

Never Underestimate a Store's Potential

By Carol White

The e-mail began tongue-in-cheek, "I've decided if I ever want to see my famous-author-sister again, then I'd better book a signing event for you here – so I did. Would you prefer this weekend or that weekend? – and we'll book the golf too!"

Groan... Spokane, Washington, population under 200,000, for a book signing at something called Auntie's Book Store? I have to admit that I was less than enthusiastic, but the carrot of golf was being dangled and my sister also promised a party at her house and said she would help with publicity. "It's our best bookstore," she pleaded. Okay, okay, just for you, my dear sis, I'll do it.

Live Your Road Trip Dream, which had been out for about a year, was in its second printing and doing well. The once frequent sisters' get-togethers had faded into a distant memory as the rigors of constant promotion and publicity had filled our lives. My ever-optimistic husband and co-author said cheerily, "It will be a fun weekend; we need to get up and see them anyway – this way we can write the trip off." He's not usually that practical, but he was right to give me a little nudge.

So, we picked a date, sent our standard confirmation sheet to the event coordinator at Auntie's Book Store and posted the event on our site. We were committed.

[subhead] Promotion Ploys

My sister and I e-mailed and called more frequently as we plotted our strategy: special postcards to every one she knows, and extras to hand out at the bank where she works; a complete media list from Auntie's and a joint press release that I wrote and followed up on; a special e-mail to a columnist for the local paper who wrote about road trips and RV travel; books ordered early for display with the event announcement in the store and in their window displays; and we were having fun.

We didn't get booked on the local morning TV show, but we got two nice write-ups from Julianne Crane, the columnist for the local paper – one on her blog and one in the local paper the weekend before the event. The rumor was she was going to attend. Several radio PSA-type announcements of the event and we were humming along. Soon, it was show-time.

Naturally, we arrived early to check out the venue and get everything set up (we use PowerPoint and bring our own PC, projector, hand-outs, map, etc.). I'm always nervous until that is done. We put our promotional items on each of the 50 chairs (the store and I had agreed that we would probably have about 40 attendees, so 50 chairs seemed right).

Because we always try to promote other items in stores that host our events, I went around and gathered up some other travel products to discuss – much to the surprise and pleasure of the event coordinator. My sister had arranged for me to have dinner and chat with her book club, so we headed out to a nearby restaurant, knowing everything was ready to go.

[subhead] The Crowd that Kept Coming

When we arrived back at Auntie's about 40 minutes before the event, the store was busy. Upstairs, many of the chairs were already full. We went around, introduced ourselves and talked to as many people as we could – including Julianne, who had actually come to see us. In an instant, all the chairs were full and people were milling around. The store responded with more and more chairs. We gave out every promo item we had.

They ran out of chairs at about 110, and the people kept coming. They were draped over counters, sitting on the floor, standing in the back. I guess I had better wear the microphone after all.

I have to tell you, I love a crowd. I get energized by the enthusiasm. I always ask how people heard about the event – all the publicity had a hand in bringing them in; everything worked. Julianne wrote the following week that the audience totaled 175. I think it was closer to 125, but what the heck.

The show went flawlessly, the questions were good, and the personally signed books flew off the table. Everyone got a special "I will live my dream" magnet for purchases that night, as I had promised. People took pictures – we felt like celebrities! The event coordinator said, "This is the size crowd we get for 'name' authors!" Most of the attendees were couples, so the 50-plus books sold that evening (Auntie's ran out, but we always have an extra case in the car), and the extra sales of other products, left everyone smiling.

Which is why I say, never underestimate the potential of a venue or a locale. Doing that good preparation and marketing makes all the difference. We now use this story to help book our other signings – it really catches a store's attention. And yes, we had a great weekend with my sis!

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