

BOOKSELLING **THIS** Week

News

Insights on Managing Blockbuster Events

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"Managing Blockbuster Events: The Logistics of Events of 500 or More" proved to be a blockbuster event in its own right at the American Booksellers Association's Thursday, May 29, Day of Education at BookExpo America. Booksellers packed the spacious ballroom at the Renaissance Hollywood Hotel to hear veteran event planners Cristina Nosti of Books & Books in Coral Gables, Florida, and Alison Kothe Nihlean of BookPeople in Austin, Texas, provide an entertaining and in-depth look at best practices for preparing for events likely to draw more than 500 people.

ABA COO Oren Teicher, the moderator of the panel, began by noting that events of 500 or more people pose unique challenges: From insurance and security to line control and audiovisual and catering needs, blockbuster events require careful planning and thoughtful execution. In addition, Teicher told the audience that near the end of the session they would be asked to help provide planning ideas for a [hypothetical blockbuster event](#).

Nosti, the director of events and marketing for Books & Books four locations, programs and promotes an average of 50 to 60 events per month and two to four of these will attract crowds of 500 or more. Noting that large events help to put the bookstore on the map, she said, "The biggest event I've helped plan was for Bill Clinton's My Life. We worked for months in advance for this event," the highlights of which she showed to booksellers via a slideshow. "It's hard to be an events coordinator," Nosti added. "You're hoping that nothing goes wrong!"

Said Kothe Nihlean, BookPeople's events coordinator: "It's best to surround yourself with people who aren't going to freak out or get star-struck. You need a great team."

A large event begins with the request that a bookseller puts into the publisher. "You provide the publisher with a proposal," said Nosti, with a best-case scenario for attendance. "We exaggerate, and then we try to live up to it," she added with a laugh.

"And then the publicist will call you when you least expect it. The minute I get the call, I try to respond immediately. You have to try to see [the future event in your] imaginary crystal ball" to be able to answer the publicist's questions about the desired event.

Once an author appearance is secured, to keep on top of the myriad details, "I've got a flow chart with everything you need to think about. I share that with the publicist and the staff," said Nosti. "Our budget for events is zero. I'm trying to get everything for free." If a store wants food for the event, she recommended trying to collaborate with a local food venue. "Partnering is very important for us," Nosti said.

Some other issues to consider:

Event tickets. Even if admission to the event is free, the more popular author events may require tickets and that brings with it a set of questions regarding logistics, including ticket distribution and printing. "People will need to pick up the tickets at your store, which is a good way of getting people to the store," Nosti said. "We design and print tickets in-house, so that involves printing, cutting, and distributing the tickets among the stores."

The book release date. If the book is not yet published, Nosti said, then the bookseller will need to provide customers with a voucher for the book.

Event Publicity. "One cost-effective advertising method is radio spots on an NPR station," Nosti explained. "The strategy is to get as much advanced publicity for the event as you can. The agony of any event coordinator is the question, 'Will people come?'"

For example, BookPeople's Kothe Nihlean said, "if you're doing an event with Ron Paul, can you work with a group that can send an e-mail blast to Paul supporters? You can include that in your request to the publicist."

Selling the books. "You need to think about ordering, receiving, and delivering the books," Nosti said. "Place the order the minute you confirm the event."

Kothe Nihlean said the store needs to consider where they will sell the books -- in-store or off-site.

Toilets. At large events, ensuring there are enough facilities for your customers is no laughing matter. For the Bill Clinton event, Books & Books rented portable toilets.

Security. If security is required, Books & Books usually hires an off-duty police officer.

Kothe Nihlean noted, "For high security events, there may be Secret Service, such as with Bill Clinton, and they will tell you how to do things."

Store Staff. Keep the store staff in the loop throughout the process. "They need to know what is going on," Kothe Nihlean said.

Authors. "Treat every author like a big author, because either one day they will be a big author or their publicist deals with a big author," Kothe Nihlean stressed.

Before you know it, the day of the event arrives. "Every event has its own karma," said Nosti. "Anything can and will happen at a given event, and the event coordinator must be able to go with the flow and respond."

Following the panel presentations, the audience was provided with a hypothetical scenario for a blockbuster event, and booksellers were given 10 minutes to come up with ideas about how best to manage the event.

For more about managing blockbuster events, ABA member booksellers can download the [Managing Blockbuster Events session handout](#) -- featuring 15 pages of information on everything from choosing a location, staffing, insurance needs, security, P.R. and marketing concerns, and more -- and an [Event Budget Worksheet](#). --[David Grogan](#)
