

## CHAPTER NINE

### ATTRACTING THE PUBLIC

#### A Book is a Book is a Book

Those who spend most of their working lives dealing with books become obsessed with them. Arriving in Agra they ask for the local bookshop instead of the Taj Mahal; in Sydney for the State Library instead of the Opera House or Harbour Bridge! It is so normal for them to seek out books that they forget that for many people books are low down on the list of priorities. If this were not so, it might not be necessary to organise book exhibitions in the first place. As it is, we must recognise that books in themselves are not a great draw. We must be prepared to use other attractions to persuade people to come to look at books, or find other ways of making books seem exciting and attractive to the non-bookman.

How can this be done? Here is one example.

A few years ago a book fair, called the "Bedford Square Bookbang", was organised in one of London's most unspoilt eighteenth century squares. The fair had two basic principles behind it:

- (a) The general public is not interested in the publishers themselves; so it is no use having, as in many book fairs, stands devoted to individual publishers. The public in the main only know of subjects - history, biography, maths, sociology, and so on - so that was how the fair had to be organised. (This presented problems of financing, manning and the like).

(b) The public will not come for the books alone, so there must be a lot of other attractions. But the books had to be there, well displayed, when the people arrived for whatever reasons. Among the attractions were: (i) a real circus (mainly for the children); (ii) poets reading their verses from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.; (iii) authors signing and selling their own books at costermonger barrows; (iv) key appearances by celebrities; (v) a fair-ground atmosphere so that even the most non-book person would not be put off entering; (vi) food and drink in an improvised cafe; and (vii) laundry boxes piled higgledy-piggledy with books for very young children to rummage through.

The principles involved in the Bedford Square Bookbang, whether reduced to a fraction of the size or blown into something two, three, four times as big, remain constant: you use other displays and events to lure people into looking at books.

Bookbang, however, was very ambitious. It cost some £60,000 to mount and took in only half that sum, so the publishers (80 of them in fact) were left to find the £30,000 shortfall; a not unreasonable sum for a fortnight's fair that gained maximum publicity.

### Posting the News

If we keep the principles of Bookbang in mind but switch back to much more modest scales, then what are the main ancillary materials we can use to draw attention to the book exhibition in the first place? Above all there are posters. Simple, well designed posters can be put in town halls, libraries, shops, bus stations, in fact almost anywhere. Of course if funds are ample it is nice to have them in four or more colours. But one colour on white or black on white, if effectively designed, will catch the eye nearly as well.

The design must catch the eye. The content must be the smallest number of words to convey the largest amount of information. The most essential items of information are:

- (a) The place of the exhibition.
- (b) The dates from when it will start to when it will finish (inclusive).
- (c) The times and days it is open.
- (d) A short main title plus an explanatory sub-title: e.g. "Commonwealth Literature: an exhibition of 500 books by authors from all parts of the Commonwealth".
- (e) Means of getting there (where applicable): e.g. "Buses 13 and 23 pass the door".
- (f) Cost of entry, if any: e.g. "free" or "\$1 entrance fee".
- (g) The organiser(s) if this adds lustre: e.g. "His Excellency the Eldorado Ambassador's Book Exhibition".
- (h) Anything else that is likely to encourage people to attend: e.g. "One free balloon for every visiting child", or "Famous authors signing copies of their books every lunchtime".

An example of a poster lay-out is given as Appendix E.

If the exhibition is going to visit a number of places, the poster can be designed so that the constant information is printed at the top and bottom and the centre is left blank so as to allow specific details of each place (site, times, transport etc.) to be inserted there.

In order to make a poster more attractive, publishers can sometimes be persuaded to lend the block of a book illustration that is particularly suitable for a given

exhibition. This is often true with children's books. Alternatively a block from a tourist organisation might be used to show a suitable scene that describes the subject or site of the exhibition. In such cases care must be taken to give a small credit on the poster itself to the co-operating organisation: e.g. "With acknowledgements to the Eldorado Tourist Board for the photograph of the Tower". In this way a lavish design can be secured for a poster at a comparatively low cost.

### The Right Number to Print

The number of posters required should be carefully calculated. When you have reckoned up the likely sites that will display it, and added a small number for damaged or spoilt posters, the print run should be fixed. Blandishments from printers that the run-on cost for a further 100 or 1,000 isn't really very much, should be resisted. However little the extra cost is, it is a waste of money if some of the posters are not going to be used.

Wherever possible copies of the poster should be displayed in strength around the building where the exhibition is being shown. They will serve to remind people passing by the building of the posters they have seen elsewhere and reawaken their interest in the exhibition. Put further copies inside the building as well.

### Design to Attract

Compared to the problem of displaying books in an exhibition, designing and printing posters is a comparatively easy task. Except to the specialist, books on their own do not make seductive displays. Book lovers will of course go to look at books anywhere and everywhere, but other people need to have their interest heightened. It is therefore very useful to prepare ancillary material which will attract people's interest and lead them on to the books themselves.

Such material can be simple and still be very effective. Thus, large cartoons on card or paper above the books can simultaneously attract the eye and then divert it to the books below. For example, a dramatic photograph or cartoon of a broken-down car or lorry - humorous if possible - with a movement within the picture that directs the eye down to the display of a group of books on vehicle maintenance will almost always do the trick. Equally, the message is clear if the picture shows a crying or bored child with some exciting children's books in front of or underneath it.

Certain subjects, such as cookery, lend themselves to non-book displays more easily than others. Bowls of spices or fruits, huge cakes and unusual loaves will always draw attention; so will flower displays if they are big enough and bright enough. Children's books can be accompanied by children's toys, though here one can run into trouble with the younger visitors: they want to take the toys home with them! What matters about the ancillary material is that it catches people's attention. If it does that, and if it has some relevance to the subject covered by the books, it can only be a plus for the exhibition.

Where there is a lot of space, say in the foyer of a town hall or large library, the placing of an unlikely object will immediately alert the attention of anyone coming near it. It is often possible to borrow without charge a new car as long as the dealer gets a card with a credit to him on it. If it is a new model, or a special version of an existing one, it will create a great deal of interest and is suitable for any book exhibition featuring engineering, travel or motoring do-it-yourself books. In the same way a new piece of farm machinery is suitable for books dealing with agriculture or the countryside.

Blown-up photographs - whether of authors, scenes from the books being displayed, or just connected to the books by subject - will always take the eye of the

passer-by or visitor. If the books deal with a particular country, then tourist offices or travel agents may be able to supply posters or photographs of places in that country. Publishers have photographs of their authors and will often supply free blow-ups of these at no cost: they treat it as part of their promotion of those authors.

### Lighting Effects

To attract people to exhibitions of art books, pictures or prints can sometimes be borrowed from a local gallery or private collector. So can pieces of sculpture. The latter can often be dramatically lit without much trouble or expense and thus constitute an instant eye-catcher. Lighting in itself is a valuable way of drawing attention either to the exhibition itself in large spaces or to individual parts of it, or even to single books. It does, however, need to be set up by someone with expert knowledge, because the wiring must be safe and the angle of the lighting carefully calculated to highlight exactly the required areas, and in a way that anyone looking at the books doesn't cut the beam off just by being there.

Spotlights can occasionally be borrowed from local drama companies or theatres. Alternatively an electrical contractor may be willing to lend them, and indeed set them up, in return for a prominent credit giving his name and address. Such credits can either be on struttred cards placed next to or among the books or be fastened by drawing pins to near-by walls or screens. Credits should also appear in any catalogue, lists or leaflets connected with the exhibition. If those helping in the ways suggested, or in other ways, see that their help is prominently acknowledged, they are more likely to help again on other occasions.

## Giving the Details

As has already been pointed out, book exhibitions for specialists do not need ancillary material to catch the eye and draw the passer-by to look at them, but they do need other aids. The specialist is likely to want to buy or borrow some of the books on display and for that he needs to know the details. Of course he can get them from the blurb or title page, but he is more likely to take note of the essential information about a book if it is neatly typed or handwritten on a card next to the book itself. Such cards should contain title, author, publisher, price, and, where available, International Standard Book Number (ISBN). Ideally they should also have a brief annotation, perhaps four or five lines, describing why the particular book has special qualities that ought to be noticed by the visitor: e.g. "This is a revised edition of a standard work first published in 1957, containing a lot of new material in the light of the discovery of X's letters". The visitor knows then at once why this book may be of special interest to him.

Annotated cards involve quite a lot of thoughtful preparation if they are to do more than merely repeat what is written in a catalogue. Where the wording has to be original, it is essential that it is done by an expert in the field. The cards also have to be typed, checked (and double-checked) and carefully placed next to the titles to which they refer. They can cause more trouble than they are worth if visitors pick up books and put them down again in the wrong place. Better just to have title, author, publisher, ISBN and price than misleading or ill-balanced annotation. Let your committee decide whether cards are worth-while or not.