

THE ART OF THE BOOK SIGNING

By John DeDakis, Author of *Fast Track* (ArcheBooks)

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You've written the book. It's been published. And now you've got a book-signing gig. Congratulations on overcoming the three toughest hurdles in publishing. Now, it's all downhill, right? Not exactly. If you think everyone will flock to you as you sit triumphantly at your book table, you're kidding yourself. I see some of you authors nodding in agreement. If you're only selling three or four books at a gig, maybe it's time you change your approach.

Here's what I do to make the sale:

➤ Don't just sit there:

- I've been very fortunate. Most of the bookstores where I've done signings put me at a table just inside the front door. (Barnes & Noble stores have been *great* about this.) So, I take advantage of the location and I stand up. It puts me at eye level with the customer.

➤ Make eye contact:

- The goal is to make some kind of connection with another human being. Yes, yes, the *real* goal is to sell a book, but think about it: why did you write that book in the first place? Isn't it because you wanted to make some sort of connection with another person? So now's your chance. Do it! Say "hi." It's not particularly clever, but it's a start.

➤ "Are you browsing?":

- This is the million-dollar question and it's a perfectly logical one to ask a person who has just entered a bookstore. Granted, some people are focused on finding a specific book and don't want to be sidetracked. Fine. But more often than not, when I ask a person "are you browsing," they say, "Yes, I am."

➤ I have a follow-up, Mr. President:

- All good reporters (and book sellers) are ready with a follow-up question. Mine is simple: "May I tell you about the book I've written?" (It helps to be holding the book in your hand as a visual aid.) Almost always this is the first time that the person has really *noticed* me AND realizes that I'm the author of a book. You would *think* that sitting at the front door of a bookstore at a ta-

ble heaped high with copies of your book would send a strong enough message that you are an author, but it doesn't. Frequently, it's only when you *engage* the customer that you see the light of understanding click on behind their eyes.

➤ **Your spiel:**

- You now have been given permission to tell someone about your book. Make it good. And make it short. Here's my spiel: "Fast Track is about a 25-year-old young woman who's frustrated because she doesn't know what to do with her life." (At this point, the person I'm talking to usually rolls her eyes and says, "Sounds like me.") I continue: "Her parents were killed in a car accident when she was an infant and the book begins when she discovers the body of the aunt who raised her. That trauma launches her on a search to find out more about her past. She goes to the small town where the accident happened, gets a newspaper clipping, and discovers she's the 'Miracle Baby' who survived a car-train collision." (At this point I turn the book over so they can read the clipping excerpt that's on the dust jacket.) While the person holds the book and studies the cover, I continue: "No one had ever told her about that part of her past. Why not? She convinces the newspaper editor to let her do a follow-up story... two of her sources are the mayor and the sheriff... they're running against each other for congress... the election is one week away... and each guy has a secret that will unravel the mystery."

➤ **Beyond the spiel:**

- My spiel runs about forty seconds – longer if there's already rapport with the person, shorter if I can tell they're just being polite. There have been a few times – not many – when a person *immediately* decides to buy my book, telling me so even *before* I've finished spieling. Usually, however, my sales job isn't done. I'm not comfortable with the hard sell. Chances are, you aren't either. So, here's what I do next: I talk with the person. Here are some stock pump-priming questions that have led to some wonderful conversations: "Where are you from?" "Are you a writer?" "What's your day job?" The goal is to get them talking about themselves – we're trying to make a *connection*, remember?

➤ **BACK OFF!**

- You've been given the privilege of having a total stranger let you talk about your book, but now it's time for you to get out of the way and let them make up their mind without you breathing down their neck. If they're reading the dust jacket, I shut up; if we've already chitchatted a bit and they still seem

uncertain, I say, “Look, I know you’re just browsing. Thanks for letting me tell you about it. I’d love to sign it for you, but if you need more time, just hold onto it while you walk around the store. I can either sign it for you before you leave, or you can drop it off on your way out.” I’ll be honest. Most people drop it off, but I’d say about 25% of them ask me later to sign it for them.

➤ A final note:

- In addition to your book and your personality, your other three most effective marketing tools are your bookmarks, your web site and your contacts. Whenever someone buys a book, I ask for – and usually get – their e-mail address. I also get the e-mail addresses of people who didn’t buy a book, but who might later, especially if we clicked on a more personal level. I give them a bookmark and follow-up as soon as possible with a “great-to-have-met-you” e-mail that directs them to my web site and gives them one more chance to get the book – perhaps even cheaper – online.

These are techniques I’ve been perfecting over the last few months. A few weeks ago in Atlanta, I sold about 20 books at each of my book signings, many to total strangers who were “just browsing.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John DeDakis is an editor/writer on CNN’s “The Situation Room” anchored by Wolf Blitzer. John is also the author of the mystery/suspense novel “Fast Track” (ArcheBooks). You may visit his web site at www.johndedakis.com.