length of program, the venue address, date, time, amount of honorarium, and when it will be paid is usually enough.

Promoting your Event

Beyond your library's calendar, flyers, posters, and website, what can you do to promote an upcoming author visit? Hopefully, you've established a relationship with your local newspaper, community blog, or radio station, and can send a reporter you know a press release a few weeks before the event. Beyond that, think about your intended audience. For example, if you're hiring Joe "Metal Cowboy" Kurmaskie, who's well-known in cycling circles but not so much beyond them, make sure your local bike shop gets posters and flyers. Create a display of the author's books and place it in a prominent location in your library. Make sure that ALL of your staff members are aware of the author visit. You could even have them put flyers or bookmarks into the books as patrons check them out. Remind your book club members and give them flyers to hand out to their friends. Ask the author/agent/publisher for a photo of the author and of their book cover jackets for the announcement on your website. Tell the author when, where, and how you're promoting their visit. You may also want to ask the author if they'd consider helping promote the visit via their website, Facebook, and Twitter.

Hosting Out of Town Authors

If you happen to be hosting an author from out of town, think about how that author is arriving. If they are driving their own car, make sure to give them accurate directions and warn them in advance of any traffic or construction that might slow them down. If your author is flying or taking the train, arrange for someone to pick them up from the airport or train station and take them to their hotel or the venue. The same goes for getting from their hotel to the venue and back. If no one is available to chauffeur the author, be sure to include the estimated cost of transportation to and from venue in the honorarium (or offer to reimburse the author afterward). If your author is on tour, check with their agent or publicist to see if they've already arranged a media escort for the author. You may also want to ask if the author is traveling with anyone else (though picking 2 people up in your Smart car would be an adventure!).

The Big Day

It's finally the day of the big event! Be sure to have your room set up ahead of time. Test your A/V equipment if you're using it. Grab a bottle of water or pitcher and cup for the author. If s/he is signing books afterward, be sure to have a signing table set up and several pens and post-it notes for the people who want to get their book signed and personalized (they can write their name and stick it on the front page). You may want to have volunteers passing out the post-it notes and pens, so you can focus on getting the author from the podium to the signing table. Selling books? Be sure there's a flow between the bookselling table and the booksigning table and make sure it's clear which line is which. Know who is introducing the author (keep it short and sweet) and be sure to thank whoever has funded the event. Be ready to give time signals to the author if s/he has requested them. If the author is doing a Q & A, have a few questions ready in case you need to get the ball rolling. Once the author is done presenting and answering questions, get up and thank them in front of the audience and announce if they're willing to sign books. Give the author time to get over to the signing table. If you're expecting a large crowd, you can hand out numbers for the signing line as people come in so as to avoid a stampede.

Thank You!

After the event, make sure to send a thank you to the author. If you have photos from the event, it's nice to include those as well as audience reactions. If you worked with an agent or publicist, make sure to thank them as well. If you held your event in a venue outside the library, be sure to thank the people who helped to secure the venue and set up for the event. Did a local bookseller drive across town and stay late to sell books to people? They most certainly deserve your thanks. Thank any volunteers who helped with the program. And finally, if your Friends of the Library or another organization paid for any part of the author visit, be sure to thank them.

Virtual Author Visits

What to do if your budget and location aren't conducive to hosting an author in person? If you have a computer with an internet connection, microphone, speakers, and a webcam, you can host a virtual author visit. The most popular way to do this is through Skype, and many authors are willing to do visits this way. Author Mona Kerby and Library Media Specialist Sarah Chauncey maintain a list of author and tips at Skype an Author Network: http://skypeanauthor.wetpaint.com/. Some authors may be willing to do a short visit for free, while others may only be interested in getting paid for a longer visit. If you don't have access to all of the technology above, what about a conference call?

Skype and other virtual visits work best within the confines of an established book club or other group. This is a great venue for your "super fans" to get to ask all sorts of questions of their favorite author. Be sure to give people plenty of time to read the author's books beforehand. If you're working with a group of children or teens, you may also want to sit down with them and write up questions before the event, and decide who gets to ask which question and in what order. This will make the visit run much more smoothly and ensure everyone gets a chance to participate. Ask the author if s/he is willing to send personalized bookplates to you that participants can walk away with a signed book at the end. Although meeting an author in person is great, virtual visits may be easier to taking into account your budget and the author's schedule.

Questions? Email Paige Battle (paigebattle@gmail.com) or Rachel McDonald (rmmcdonald@kcls.org).