

The Value of Book Signing Tours for Today's Author

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An author's job is simple. We come up with an idea, scribe the next bestseller, do a few edits, and *voilà*, send off our polished masterpiece so it may be published and shared with the world.

Then we repeat the cycle, from the comfort of our home office (working in our coziest pajamas of course), watching the royalty checks flow into our bank account as we churn out book after book.

And there you have it folks; the life of an author. All done.

Sounds cushy, right? Easy peasy lemon squeezy.

Wait a second...

What about the readers who send us heartfelt letters and e-mails? Or the fans who want to meet us in person to sign their books? Don't forget to follow-through on the requests to be interviewed by media sources and network with booksellers. There are also all of your social media accounts to manage and maintain: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, blogs, your website, not to mention, keeping up on your accounting and paying your taxes.

And, congratulations! Your next book is about to hit the shelves. It's time to go on a book signing tour to promote yourself and new release. Your publisher has already arranged it, so pack your bags and laptop. Remember to grab your passport, too.

What? You may ask. How in the world do I have time? I'm already contracted for my next three books you say. I only have so much energy and my to-do list continues to grow. Where must I focus my efforts to maintain a successful career?

You sit back, pondering how much *value* there really is in doing a traditional book signing tour.

Should you take time away from your writing and family to pound the pavement and mingle with the people who keep you in business? Namely your readers. Or is there perhaps an alternate method, such as doing a virtual tour via guest blogs, web chats, etc., and flooding social media channels with your latest and greatest?

After all, the Internet has no borders, and you can reach thousands of readers at once.

Is leveraging social media a better way to connect than meeting fans on a tour? I had the pleasure of speaking with Alyson Noel, Susan Squires, and Eloisa James, three New York Times best-selling authors, to garner their insights.

Traditional Book Signing Tours

For the sake of getting everyone on the same page, let's define traditional book touring as a good ol' fashioned, in the flesh, face-to-face interaction between an author and a reader during a planned signing event. One where real-time eye contact is made without the filter of a computer screen, and the author pens her autograph on a hard copy of her book, handing it back to the eager reader to treasure forever.

We hope this same devoted booklover will be first in line when our next novel is released, and the many more that are sure to follow. Does this personal meet and greet during the few moments of a signing actually make a difference when it comes to an author's career?

Ms. James, who is currently on tour, said, "I like them [book signing tours], but I don't consider them necessary. They work for me because I like my readers and I'm very comfortable hanging out with people. Many authors are more reserved in their private lives and with their personal space, and I think that's absolutely fine. If it doesn't work for you, then a book signing will only hurt your brand."

Solid point. It takes a certain personality type to feel natural amongst a crowd of strangers. If this idea makes you cringe, then perhaps doing a virtual book tour is something you may want to consider.

I will expand on this modern alternative some more as we go along.

Ms. Noel shared that both book signings and tours are great for connecting with readers and booksellers in a way that's difficult to accomplish online. "That said, unless you have a sizeable and dedicated audience committed to showing up, they can be awkward, discouraging, and not the best use of time."

Ah, *not the best use of time*. Something we are always short on and desperately wish was more abundant. This constraint is certainly an honest concern with all of our other "job duties", no?

Squires concurred, saying, "Unless you're a top draw author, where the event will capture many visitors on your name alone in that particular geography, or you are attending a large signing with other authors at an event that will bring in many visitors, there are more efficient ways to engage with readers through social media."

So, let's say you and a group of authors are planning a traditional signing. Where should you have your event, and what's the best way to go about it?

The Venue and Organized Group Tours

The venue where one does a book signing has significant correlation with the success of the event. Collaborating with many authors attracts more of an audience. Ms. Squires explained, "Multiple author book signings are most effective, and most pleasant, if you can count on them being well attended by readers. RWA conference book signings and RT book signings would be examples of productive signings. You might sell 25 – 50 books or so, and at least you get to talk to other authors during the signing. Of course you sign books during speaking engagements, but that is almost a courtesy. There is no guarantee that because you are speaking, that anyone will buy books. 10-20 books at a speaking engagement would be very good."

Independent bookstores are another location for book signings as well. Often, these boutique shops have periodic events with multiple authors. This is great marketing for the mom-and-pop stores that still exist. Booksellers can hand sell your books in the weeks approaching the signing, and bring you stacks of books to sign for customers who couldn't make it in on the day. Just make sure you nail down the details, including the roles and responsibilities, well in advance of the signing. It will make things go more smoothly.

Pulling in a large crowd and getting a lot of traffic is optimal. Ms. Noel has experience with this. "I'm a big fan of festivals, speaking engagements, fundraisers—anything that brings in a targeted audience. It's usually a win-win as the majority of attendees are dedicated readers who are interested in discovering books and authors that are new to them. For a new author, attending an organized event takes the pressure off of filling up the seats on your own.

Even for a bestselling author it can be hard to fill a room when most people today are so overscheduled and time pressed. Because of that, there's been a real spike in organized group tours, both author and publisher generated. I think they're great, and tend to work well for everyone involved."

Where to Tour

When an author chooses to embark on the book signing circuit, where should they travel? Is it best to stay local in your hometown, or expand and go worldwide? Ms. Noel spent much of last year touring across the globe, so I was able to pick her brain a bit.

"It's always a good idea to do a signing in your hometown and connect with your local booksellers and readers. As for touring different states, without a publisher's support that can get pricey. And arranging and keeping track of all the logistics of hotels, flights,

and publicity can become overwhelming. As for touring in different countries—every tour I've done abroad—and I've done many, touring on 5 continents—they've always been at the request of my foreign publishers who cover all of the travel expenses and handle all of the publicity on their end."

If your work is translated into multiple languages and you're interested in meeting your overseas audience, bring this to the attention of your foreign rights agent. Or if you're planning a vacation and want to squeeze in an event in a foreign city, this opportunity is worth snagging.

Ms. Noel did just this on a recent vacation to South America. "My husband and I traveled to Peru over the holidays, and my foreign agent put me in touch with my Spanish publisher, who put me in touch with the largest Peruvian bookstore chain, who arranged an amazing event for my last night in Lima. It was a great way to end a wonderful trip."

Touring in a Non-Speaking English Country

So your publisher is sending you to France, but you don't speak a lick of French. Don't fret. Depending on your house, the publisher usually hires a translator for signings and media interviews that are scheduled. If you go on a multiple city tour in countries where English is not the first language, often times you will be assigned a translator at each location you travel.

If you are into adventure, the international tour is really something to entertain. Readers from different countries are elated to meet their favorite author in their homeland.

Virtual Touring through Social Media

Maybe a traditional book signing tour isn't up your alley. Don't worry. You have a wealth of other avenues when it comes to promoting yourself and your books. Authors may leverage the beauty of technology to connect with their readers through online channels and feeds, without leaving the house.

Ms. James, an avid social media user, expanded on this notion. "I think that the days of solitary writing are over for good. You must be a businesswoman, and create a platform, or no one will read your next book because they won't even know it exists. That doesn't mean you have to go on a tour, or even greet people in person, if you aren't comfortable. Do what works for you: Tumblr, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter...they are all different ways of communicating with readers and as valid as book signings."

Also recommending social media tours, Ms. Squires elaborated. "I think the big

difference for virtual book tours, is that they reach readers in multiple geographies. This expands the reach of the event. However, they can be less personal than a physical book tour. To combat that, you might want to avoid those kinds of blog tours that post standardized blogs that are solely promotional in nature. I don't think readers feel like they're connecting with a real person in those situations.

However, if you bother to write genuine posts, infuse your interviews with your individual personality and show that you are making a real effort, it's a good way to connect with readers. It's a more effective use of time, and allows people to repost and share the experience they had with you easily."

This advice is golden. Showing your human side to those who "follow" you on Facebook, for example, really appreciate your letting them peek into your life. They can relate to the juggle of family and career, or something funny your spouse did. If you're comfortable, posting photos, especially when you are at writing-related events, goes over well too.

I was curious to hear Ms. Noel's two cents on the virtual approach, as she's done so many traditional book tours. "Social media is such a boon for authors, allowing us to engage with readers in ways we couldn't just a few years ago. While I'm still a firm believer in the power of face-to-face contact to build a rapport and reader loyalty, if you can't get out on the road, then by all means make the most of all the various mediums offered to you. I've toured in the UK on several occasions, but recently, when I couldn't get there for a particular release, my UK publisher set up a Google Chat that was loads of fun. They held a launch party at their offices, which they decorated in the book's theme, had yummy snacks on hand for the bloggers they'd invited, and I read from my book, we chatted, and I answered questions. While it wasn't the same as being there, it was still effective."

Touring Tips to Keep in the Back Pocket

Before wrapping up my interview with these fantastic authors, I asked them if they had any additional tips for us. Ms. Squires said, "Be 'present,' which means pay attention, answer questions or post thoughtfully and in a personal way. Be nice, no matter what, even when people don't like the book, or refuse to try it because it sounds like something they'd hate. Try to ask individual questions if you get a chance to interact with a reader, even if it's just, 'What kind of books do you read?' or at writer events, 'What do you write?'"

Ms. James reminds us, "You can't get too upset if no one turns up. Make friends with the booksellers, and enjoy the 2-3 people who do come. I genuinely believe that one super-fan, who really is your friend, can do more for your career than 20 fans who go home, read one chapter, and toss your book aside."

With a practical tactic, Ms. Noel keeps our feet on the ground. “Not to sound like your mother, but don’t forget to take care of yourself. A tour where you visit a different city everyday translates to early morning wake up calls, very late dinners, and loads of time spent in airports and on airplanes. While it’s fun to talk about your book and meet people who love reading, the schedule can be taxing, so get your rest, take your vitamins, and drink your green juice.”

You Put the *Value* in Your Book Tour

Whether it be traditional or virtual, a book signing tour and its value, is dependent upon you. Be creative and innovative. Speak to other authors and learn what they've done; what's worked and what hasn't. Talk to your publisher, your agent, your editor, and strategize with your support team to design the best plan for you to attain your long-term career goals.

Get out there on the web and make your rounds at events. Try new things and experiment. Be confident! Something will click and you’ll find your way.