

Book Fair Tips: 6 things I'll do next time

by Chazda Albright -

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This entry is part 3 of 5 in the series [Buchmesse Experience 2015](#)

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While I've been to writer's events and book fairs before, there's always something (in fact, a lot of things) to learn.

There are also those finer details where you realize you could tweak or upgrade something in some way to make the experience better the next time you go.

This is the, "If I had known then what I know now," kind of stuff.

Here are my personal 6 Book Fair Tips, the things I wish someone had told me before I went this year.

1. I would have had cooler business cards made.

My business cards are the minimum of what they needed to be, but truth be told, they were made just one week before the fair. A rush job that was designed for me by the printer - as I wanted a QR-code for my personal writer's portfolio ([it's here](#), if you're curious) right on the front of the card, below my picture.

The picture is fine. It's the same one I use on the website here. I knew that with all the people at the fair, should someone ask for my business card, a picture of me would be important. Why? It's the easiest way to help them recall whose card it is.

Once they fly back home, they can see the card and think, “Oh yah, it’s that gal. The one who is so awesome I can hardly wait to work with her!” Just like that.

I even have a little firefly logo. Tipping my hat just a smidge to [Firefly](#), as any Browncoat would.

But... the cardstock wasn’t as thick as it probably should have been. The color pallet of my picture was too dark and a bit fuzzy. The font isn’t what I would have chosen and the text itself looks a bit blocky.

Too, nowhere does it say “Writer.” I’m a writer. But my business card just says Chazda Albright – not L. K. Chazda Albright, Writer - Teacher - Accredited Blogger.

I’m not clearly defined!

You might think I’m nitpicking. I am, you’re right. But I also know that I gave my card to *almost everyone* I met at the fair. That’s a lot of people. Was this a surprise to me? You bet. In the past, whenever I offered to give someone my card, the reply was almost always, “No thanks.” Really.

But this year’s fair was quite different. Most of the time, I didn’t need to offer my card. People asked if I had one. There was only one occasion where I offered my card and he didn’t accept it. Just one.

So gone are the days when my business card is just extra. It’s now mandatory, so I need to make it good. I want my card to reflect the quality of my writing. The card I currently have does not.

2. I would have had 3 sample drawings for *each* manuscript.

I pitched 7 of my own manuscripts and 2 others written by students of mine. Some of the manuscripts were fully illustrated, some had a few samples and some had no illustrations at all.

In the future, I’ll be sure that all the storybook projects have at least 3 sample illustrations and that only the novelty items are fully illustrated.

I know that professional wisdom and tradition in publishing suggests that you should never illustrate your storybooks. That’s true *if you submit through the mail*, but if you meet people in the industry and are looking them in the eye, they often ask to see what you’ve got.

In fact, those are the words I often heard: either, “What have you got?” or, “What have you brought me?”

There are some cases where I have a very particular publisher in mind for a particular manuscript. When that’s the case, I tell them that – in which case I really did bring the manuscript for them especially.

3. I’d have researched the attending agents much earlier.

I would have researched the attending agents before the fair (months, or perhaps a year in advance), and contacted them via email about my work. That way, I might have been able to treat an agent to a dinner or

breakfast meeting.

It's important to me that I get to know my agent(s) on a more personal level. As it now stands, my desired schedule is a year behind.

I'm now contacting agents I won't be able to meet until next year at another fair, which means I'll meet them either at the [Bologna Children's Book Fair in April](#), or the [Frankfurter Buchmesse in October](#).

So why didn't I do it? I just didn't know!

It used to be that I could bump into an agent. Every stone's throw away: agent. They were all over the place. Not anymore. Now what they do is even *more* secret.

There is now a new floor (an entire floor) at the Buchmesse just for literary agents and scouts. That section is top secret – no kidding. When you take the escalator up to the agents' floor, there is an open space with a café and then a long-stretching walled-off area.

That's where they all hide, behind the wall. It's where Q is, I'm certain of it. The entrance is guarded.

I approached the guards with false confidence, thinking: "it doesn't hurt to ask, right?"

Only if they have you in a headlock. It didn't go that far.

You must show proof that you are an agent or proof that you have an appointment. Otherwise, you must leave.

That's what I was told when I asked if I could take a look. It was like something out of a movie: a young man with a thick German accent says to me, "You must show proof you are agent or proof you have appointment. Otherwise, you must go."

I *so* wanted a secret agent badge! The guy next to me had one. He drop-flashed his wallet just like an agent would and was nodded through.

It was cool. I smiled at the guards, muttering a nonchalant thanks and sorry, and backed up.

Curious, I decided to walk all the way around it, *the agent wall*. I wondered if it would change somewhere around the corner or if it would stretch endlessly white. I wondered if there was another, secret door. How big was this site?

You cannot see or hear anything from the other side of the wall other than the continuously busy hum of many, many voices. And printers and I think I heard some fax machines.

Not that I was trying to eavesdrop or anything. I will never know if the wall changes color or if there is another door.

Before I could get halfway down the hall, a security guard waved me to "get away from there, come back

and then leave.” It was pretty clear. I didn’t want to be tackled to the floor. I had a coffee date with an artist, Konrad Algermissen and couldn’t be late for that.

Ah yes, the wall was calling to me. Maybe next year I’ll be able to drop-flash my official secret appointment with an agent. I’m working on that.

4. I’ve come to realize that I’m not nearly tech-savvy enough.

As a consequence of my being a fuddy duddy writer who still uses a stick-shaped thing called a pen and sort of thinly pressed material called paper, I found my shoulders pulled down by the end of the day.

As a writer, when it comes to an event like the Buchmesse, I have no anchor. No booth, no table – no surface to rest my bag and no chair to pull up and sit on.

I am nomadic, constantly moving around. If the person I’m talking with is standing, so am I. If they’re sitting, they often offer a seat but not always.

My silly bag. It holds everything I need to get into the fair and make my pitches, but I learned to hate that thing by the end of the day. With all the gadgets on the market, I’ve got to see what I can do to get rid of the extra weight. Besides, it will look much cooler when I can go back to the agents’ floor.

No more paper manuscripts. I was carrying far too much paper. I’m going to see about getting a smart phone or perhaps an ebook reader, and show a few art samples on that. If they ask for the manuscript, I can just email it to them. Like a normal, modern person probably would.

I really value my pad of paper and my pens. Some people smoke, some drink. I write. It’s how I function and at the crazy Buchmesse, it’s what enabled me to keep everything straight in my mind. I took notes on who I saw, what I pitched to them and what happened. Follow-up action? Made notes of that.

Without my scribbings, the whole event would be little more than a blur by now. It was just so much!

I’m going to see what my options are, how I might find some kind of app that allows me to write down notes on a smart phone. I’ll see. [Definitely something](#) to test out.

5. I would have scheduled my time into 5-minute segments.

I now know that I don’t have nearly enough time to do everything I’d like to do at the Buchmesse. Well, I knew that going into it – but being there and actually doing it is another thing.

On the first day of the fair, I was so busy and so excited, I forgot to eat lunch. At a few minutes to 3pm my hunger pains kicked in with a vengeance, leaving me incapable of formulating a cohesive sentence.

Because I had to eat right *at that moment*, I had to miss out on a publisher Q&A Panel I was keen to see.

What's more, I also had to allow myself a sort of reboot period as my body worked to digest the food.

I was essentially worthless for an entire hour.

If I break it all down into 5-minute periods, then I can realistically say how many I'll need for a given publisher. Maybe 15 minutes, or three of my 5-minute blocks.

Very importantly, my schedule will need to include coffee breaks (where I can take notes) and a lunch break (so that I won't forget to eat and then nearly pass out from hunger).

I can also schedule my meetings and any special presentations I want to see, and plot those out as necessary. While I *did* have a schedule for each day and many notes on who I should see on that given day, I neglected to plan breaks.

That snuck up on me. Next time, I'll know better.

6. I would have allotted a larger budget for the coat check.

Also, I now know to never check my coat at the first possible location. Instead, there are coat checkers everywhere. Always check nearest the hall where you'll be working the next couple of hours.

Because there are so many outside events, it's worth it (and necessary, really) to check and uncheck your coat several times a day. The fair is expansive, involving several buildings (each three stories high) and a very large, central courtyard that holds a large tent with televised interviews, a large stage for live concerts and several food stands.

To move from the hot interior to the cold, wet courtyard for either a presentation or to visit a food stand is unwise without a coat.

That's €2 for each time you hang your hat. I generally checked my coat once or twice a day, but it would have been nicer to check it about 5 times a day. There were several times I had to go outside into the cold Autumn weather without my coat because I needed the money for food or drink.

Next time, I'll budget €10 a day for checking my coat. It's expensive, but the alternatives are really impractical if you want to work the fair the full week:

- needing to carry a heavy winter coat, hat and scarf inside a bustling, hot book fair (and ending up with one long, really sweaty arm), or
- freezing my tushie off whenever I need to go out to the courtyard.

These are the things I would have done differently - if I had known then what I know now. It will absolutely inform how I handle future book fairs (and other writer events).

I can hardly wait for next October already. I really want to see the other side of the agents' wall!

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Keep creating, no matter what.

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