

This article was originally published in the March, 2005 issue of *InSinC: The Sisters in Crime Newsletter*,

Bookselling for Authors: What You Need to Know

by Karen Spengler

I recently had lunch with two author friends: one, a long-time friend of my bookstore, and the other a visiting author with whom I was having a delightful first meeting. As we lingered after lunch, the discussion turned, inevitably, to the business of selling mystery books. My friends were surprised at some of my opinions on how authors help—or hinder—that process. From that discussion, we conceived the idea that I might write an article outlining some ways in which I think authors can help booksellers sell their books.

Although some of what I am going to say will be most applicable to newer authors, many of my points may be helpful to established authors as well. Of course, if your books are regularly appearing on the *New York Times* bestseller list, feel free to stop reading now, because you clearly don't need advice from me.

Just to be clear, when I use the term “booksellers”, I mean “independent booksellers”, because as far as this article goes, big box superstore booksellers and their internet counterparts do not exist. They are not even a blip on the radar screen if you are a newish author trying to get your books into the hands of the mystery-reading public. What you need is a bunch of good, old-fashioned **independent** booksellers handselling your book. So, from here on out, read “booksellers” to mean “independent booksellers”.

Understand the business of bookselling

I think that the best thing way to sell your books is to cultivate relationships with independent booksellers, but before you do that, it would be wise to understand something about the business of bookselling. Here are a few basics that you should know:

1. Bookstores typically get their inventory from a variety of sources. We order our “front-list” titles direct from the publishers on a seasonal basis. Most of our backlist and reorders go through a distributor, such as Ingram or Baker & Taylor, who can get the books in our hands within a few days after the order is placed. In exchange for this speed and the convenience of placing orders with a centralized warehouse, we get a lower discount and more stringent return policies. Note well: Many small-press books are not available from Ingram and B&T. Some independent bookstores order their entire inventory from these distributors, which means that they don't have access to books from some small publishers.

2. According to a recent American Booksellers Association member survey, less than half of the responding bookstores were profitable. Books have a very low profit margin compared to other retail goods, and the labor cost of selling books is very high. The bottom line is that it's very difficult for many independent booksellers to stay in business.
3. Independent booksellers face intense competition. Besides those big-box superstores that I don't count as booksellers, we compete with grocery stores, discount stores, the internet, wholesale clubs...the list goes on and on.
4. The ability to return books is an integral piece of the business of bookselling. Although our dream would be to have every in-print book in stock, for most booksellers, this isn't practical. At my store, we don't have the self space, and just as important, we can't afford to keep excess stock on hand. Once a signing is over, for example, we bundle most of the books back to the publisher within a few days.

This is a very important thing for authors to understand. The vast majority of publishers accept returns of unsold books, but some smaller publishers don't. The distributors (Ingram and Baker & Taylor) limit returns to a small fraction of a store's total purchases for the year, generally do not accept returns of "print-on-demand" titles, and give less than full credit for any returns that they do accept.

At my store, we rarely buy books from publishers who don't accept returns. As the publishing world shrinks, I know it is next to impossible for new authors to be choosy if a smaller publisher offers them a contract. Just be forewarned: if your publisher doesn't accept returns, you will need to be prepared to go way beyond the extra mile to get booksellers to carry your books.

So, now that you a few basics about bookselling, what's next?

Cultivate Relationships with Booksellers

Don't make the mistake of thinking that once your book is published, it is going to fly off the shelves of the bookstore. I would guess that there are maybe 1,000 authors represented in our new books section. Forgive me if this sounds cold, but it is probably just as easy—and sometimes easier—for a bookseller to sell a book by one of the other 999 authors, as it is to sell one of yours.

So what's the most important thing you can do to help booksellers sell your books? In my opinion, the answer to that question is "Cultivate good relationships with booksellers". Here are some specifics:

1. Make it a point to meet the booksellers in your area. Drop by the store. Meet the owners, meet the staff, remember their names (at least the names of the owner and/or manager). These are the people who decide what books to order, and just as important, they are probably the people who can put your books in the hands of the customers.
2. Buy books from your local independent bookseller. If you have more than one local, spread your book purchases around. One author used to come by frequently to try to sell us his books (we already had a few copies on the shelf). He would mention the books he'd been reading, but never bought any books from us. Finally, I asked him where he bought his books. He said he didn't buy them; he used the library. Now I don't mean to say anything against libraries—I use the library myself on occasion—but that was the wrong answer. Also wrong would be “I buy them from Amazon”, “I buy them from Borders”, etc. You get the picture.

I know that authors don't make a lot of money, but neither do booksellers. The thing to remember, when you're thinking of saving a few bucks by buying at one of our competitors, is that buying a book from an independent bookseller is money well-spent. We're in business to sell books; if you help us in our business, we're more likely to want to help you in yours.

3. Be nice. Be polite to the staff when you come to town for a book signing. Be pleasant when we ask you to sign books at Bouchercon. Never, ever, say bad things about booksellers, except in the privacy of your own home (or maybe in your car with the windows rolled up). Whatever you do, don't write bad things about booksellers in public forums. Word gets around, and I don't know about other booksellers, but like an elephant, I never forget.

As unlikely as it seems, we can often sell a book by answering the question “Have you read this?”, with “No, I haven't read it, but the author, Jane Doe, is such a nice person.”

4. Be mindful of the links you display on your website. If you have a “Buy my book now” link that goes directly to Amazon.com, chances are that you won't have a lot of independent booksellers mentioning your site in their newsletter. Be an equal opportunity author: if you must display a link to the giant retailers, include similarly prominent links to BookSense.com and/or individual independent bookstores (you can find a list of independent mystery bookstores at <http://www.mysterybooksellers.com/membersh.html>).

Signings and Such

We've cut way back on the number of signings we hold at I Love a Mystery. No matter what we do, we just don't get the attendance to justify the cost of the staff, the time and effort involved in publicity and setting up the store, etc. I hear from authors that other small stores are having the same problem. Not to say that some independents don't still do very well with signings. In our case, part of the problem is that we are located about five minutes away from a large independent bookstore—billed as the premier author event organizer in the country--that holds really big-name signings almost nightly.

We do make exceptions, but I usually try to steer authors toward coming by for a stock signing, rather than a formal signing. Our customers love signed books, but they aren't particularly motivated to hear the authors speak. For out-of-town authors, I like to take the author out to lunch, so we have a chance to get to know each other.

Here are some tips related to signings of both kinds:

1. We love to have authors come by to sign stock—whether you're local, in town to visit friends, or even in town to sign at some other bookstore—but it's much better if you let us know ahead of time that you're coming. That way we can be sure to have a decent supply of your books on hand. If it's not possible to call ahead, though, do come by anyway, to say hello and sign what books we have.
2. When you contact a bookstore to ask about a signing, make it easy on the manager or owner by offering a stock signing as an alternative to a formal signing. Some stores will jump at the chance to schedule a formal signing, while others, like mine, prefer to have you come by to sign stock. I always worry about hurting an author's feelings if I have to refuse an offer of a formal signing.
3. If you're doing a formal signing, give the bookstore a hand with publicity by providing a press release with background information about you and the book.
4. If you're not able to travel around to do stock signings, offer your favorite bookstores the option of having books drop shipped to you for signing, with a call-ticket for shipping back to the store. If all else fails, offer signed bookplates.
5. If you're a brand new author, with friends and family anxiously awaiting your debut, your local bookstore might be willing to hold a launch party for you. At I Love a Mystery, we've been very successful with signings celebrating the release of an author's first book. For our part, we provide the location, the refreshments, and we put the calendar listings in the local paper. The author sends out invitations to his or her own guest list, and if their publisher's terms are not acceptable to us, the author also provides the books to us on consignment.

Pick Me! Pick Me!

One of the best things that can happen to a book, as far as increasing exposure, is for it to be chosen as a Book Sense pick (selected by ABA member stores who participate in the Book Sense program) or a Killer Books pick (selected by members of the IMBA, the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association). It's very unlikely that your book will be chosen unless advance reading copies (ARCs) are made available to booksellers. If your publisher will not send out ARCs, you may need to buy a few finished copies to give to booksellers.

If you do that, here's how I'd suggest distributing them: First, do your homework. Get ahold of some copies of the Book Sense list and the Killer Books list. Choose a few likely booksellers to contact (booksellers you've met or booksellers whose picks seem to indicate that they'd like your kind of book). Email the booksellers to ask if you could send them a copy of your book to read. If a bookseller agrees, find out exactly who to address the book to, and then put a personal note on the book, addressed to that specific person. After a few weeks, follow up with the bookseller to make sure that she got the book (we get so many ARCs that even one addressed specifically to me is liable to end up in pile, unless I go looking for it).

Here's what you shouldn't do

---Do not ask that your book be returned.

---Do not contact the bookseller about the book again, after you've determined that she received the book. This will spare you both embarrassment if she didn't like it.

—Do not put the bookseller on the spot by asking her to nominate your book for Book Sense or Killer Books (or to make it an in-store staff pick). If you send the book to people that you know have nominated books in the past, they will know to nominate it if they like it. Note that a nomination doesn't guarantee that your book will be chosen for the list, especially for Book Sense. The Killer Books list is devoted to mysteries, is published every month, and comes from a much smaller number of stores (members of the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association), so you have a somewhat better chance of actually making it to that list.

Karen Spengler is the owner of I Love A Mystery® bookstore and a member of the American Booksellers Association, the Midwest Booksellers Association and the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association.