

*"I decided to create a program that I hoped would be irresistible: I would offer to do events in public libraries in small towns."*

## Promoting The Backlist

An author uses libraries and soup to extend the life of her books

BY MAGGIE STUCKEY

Few terms are more discouraging to authors than *backlist*. If a book is backlisted, that means it has slipped to the back pages of the publisher's catalogue, it now gets little or no attention from booksellers, and (worst of all) there is no longer any budget for promotion.

I'm very familiar with the problem. My most recent book, *Soup Night*, was released in October 2013. It was Storey's lead title that season, on the cover of the catalogue, and thoroughly and successfully promoted by hardworking publicists. Then, six months later, a whole new crop of books came along, and the cycle started anew for those books. That's reality. Now, two-plus years later, my book is firmly backlist. I'm faced with two choices: (1) let the book ride on its own momentum, live with the declining sales, and whine, or else (2) do something about it.

I chose the second option. I decided to create a program that I hoped would be irresistible: I would offer to do events in public libraries in small towns.

Why libraries? Because they're a natural place to find book lovers. Why not bookstores? Because we all know they are doing fewer and fewer author events

these days. Why small towns? Because they are much more excited about hosting visiting authors, and because their local newspapers are much more amenable to feature stories.

The program I developed is called Soup and Books. I do a show-and-tell for three of my books (all now backlisted): how I got each initial idea, how I developed that idea into a book, and how I found the best publisher for each. The third book is *Soup Night*, and at this point the presentation segues into the main portion of the program, the part that everybody likes: we actually host a soup night right in the library. Folks sample homemade soup and bread while I talk about the soup night tradition and tell stories of soup groups all around the country.

I pinpointed libraries in small and midsize towns within a four-hour drive of my home in Portland, Ore. From a list of 72 libraries in Oregon and Washington, 38 said yes. That's a return rate of almost 53%; by comparison, direct marketers consider 1%–2% a good response.

My idea worked because libraries these days see themselves as community centers, and it helped that my soup book is all about creating community. It also helped that my books are in print. Thank you, Workman and Storey!

But the main reason my proposal was so well received, I believe, is that I offered a full event: not just a reading, not just a talk, but a complete package. And free food never hurts! I made it easy for the libraries. I created a checklist to summarize the specific arrangements with each library and sent it to them three weeks ahead. (Turns out, librarians love checklists.) If the travel distance was minimal, I provided the soup and all the service



items. I came early to help set up and stayed late to help clean up. Some libraries opted to provide the soup, using either a local caterer, staff members who enjoy cooking, or volunteers. I made sure to introduce the volunteer cooks to the audience and thanked them at the end

with a small gift bag. And I sent a handwritten thank-you note to each librarian the very next day.

I also helped with publicity. After checking with each librarian, I contacted local media in the town, offering an interview (and photos) to supplement the standard press release that most libraries do. The response was astonishing: a half-dozen full-page, full-color feature stories, plus many smaller articles. Now, these are small-town papers, often weeklies, but everybody in town reads them, and they generate lots of buzz and bring in very enthusiastic audiences. Thirty-eight libraries and nearly 1,000 miles later, I can say unequivocally that it was an amazing experience. I won't deny this: it's a lot of work—but well worth the effort, in every possible way.

It's impossible to quantify future bookstore sales triggered by promotions like this, but I have no doubt that it helps. My reward, though, is more immediate. Seeing people respond so warmly to the idea of soup night and being inspired to start a program of their own is rewarding. Many librarians told me that people came up to them afterward and said: "This was great. The library should do a regular soup night."

I agree. And please invite me—I'd love to come. ■

*Maggie Stuckey is the author of 11 adult trade books, most about cooking or gardening.*

TO SUBMIT AN ESSAY FOR THE SOAPBOX COLUMN, EMAIL SOAPBOX@PUBLISHERSWEEKLY.COM.

Copyright of Publishers Weekly is the property of PWxyz LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.