

How to Make a Disastrous Book Signing Event a Success

By J.A. Konrath

No aspect of a writer's job offers more opportunity for euphoria (and anxiety) than a book signing. But how do these events really go down?

The Fantasy. Your escort picks us up at the airport and drives you to the largest bookstore in the state. She tells you they've advertised the event in the three local papers and on the radio. When you arrive, there are a hundred fans already waiting. You meet the excited staff and sit behind a table stocked with a huge pile of books, under a giant color poster of your cover. You read a chapter aloud, receive thunderous applause, and then do a quick Q & A before signing for a solid 90 minutes, people waiting patiently in an endless line to tell you how much they love you.

The Reality. You arrive at the bookstore ten minutes early. There's no crowd of fans---there's not even one. No posters, no signs, no table full of books. The employees look at you like you've grown a second nose when you say you're the author and there to sign. Finally you convince someone to help you and they unearth a box of your books and set up a small table for you in the rear of the store, near the washrooms. You sit there for two hours, each second an eternity. People try hard to avoid eye-contact when they pass. Some approach you and ask where *The DaVinci Code* is. One will always come over and say, "So you're an author? I've got a lot of ideas. How about I tell them to you, you write them, and we'll split the millions?" No one buys a book. It's debasing, humiliating, discouraging, and you vow to never do this again.

The Plan. But it doesn't have to be that way. With proper preparation, and a little bit of self-confidence, you can do very well at bookstore signings even if your last name isn't Clancy. Here's how.

A Month Before the Event. Book the signing yourself by calling or dropping by the bookstore and speaking to a manager or an event coordinator.

Often the store is not very receptive—author events don't ever go well. Convince them that yours will, because you have a different way of doing things.

If you're with a small publisher, your books may be difficult or impossible to order. Offer to bring the books in yourself and give the bookseller the standard 40% discount.

If you're with a large publisher, they might refuse to pay the store co-op money (publishers pay stores to host events, often between fifty and several hundred dollars.)

If that's the case, the store won't be allowed to host a signing. Tell them you don't want to do an official signing, but rather a drop-in just to sign stock. Then make sure they have at least twenty copies available.

Two weeks before the event. Advertising is up to you. Make a flyer featuring the date and time of the signing, your book cover, and a few blurbs. Send the bookstore 100 copies.

List the event on your website and in your newsletter, with an address and a phone number for the bookstore.

If you haven't already, make a large (2' x 3') poster of your book cover and a sign that says "AUTHOR EVENT TODAY." Often your publisher will do this for you; just ask when you receive the cover art. Or you can have one made from a digital file at any copy shop, like Fed-Ex Kinkos.

Three days before the event. Call the store and make sure they have copies of your book in. If they don't, remind them that you can bring copies of your own.

Most authors get discounted copies from their publisher. Instead, I suggest you buddy up with a local independent bookstore owner, and ask if she can sell you copies at her 40% discount. That way, they count toward your royalties.

How do you become friends with a local indie? Make them your base of operations, and have anyone who wants a signed copy go through them. Also, use them for your initial book launch party—they'll be happy to help you out after that.

Day of the event. Make sure you have the essentials; 100 business cards with your website on them, flyers that feature some blurbs and reviews, some mints (so your breath stays fresh), some bottled water (hydration is important), and a nametag that says "AUTHOR."

Dress. Business casual or better. Shaved, bathed, combed, made up and smelling nice.

Upon arrival. Get there fifteen minutes early to set up. Your first order of business is to introduce yourself to EVERY employee in the bookstore. Shake

their hands. Give them a signed business card. Briefly tell them what your book is about, and let them know you'll be there for a few hours.

Bring pizza or donuts for the staff. Employees are used to bigshot authors snubbing them. Be a bigshot author who appreciates them, and they'll champion your books for life.

Set up. Sometimes the bookstore has already set up a table for you. Try to get one at the front of the store. If not, no problem—you can work around it.

Put your flyers and some business cards on the table, and hang your poster in a prominent place. Make sure your books are arranged in an attractive manner.

An employee might offer you a chair. Kindly tell them you don't need one—you'll be on your feet for the whole event.

Ready, Set, Go! If you're lucky, some people may have come to see you. Usually this isn't the case. You're a new, unknown author. All of your friends and family have already bought your book. Even if the event has had heavy advertising and publicity, would you go to see an author you've never heard of before?

Neither will anyone else.

The only way you'll move your wares is through determination, personality, and fearlessness.

Put on your smile, stick out your hand, and get ready to greet EVERY PERSON that comes into the bookstore.

Does that terrify you? It shouldn't. People are excited to meet authors. You're a minor celebrity. Everyone likes to meet celebrities.

Don't worry about being rebuffed or ignored. You've dealt with rejection before. You're a writer, and rejection is part of the business.

The Approach. People will be preoccupied when they walk into a bookstore. Some are on a mission to buy the new Harry Potter, or latest issue of *Guns & Ammo*. Some are there to browse genres other than the one you're writing in.

But all people, no matter their reason for being there, will respond when you introduce yourself and offer to shake hands.

I use one of two lines:

“Are you a mystery fan? I’m a mystery writer.” or “Hi, I’m an author. Do you like thrillers?”

It’s extremely rare that a person will ignore an outstretched hand—it’s only happened to me three times, and I’ve shaken thousands of hands.

The Pitch. If I get a yes to one of the above questions, I launch into my pitch.

“My name is JA Konrath. I write a mystery series about a Chicago cop named Jack Daniels. Jack is short for Jacqueline, and she’s in her forties, divorced, has a train wreck for a personal life, but she’s great at her job. She chases serial killers.”

If they still seem interested at this point (about 1 out of 5) I continue:

“The book is actually very funny, similar to Janet Evanovich or Dave Barry. But it also has a darker side, kind of like James Patterson or Hannibal Lecter/Silence of the Lambs. So it goes from laugh out loud funny, to pretty scary. You’ll want to turn on the lights and make sure the doors and windows are locked when you’re reading.”

It’s important to maintain eye contact and keep smiling. Then finish your pitch.

“Whiskey Sour is the first book in a new series. The second is Bloody Mary. They’ve won several awards and appeared on some bestseller lists. I’d love to sign a copy or two for you—and if you like, I can make it out to EBay.”

Relax and Be Casual. No one likes high pressure sales. Selling isn’t about forcing people to buy something they don’t want. It’s about finding the people who are looking for your product.

And yes, books are products. Publishing is a business. Take off the artist hat, and put on the salesperson hat. If you’re shy, or have low self esteem, take a public speaking class. The better you can talk to people, the further you’ll go in this career.

The Hand Off. While doing the spiel I’ll hand them the book itself. That connection is important. Holding something implies ownership, and you want them to look at the cover, read the jacket, and begin to think of this book as theirs.

Adjustments. I tailor the pitch depending on the person's interest. Often I ask questions. Sometimes I answer questions. I adjust the pitch to the individual (if a customer likes romances, I play up the romantic end. If they like thrillers, I downplay the comedy, etc.)

The Rejection. Most people won't be interested, even after hearing your wonderful pitch. That doesn't mean you should move along yet.

Hand them a flyer to look at, or autograph a business card or bookmark, and ask them to pass it along to anyone they know who is a fan of your kind of books.

Thank them for their time, and mention it was great meeting them. Also let them know that you'll be around for a while, if they decide they want something signed.

Often people come back. Sometimes while you're there. Sometimes days later.

The Acceptance. If they buy a copy, be genuinely grateful. I once did a signing with an author who grumbled, "I hate signing books" in front of the person he was autographing it for. The fan's jaw hit the floor. I don't recommend that approach.

Thank the customer for giving you a try, and ask them who they'd like the book personalized to. ALWAYS ask for them to spell the name, even if it's "Kim," (I had a Kymm once.)

Then thank them again, shake hands again, and give them the biggest smile you can give.

Enlisting the Staff. Large chain stores will often make announcements. Ask if they can announce you every half hour, or if you can make the announcements yourself.

"Today we have local author J.A. Konrath—that's me—signing books from the Jack Daniels series. I encourage everyone of come over to front of the store and say hello. Autographed books make a great gift, for family, friends, or yourself."

If the staff really likes you (and if you brought them pizza, they will) ask if they can pass out flyers, or walk around holding copies of your book and directing patrons to your table.

Does it Work? Typically, 1 out of 5 people I pitch to will buy the book. And I pitch to several dozen an hour—depending on how busy the store is.

I did an event last Saturday, and sold 40 hardcover books in 6 hours. The week before I did 40 books in 8 hours (store wasn't as crowded). Week before, 60 books in 8 hours. My record is 120 in ten hours.

It isn't easy getting a stranger to part with \$22. Sometimes there are stretches when I approach 30 people and can't sell a single book. It's disheartening, depressing, and just plain awful.

Other times, I'll sell five books in three minutes—one person buys it and others will wander over to check out what's going on.

To date, using this method I've hand sold over 2,000 books.

Time to Leave. How long you stay is up to you. I think four hours is minimum, and if the store is really busy I'll stay for six or more.

When you're finally ready to go, you should once again thank the booksellers—they watched you bust your butt and are on your side.

If you didn't sell every copy, ask to sign the remaining stock, and affix stickers that say "Signed by the Author."

If the store doesn't have stickers, use the ones you borrowed from the last place you signed at—the employees shouldn't mind if you ask to take some extras, and you should always keep a supply of stickers on you from various chain stores.

If you brought your own books, don't ask to be paid upfront—that's bad business. Leave your contact information and let them know they can mail a check.

Most importantly, ask to come back in a month or two. I visit some local stores five times a year. Signed books really do well during the holidays.

Staying Positive. Every time I come into a bookstore and see that big stack of my books, I get a little sick inside. There's no way I'll sell all of those, I think. No one will come in to the store. People will ignore me. My pitch is crummy and won't work. The staff is laughing behind my back. I'm a writer, not a salesperson.

Then I remind myself that the Great Wall of China was built one brick at a time, and that's how I'll sell my books--one at a time.

Each book you handsell is a book that never would have sold without your efforts.

Each person you meet is likely to talk about you to others.

Each reader who becomes a fan will become a fan for life and remember the time they shook your hand.

Each bookstore you visit will have employees who will handsell you for weeks, months, and even years after you've gone.

In my acknowledgements page on my latest book, I have a list of a dozen booksellers that I thank, because they've each handsold at least twenty copies of my first novel.

In the next book, I'll be thanking over fifty booksellers. One particular bookseller has helped me sell over 300 hardcovers at one location. I named a character after him in my third book.

Your Goal. There's no reason a book signing has to be a stressful, unpleasant experience. In reality it is one of the cheapest, most-effective ways to build your career.

It's your name on the book's cover, and it's your job to sell it. Sales is just like writing—the more you do, the better you become, the more success you achieve. Now go get 'em, tiger!

Six Keys to a Successful Bookstore Pitch

1. Introduce yourself with a smile.
2. Explain the book's premise, setting, and lead character in just a few seconds.
3. Compare your books to well known books the reader will recognize (It's like a chick-lit version of *Silence of the Lambs*...)
4. Ask the customer a question. (Who do you like to read? What book did you come in for?)
5. Offer to sign and personalize a copy for them.

6. Thank them, whether they buy a copy or not.

Signing Survival Kit

- Snacks for bookstore employees
- Three good pens
- Business cards
- Flyers
- Poster of book cover
- Sign saying "Author Signing Today"
- Mints (gum annoys people)
- Bottled water
- Extra "Autographed Copy" stickers
- A big smile and a good attitude

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[J.A. Konrath](#) recently signed his second three book deal with Hyperion Books for his Jack Daniels mystery series. His first novel, *WHISKEY SOUR*, introduces series heroine Lt. Jacqueline Daniels of the Chicago Police Department. The second in the series, *BLOODY MARY*, was released in July 2005.

Joe graduated from Columbia College in Chicago in 1992. He's written for corporate and cable television, assisted the brewmeister at a local micro brewery, performed improv comedy on stage, and regularly speaks at mystery and horror conventions.

Recent short story sales include "On the Rocks: A Lt. Jack Daniels Novella" and "Street Music" to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, "Finicky Eater" to *Horror Garage Magazine*, "The Screaming" to *The Many Faces of Van Helsing* anthology edited by Jeanne Cavelos, "Forgiveness" to *Cemetery Dance Magazine*, and "Redux" to the *Spooks* anthology edited by Tina Jens, coming from *Twilight Tales*. He's also written articles for *Writer's Digest* and *Novel Writing Magazine*.

Joe has one wife, three kids (that he knows of), a dog, and a house in the suburbs, where he's recently finished *RUSTY NAIL*, the third book in the Lt. Jacqueline Daniels thriller series.