

CHAPTER TEN

CELEBRITIES

Catch a live author

Cards, photographs, posters, all these things and many more help to draw attention to book exhibitions, but the biggest single attraction in most cases is a live author. Two or three live authors, of course, increase this attraction. Most people in most walks of life who enjoy reading books want to meet well-known authors; so too, do many non-readers provided the authors are famous enough. The first rule, then, is to look for an author with sufficient rating in the area being covered for people to want to meet him or her. Not everyone will have heard of Michel Guérard who invented cuisine minceur - a form of French cooking that preserves the authentic flavour while avoiding the use of rich or fat sauces - but anyone really interested in modern cooking will know the name and turn out to meet him - and see his and other cookery books while doing so.

Having decided to invite a suitable author to open the exhibition or visit it - someone who is likely to be available and whose travelling expenses will not be enormous - the next step in most cases is to approach that person's publisher with a request. Publishers both protect their authors from over-exposure and yet want them to be seen by their readers. So their response is likely to take into account the number of people expected at the exhibition at the time of the author's visit and the facilities for signing copies of the book (if any). To be able, in the first approach, to say: "We are expecting 300 guests to the opening party including the Lord Chief Justice", is much more likely to help the publisher to

persuade his author to attend than: "We don't know how many people will be there but we are inviting as many as 30".

On such occasions authors do not expect to be paid more than their expenses, and these will often be met by the publisher. But it is essential to make them feel how much the organisers value the visit. Care should be taken to greet the author on arrival and ensure that one or more members of the organising committee accompany him round the exhibition, see if he would like some refreshments, and tell him where the cloakroom is. Nothing is more daunting than to have to make a speech or spend half an hour autographing copies of a book while all the time urgently wanting the toilet.

Preliminaries

Even before the author's arrival, a letter should be written thanking him for accepting the invitation and giving details of the visit (e.g. the desired time of arrival, the length of the speech or stay for signing, and whether he is invited to lunch, a drink or dinner depending on the time of the day). If he is coming unaccompanied by the publisher, a route map should be enclosed. All this may sound very elementary, but it is unfortunately true that such details are frequently overlooked, so that the celebrity is cursing his agreement to come even before arriving. For this reason a phone call on the morning of the visit confirming all the arrangements can do wonders to ensure the arrival of the writer in an equable mood.

If the writer has come to the opening reception, then care must be taken to introduce him not only to other well-known people there, but to members of the organising committee. This may seem little more than a formality, but those who have contributed greatly in service and time do value being picked out to meet someone who, in all probability, everyone present would like to meet personally.

Foreign Visitors

When a writer is arriving from another country (perhaps he is making a world tour and his publisher has been able to arrange a stop-over that coincides with a book exhibition) the host's responsibility may be greater than just checking the details on the phone and greeting the celebrity at the door. There will be a hotel room to be booked, transport from hotel to exhibition to be arranged, and, if funds permit, a lunch or dinner at which the author can meet a small number of interesting people. Care must also be taken not to "switch off" when the speech or signing session is over, leaving the poor celebrity to find his own way back to the hotel, his own evening entertainment, and his own transport to the airport next morning.

Speaking and Signing Engagements

Visitors, however famous, should be encouraged to keep their speeches short. It is much better to leave an audience feeling "Oh, if only he'd gone on for another ten minutes", than "I thought he was never going to stop, didn't you?"

If an author has agreed to sign copies of his books, remember that it is a physically and mentally tiring business: physically because of the actual writing of the signature dozens and dozens of times, mentally because of the effort needed to say something to each person, however briefly. So keep the signing session down to a reasonable time, with an hour probably as the maximum. Don't forget, too, that your author, however famous, may turn up without a pen: have one waiting for him.

Tie-ins

If, as has been suggested, you are thinking of borrowing a picture or two from a local gallery or art group, you might take the idea a stage further by asking

a society or college to put on a picture display on the same theme as the book exhibition. Even if the books are not about fine art but about townscapes or landscapes or even town planning, there may well be a group of relevant pictures in some local collection which could serve as a supplementary attraction. But remember that this can cause problems, such as that of insurance: books are not usually of great value but pictures can be.

Similarly, a film may have relevance to one or more books in an exhibition. If so, overtures should be made to the manager of a cinema to see if it can be shown. All sorts of cross publicity can become possible with stills from the film at the exhibition, an announcement on screen about it, and so on.

Once having accepted the principle that a book exhibition can only gain by being connected with other things or events which a non-book public are likely to notice, then real effort should be made to figure out just where such tie-ins are possible.