



Public libraries are superb places to host author events. There's thousands of them, for a start, with a wide geographical spread. They often have large amounts of floor space when compared to book shops. But, in this age of increasing competition for people's time and limited staff resources, how does a public library ensure that writer visits can be as successful as possible? That's the question *Time To Read* posed. The answers that came back all pointed to the conclusion that simply offering an author, except if they're really famous, is not enough.

In fact, what came through loud and clear is that the library needs to think of how to package the event. Perhaps the best way to explain this is by analogy. Think of it like trying to sell a sandwich, where the author is the main filling and the library is the bread. Well, that may not be enough to get people to buy the sandwich, especially as there are many other fantastic lunch options out there. So it may be better to add in some refreshments as extra fillings and - to improve the packaging, as it were - theme the event. Oh, and make sure you don't serve it at the wrong time of day. Perhaps add some music in there as background too. And, voila, you get a really nice sandwich . Or author event.

This guide is intended to share the best practice out there and to share the hard-won experience of experts so you don't have to learn on the fly. But it's not intended as prescriptive. To take the food analogy still further, choose what you want from the buffet of ideas and perhaps come back later to try something more adventurous. Oh, and let us know your ideas too so we can improve for next time.

Ian Anstice, December 2017

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## Everything is better with refreshments

Being able to have a cup of tea or a biscuit is a surprisingly important factor in some people's minds when it comes to deciding to attend an event or not. Offering refreshments adds a familiar opportunity to relax and chat into what otherwise may be an unusual event for some attending. It will also give an event an extra sense of having value if charging is necessary and the cost of a coffee can be included in that charge.

Speaking of charging, it's possible to make a profit from refreshments (especially if alcohol is concerned) but do experiment with pricing levels. For a library theatre show, people generally expect to be charged for refreshments (e.g. £1 for hot drink, £2 for glass of wine) as that is what happens at a normal theatre show. If doing an afternoon lesser-known author event then simply asking for donations may be more appropriate.



Refreshments range from the simplest (just hot drinks and juice) to offering biscuits/cakes as well to offering alcohol (makes sure you have a license) to full-on hot meals.

“We had an author of a Greek Detective series, while the author is not at all unknown tickets were a little slow to start, so I contacted a local Greek restaurant and talked them into providing authentic food at £2 a head (our tickets were only £4!). It gave the restaurant the opportunity to have their food tasted by potential diners and it also meant that they promoted our event to people that ate in a Greek restaurant so were hopefully more likely to have an interest in an event that would have an author speaking a great deal about Greece, the culture and the place! It worked really well and both the library and the restaurant benefited” **Bedford**.

Offer fish and chips for an English feel – this is good as there's always a fish and chip shop nearby. But you can also do pizza for Italian, curry for Indian etc. in the same way.

### Death by Chocolate

Cowdenbeath Library 7.30pm

Ticket price includes six different chocolate tastings and refreshments.

£9.50 (£8.00) | Book your ticket at your local library or call Cowdenbeath Library on 01383 602363

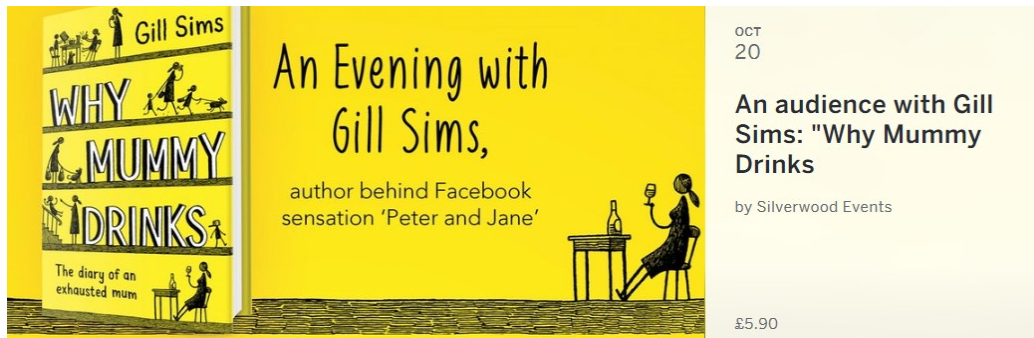
“As a service development team we started to think about what else we could offer which would attract audiences in to our libraries. “[Make A Noise In Libraries 2015](#)” was coming round and we wanted to do something a bit different which would offer an event suitable for visual impaired readers – and so *Death by Chocolate* was created. Working with a local chocolate maker we paired crime and thriller readings with bespoke chocolates. The audience listened to a short reading and then tasted the chocolate with tasting notes provided by the supplier. The audience loved it, with a demand for more like this being fed back. It would have been

wrong not to give our readers what they wanted and so the Taste of ..... series of events started. To date we've tasted gin, whisky, chocolate, baileys and our next event will be Cheese, Wine and Horror. We love reading the feedback from our audiences, but we're unsure about the request for a whisky and trampoline event.” **Fife**.

[See more in this article on Fife's public library events](#)

## Refreshments in Bolton, Oldham and Blackpool

[“We did a successful pitch for very popular blogger Gill Sims.](#) Working in partnership with Silverwood events. My colleague Anne Burns, who is a massive fan, interviewed Gill. We invited Bunbury’s of Bolton to sell wine and gin (will only do this for a decent sized audience; we had 150) and offered £5 off the price of a book” **Bolton**



“To commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Jane Austen, I booked Helena Kelly to talk about her non fiction book – Jane Austen, The Secret Radical. I worked in partnership with the local Parks department and hosted the event in a beautiful conservatory in Alexandra Park, Oldham. I hired a local business – a mother and daughter team who provided a cream tea for £5 per head. They also set each table with gorgeous china and cake stands. We charged this amount per ticket, so we broke even. I was reluctant to charge more because this was the first time we had done an author event in a park. The event sold out very quickly and worked well as the “finale” to the festival. The author was on a book tour and came for free. As suggested by the title, her book suggests Austen as much more of a radical, so naturally she ignited a lot of heated debate. I didn’t recognise most of the audience – a lot were from independent book clubs who I managed to encourage to borrow sets from the library. Helena sold around 8 copies of a *hardback* book.” **Oldham**



“We have found themed food and drink always work well! For example our launch event is usually in the “Art Deco Café” in the Park and this year was “Mystery and illusion, the art of the crime writer” We usually serve canapes and try and do a cocktail on the theme – murderous martini or similar. This launch event usually has a high price ticket (hence the drink and canapes) but is our big fundraiser too. Also on the theme of food, we usually have a cream tea afternoon – order in large cakes, author does a talk, everyone happy! Very appealing to an older lady crowd. Works with a family saga or chicklit crowd.” **Blackpool**



## Three (or four) is better than one: Panels

A panel consists of two or more authors with a moderator. The moderator can be a librarian or anyone else with an interest, including another author. Authors can be chosen (or “curated”) by the library, the publisher, author or anyone else as appropriate. Blackpool asked Elly Griffiths to choose which authors



to have and so they all knew each-other beforehand. The choice of authors should be based around a theme e.g. they're all one genre or perhaps all talking about how they got published.

The advantage of a panel are various but include (1) pooling the fans of all authors together to create a bigger number, (2) allowing a theme to be explored and (3) encouraging a conversation. Tips include:

- Encourage the authors to meet beforehand so there's no formality. Also, suggest they read a bit of each other's work as well.
- Keep the format conversational rather than asking each author to answer the same question in turn.
- Make sure the authors are ready to summarise what their book/s are about.
- Send the questions to the authors beforehand so they can think of interesting things to say

“We've had panels on female crime, writing life stories, how to get published and have an upcoming talent event on science fiction and fantasy. We find these days that audiences don't just want to hear one author speak (unless it's a very famous author). It's far better to make the offer more wide ranging and interactive. Audiences often also want to be able to learn something practical and there are many aspiring writers out there who want to hear how others got published.” *Portsmouth*

## Using technology: the joy of Skype

If you have a good enough internet connection then skyping authors has some key advantages in terms of reducing fees and avoiding travel expenses. It means it is as easy to interview a US author than someone living in the same town, vastly increasing the number of possibilities open.

- Encourage questions to be asked at one microphone so the author can see the questioner.
- Ask an author physically visiting your library if they know another author (extra bonus points if they're famous) that they can do a skype conversation with during their event.



For further info, [see this blog post](#). Adriana Trigiani even [has a video explaining how and why to do it](#).

“We had only once a full house of 30+ attendees, several of whom were in wheelchairs, for the promotion of a fiction title: *The Affair* by Gill Paul, when we also organised an interview by Skype with the actor John Gayford, who helped Paul in her research for the book “ **Ivana Curcic**

## Screenings and authors

Join up an author talk with a screening of a documentary, film or even theatre show on the same subject.

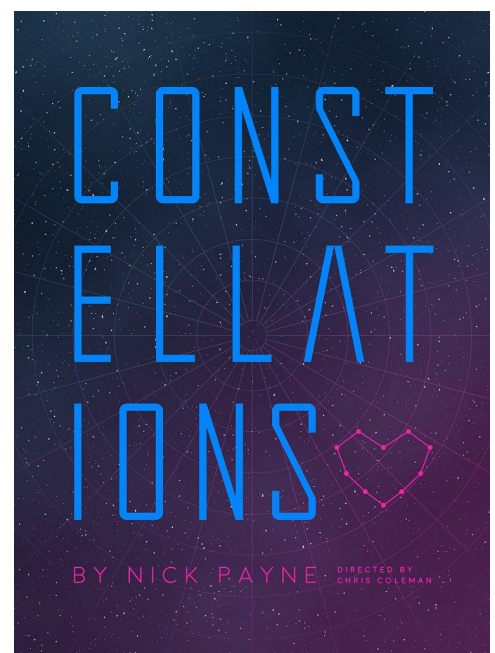
““We have done this on a couple of occasions and it has worked well. We follow our usual format when it comes to the author’s section and then follow the book signing with a screening. We hosted an event with Graham McCann who is a British Sitcom expert and he came to talk about his book about Dad’s Army. We followed the talk with a screening of “We’re Doomed” - a 60 minute BBC documentary about the making of the beloved sitcom. On another occasion, we hosted Willy Russell and followed his talk with a screening of Shirley Valentine. We do the screenings in partnership with Small Cinema – an initiative that was started by a group of young people through their love of film. This takes a lot of the hassle out of it for us because they deal with the equipment and licencing etc. It works because people feel they are getting something extra. Sometimes the author stays for the screening, and sometimes they don’t – probably because they have seen the film/documentary a thousand times. If you do the book signing before, then the author can choose if they wish to stay or not.” **Oldham**



The screening need not be cinematic—a laptop and a projector will work - as it did at the “[An Evening Without Alan Bennett](#)” event in Northwich. Indeed, the event showed that the author need not be actually present.

“In March of this year, we hosted an event with Jane Hawking followed by the theatre show Constellations by Nick Payne. Jane’s talk about being married to Stephen mirrored a lot of themes in the play and they complimented each other really well. We charged £5 for theatre tickets as part of our [live@thelibrary](#) programme. Jane’s pre show talk was free but we asked customers to book. Jane stayed for the theatre performance with her husband and really enjoyed it. We had an attendance of 90 people for the talk and 96 for the play - the vast majority attended both.

I do think Jane would have been popular on her own, especially because the film, The Theory of Everything is based on Jane’s memoir. However, there was an amazing buzz that evening – more so than with other big authors and I think we encouraged our usual theatre audiences to try our author events and vice versa. We usually only sell the author’s latest book but on this occasion, we sold a few from Jane’s back catalogue due to the popularity of the film and people may already have read her memoir. Jane sold 45 copies of her books.” **Oldham**



## Theme the event

Think about what could go well with the author or book reading in order to strengthen the theme. For example a historic fiction writer could have a history quiz added to the evening, artefacts from the local museum or pictures of the period from the local history society/archive. Dressing up is always a bonus too. If you're doing refreshments then theme them to the event e.g. Alan Bennett with Yorkshire Tea.

## Different times and days for different events

Many libraries find it harder to attract an audience for something on a Friday evening than other days. Think about who your target audience is. If it's likely to include people who work then avoid those times when they're in work e.g. weekday days or when they're likely to be doing something else e.g. Saturday morning. Even then, give workers a chance to get home. Depending on if you are in a commuter area, 6.30pm may be too early (remember they need to have tea) but 7pm appears to be ideal.

Only have an event on a Friday night if it's a big event e.g. a show or there's drink involved. Friday nights are often "special" and the event needs to be *really* good to compete. On the other hand, if the event will appeal more for senior citizens then it may be best to avoid dark evenings. So timing is a compromise between the various groups you expect to come in.



If the event can only be during opening hours, consider who best to attract and aim your promotional push accordingly, That is, it's more likely to be senior citizens or to an already established reading group.

While on the subject of days, see if you can tie in with a national "Day" if it's appropriate e.g. a horror writer at Halloween. Also, of course, get your event added on to the national publicity if it's for Black History Month, LGBT History Month, International Women's Day, National Poetry Day, Holocaust Memorial Day, World Book Night etc.

"As someone who has organised, hosted, participated or simply attended readings, it's often a combination of things, not least the right place at the right time, combined with clever promotion, that can make or break an event. Sometimes the obvious is overlooked - ghost stories at Halloween anyone?" **Friends of Carnegie Library**

## Timings

The public will appreciate knowing how long an event will last for, especially if it is at night or if there is a limit on car parking times nearby. Agree with the author the time he/she is going to speak for, add on time for any refreshments, questions and book signing. A suggested schedule could be:

"Author speaks or is interviewed (depending on their preference) for 30-45 minutes, Followed by audience Q and A - 20 mins, Book signing and informal chat with the author- 30 mins" **Oldham**

Another structure is: the main event – author talk (30 minutes to no more than one hour), Break for refreshments. This gives people a chance to meet the author over a coffee or to work out questions (20 minutes) then questions & answers. (30 minutes to 45 minutes) the book signing (30 minutes)

## Use the local community

There are lots of groups in your area that may be interested in partnership. They can offer their services in return for publicity. Examples include tying in Sci Fi/Fantasy/graphic-novels with comic shops; Spoken word events with local drama groups and Historical fiction and history research groups

“social media is a brilliant tool but networking face to face with the local community 'influencers' will always be one of the best way of bringing in new faces to the library whether it's an author event, a Fun Palace, Lego Club, Knit and natter or any activity or event” **Bedford**

“In partnership with the University of Bolton, we hosted the [Patrick Ness event](#). This was in the Live Literature series in which the University normally organises and pays for the writers, but this was one the library organised. Emma Ali co-ordinator of our young volunteers (“the Imaginators”) hosted an event with Patrick Ness & linked it in with our Live Literature series with the University. This was a very successful event. The creative writing students, staff, students of children’s literature and young people from the local schools attended. The young volunteers organised the event and helped to promote it. They also created a blog page. We are hoping another event like this in March 2018 with Young



Adult writer Alice Broadway. The Imaginators are going to use this as their Arts Award. Students of Children’s literature/with a crossover into YA, are also keen to come.” **Bolton**

“Our partners include – the [Illuminations](#); Friends Stanley Park; Family Learning team (council); Grundy art Gallery; Grand Theatre & Winter Gardens – both theatres have hosted our Timehop YA festival and supported with promotional and advertising stuff. “ **Blackpool**

## Choose your venue

The central library, especially if it is modern or not beautiful, may not be the best place for the event. Think about which libraries suits the atmosphere best for what you’re trying to promote. An older one may be ideal for a book set in Victorian times, for example. More importantly, you need a library that is interested in putting on the event. An event which is “parachuted in” is less likely to get staff involvement than one than one where the library has volunteered to host it. Email all branches with an idea and see who bites so that they feel ownership. Sometimes all available libraries are lacking in enough character. In which case, hosting the event somewhere other than a library can be useful:

“Think about what local buildings you have that can be of interest. For example, Blackpool have used the Tower and the pier. If there’s nothing so famous, simply hiring out a historic building for a horror writer etc. can work instead. Blackpool arranged a “Shopping for Words” walking tour where participants walked from place to place to meet poets/writers in various retail outlets such as a sweet shop. Also, this year at Wordpool, we hired a vintage bus and charged a rover price to be transported around three venues hosting authors, some people were on the bus for the full day, having lunch at one event, cream tea at the next and a small supper to finish! It was hard work to organise, but they enjoyed it” **Blackpool**



## Emphasise the intimacy



Often a library event won't have more than 30 people attending. Make this a selling point by saying that questions will easily be asked and there's a chance for real dialogue with the audience. Advertise as "An intimate evening with ..." or similar.

"... I always emphasized the intimate aspect of our events and thus the possibility of a dialogue with the audience ... the understanding was that the audience should have a chance to ask questions -- that it was a dialogue rather than a monologue " **Ivana Curcic**

## Name the event imaginatively

The name of an event is one of the key bits of information that a member of public will have when deciding whether to attend or not. The title needs to be both the bacon and the sizzle: it needs to tell the public what the event is (although this can be added in the subtitle) but also make them excited about it. Naming an event can be an art and repays time being spent on it.

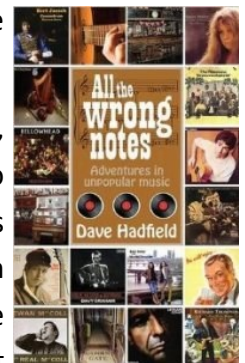
"We promote unknown fiction authors in a non-fiction way e.g. a local debut author was coming to talk about her first book, a Victorian crime novel. I know people won't come for her name as they won't have heard of her yet and won't come if I just say 'a Victorian crime novel' – so we called the event (having talked to the author about this) 'Blood, Beasts and Butterflies' and talked about her research for the novel on the publicity (Darwin, specimen collecting in far off lands, anatomists, resurrectionists) – all exciting and interesting stuff – and then said basically ps. She's written a crime novel featuring all this." **Richmond upon Thames**

## The power of music

Poetry and lesser known authors can be a tough sell, but people like music. So combine the two. Have a poet coming in with some live music being played in between. Sometimes the author/poet will know someone or you can ask your arts service, if you have one, for ideas or local music groups. Combine the readings and music with refreshments with a good theme and you should get a good crowd.

"We held a panel event of rugby league experts at Bolton linking into the Time To Read *Try Reading* promotion. Dave Hadfield (Rugby League and sports journalist) is a friend of our Head of Service and Dave's other passion is folk music. He wrote a book called "All the wrong notes." Julie wanted to have an event with Dave and wanted to know how we would promote the event.

After some thought, I recalled that my colleague Pierrette Squires, a conservator, loves folk music and has lots of contacts. I thought it would be a great idea to meet with Dave & Pierrette and plan how we could take the event forward. It was decided that we'd do an evening event. Dave was going to be in conversation with his publicist from Scratching Shed and there would be music and beer. Dave invited 2 very good folk singers and Pierrette invited fiddle players. It was a great evening. Pierrette invited people she knew, as did Dave and we also promoted it via the usual channels. We had about 80 people" **Bolton**



"but for us, it's the music which brings people in ( 100 plus at some concerts)" **Warwickshire**



## Pricing

The relationship between pricing and attendance can be counter-intuitive. A free event can sometimes attract less people than the same event charged. This is for two reasons:

- People partly measure the perceived value/desirability of an event by the price.
- People may book up for a free event and then not turn up on the night, thinking they're not losing any money by doing so. The worst case scenario with free events is that people only say they'll come as a "favour" to library staff. This can lead to fully booked up events with lots of empty seats. Charging a fee, even £2 or £3, makes the person more likely to repay their investment in the event by turning up.

"We used to do free ones but had a spate of people booking and not turning up – to the point a few years ago where one author was left standing in an empty room in tears because it was raining outside and all the booked people decided not to bother." **Richmond upon Thames**

Having decided to charge, if your authority allows this, decide on the correct pricing level. This can depend on your area. £5 is generally quite common and suggests it's a good value event, especially if refreshments are provided, without raising expectations too high, £1 or £2 may still send out the message to some people that the event is lower quality.

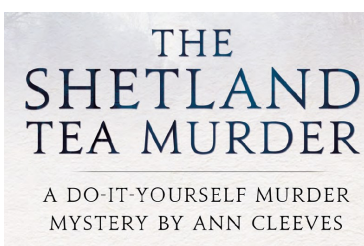
There is a danger, though, that people genuinely unable to pay will not be able to attend.

"We order books through Askews on a sale and return basis so that we make some money. Depending on whether an author is on tour, we pay a fee of up to £150 or just cover travel expenses. For big names, we have got sponsorship from local businesses" **Oldham**

## Murder Mysteries

The murder mystery tends to be popular but can be fairly intensive on staff time.

"Until recently [we have used the scripts written by Ann Cleeves](#), read out by willing staff volunteers. The



'suspects' are then interrogated by members of the audience over refreshments before deciding who the killer is. These events are relatively low cost, with the main expense being staff time. Our last murder mystery was a little different with the murder taking place in Hogwarts and the suspects provided by 'Can you catch the Killer'. This was in response to a request for adult Harry Potter themed events. Dunfermline Carnegie Library & Museum was dressed for the occasion with

catering reflecting the Harry Potter theme – who could resist a Golden Snitch cocktail? We had a full house and will be repeating the event in February. Looking back we had often talked about how do we get across to readers who have never been to an author event what to expect from one? Perhaps we have found the answer – we provide events that bring the social aspect of reading to the fore rather than asking audiences to sit and be entertained by an author." **Fife**



## Publicising the event

Having the best event in the world will not guarantee a large audience if no-one knows about it. Communication is a key part of making a successful event. See below for some examples of what to do but bear in mind that none on their own will make the event as fully attended as possible so try to go for a mix.

- (1) Recruiting the local library staff as your sales people will often be key. They're the ones who see the library users who are most likely to attend. Ensure the branch staff (and those at neighbouring libraries too) are on board. Involve the branch as soon as possible, up to and including involving them in designing the event in order to give them ownership. Branch pride is a real thing: encourage this with the event. Friendly rivalry (be careful with this though) with other branches can also be productive. Visit the library and demonstrate your interest in the event to the staff.



“While creating an attractive poster (not too much text in front) is important, there is also great merit in promoting events when talking to library users, or any chance one gets. This is a very important aspect that unfortunately does not get enough attention.” **Ivana Curcic**

- (2) Quality publicity material is very useful. Consider if you can afford professionally produced publicity material or if “in-house” produced templated posters will be good enough and not send out the wrong message. Ensure handouts are nearby to give out / people to pick up. Posters on walls (and on counters in proper stands) are still surprisingly effective.
- (3) Your library service will probably have a regular promotional email. Ensure your event is included. Ask everyone attending an event to give their email address and permission to email them for future events.
- (4) Social media. The event should always be added on to the library service Facebook and Twitter if possible but don't just rely on that. If allowed by your authority, find out the local community Facebook group (e.g. that of local town) and post on that too. Advertising on social media can be very effective. If you have a budget then you can target users, for instance on Facebook, in specific local areas and ages. Feedback from those who have done so is very positive

- (5) Online ticket ordering. This goes go hand in hand with social media as the person reading the tweet/post can then click on the link to buy a ticket rather than having to phone the branch or visit in person. This is especially so as many people check social media out of working hours, often when libraries are closed and so may not be able to order a ticket at the branch there and then. Eventbrite is the most common one used by libraries but there are other similar ones such as TicketSource and WeGotTickets.

The Eventbrite logo, featuring the word "Eventbrite" in a white, sans-serif font on an orange rounded rectangular background. A small "TM" trademark symbol is located to the right of the logo.

Some, e.g. Eventbrite, automatically add purchasers on to an email mailing list for the next time and also show who bought when.

## Publicising the Event

- (6) [Mailchimp](#) – Useful for sending out details about your event. However, some authorities block Mailchimp so check before using.
- (7) Local newspaper. Check if your local authority allows you to send press releases direct or if they need to go through the PR department. Similarly, check if you're allowed to cultivate close relations with the local newspaper as this pays dividends.
- (8) Events websites. Experiment with which ones are most used in your area. Your local newspaper will probably have one but there will probably be others too.
- (9) Reading groups are going to be a core market for any author event. Ensure you have a list of contacts for them, especially those which meet in the library.



(10) Local writers are likely to be interested in visiting authors. Find out the local writers groups in your area and make sure to let them know of any forthcoming events. Members will often attend to ask for writing or publishing advice. Portsmouth Libraries publicise to [Portsmouth Writers Hub](#) via social media.

- (11) Cross-promotion. Those attending one library event are precisely the same people who may attend another event so tell them about what your library service has forthcoming.

“I believe it is in the programming and delivery to build an audience from your big name events to take a chance on the others. We cross promote a lot at events and have seen a lot of people who came initially to see a famous name at smaller events. We also find that panel events are popular”

### Medway

- (12) Give yourself plenty of time. A major event needs to be publicised three events beforehand and a normal author event should have at least a four-week window for publicity.
- (13) Every event will often include the same list of people to contact and involve various people engaged with advertising. It may be a good idea to have a master list of what to do and who to do, that can be tailored for every event. Pick and choose from the list as to what is most appropriate and possible to do.

### With thanks to the following for their advice and examples



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