

BETTER BOOKSELLERS Together

Gain store profile, customer trust and increased sales by collaborating with other stores.

By Mark Leslie Lefebvre

Collaboration and sharing are two great side benefits of attending CBA's national conference. Last year's CBA Summer Conference allowed attending members an opportunity to learn first-hand from their colleagues. For example, booksellers learned dynamic display-building skills from merchandising maven Eleanor LeFave, and also heard from a wonderful panel of participants about great ideas and activities that worked for them when it came time to promote their "shop local" events.

But, as wonderful as the networking and sharing that occurs each year when CBA members are given a chance to congregate, chat and engage one another in their passion for bookselling, collaboration and sharing can take place all year long. And it can reap some tremendous rewards.

Working together during day-to-day activities, bookstores have been able to become stronger and offer their customers more.

The first time I can recall the concept of two booksellers collaborating would be in my own neck of the woods. Bryan Prince Bookseller in Hamilton and A Different Drummer Books in Burlington, Ontario have regularly partnered when it comes to hosting local author events, particularly larger events,

commanding bigger name authors and venues beyond the walls of their bookstores.

At first it might seem counter-intuitive to have to share a local event—particularly one with a big-name author, with another retailer. But the execution is absolute genius, because this type of collaboration offers several things. First, it allows each of the stores to merge their investment of both time and resources. Shared are the responsibilities of investing in a venue, purchasing stock and the attribution of staff time in planning, setting up and running an event. These are investments that can easily eat up a lot of scarce resources. Working together, they are able to split the costs and lean on one another where needed.

Having two well-respected booksellers collaborating on an event is also attractive to a publisher or event organizer because it means there will be two mostly unique customer pools attracted to it. So, in the eyes of the publicist, the promotional efforts are doubled in having two local venues sharing information with their customers about the function—bookstores that then have a competitive advantage against others in the region whenever publishers are seeking a bookseller to host a local event.

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laborating in such a way are cut in half, so, then, are the profits reaped from the event. However, attracting bigger name authors with wider audiences in larger venues typically results in more book sales and a greater pool of funds to split.

Beyond that, store owners Bryan Prince and Richard Bachmann seem to recognize that it's not always about margins or profits—much of the success comes from establishing a concrete market share. By working together, these two booksellers have put themselves in a desirable position and strengthened each of their store's reputations.

Collaboration, of course, doesn't need to be event-based. Sometimes there are specialties that one bookstore offers (in terms of staff, system or even physical location), that can be shared with a nearby bookstore neighbour.

The University of Alberta Bookstore was the first in Canada to own an Espresso Book Machine (a machine that can print and bind a perfect bound book in a matter of minutes). They have used this POD machine to produce textbooks to save students money. But they also extended a hand to a bookstore just a few hours drive south. When the University of Calgary Bookstore had a textbook adoption requiring local POD capabilities, the books were printed for

them at the University of Alberta Bookstore. U of Calgary students saved money on their textbook purchases, the publisher increased sales and each of the two bookstores made a small bit of margin from the exchange.

Campus bookstores have long collaborated with one another in this manner, either through campus-specific organizations such as the CCRA or CSC or independently. In October 2009, the University of Alberta, University of Waterloo and McMaster University bookstores, all owners of the above-mentioned Espresso Book Machines, combined resources to produce an anthology printed at their stores. They pooled their funds to pay professional rates for Canadian authors, such as Kelley Armstrong, Julie E. Czerneda, Nancy Kilpatrick, Susie Moloney and Edo van Belkom, to write original chilling tales set on campuses across Canada. The book's introduction was written by Robert J. Sawyer, Canada's Dean of Science Fiction.

The book, *Campus Chills*, was launched at these three locations in Edmonton, Hamilton and Waterloo as well as at two other stores, Dalhousie University Bookstore in Halifax and Algonquin College Bookstore in Ottawa, featuring all 13 of the book's contributors.

Hazel Lyder, co-owner of The Downtown Bookstore in Owen Sound, Ontario, has been hosting a local writers' group at her store for over two years, meeting every second Thursday. When the group wanted to take their writing to the next level, the bookstore produced a book of their writing called, aptly enough, *Every Second Thursday*, as a way to celebrate the bookstore's third anniversary and this diverse group of writers.

Lyder's collaboration with writers in the community has been an ongoing community-strengthening event. "It's really important to be connected to the writing community," she says. But the production of the book was also collaborative in that it was printed on the Espresso Book Machine at Titles McMaster University Bookstore.

Collaborating doesn't necessarily have to be with another bookstore. There are plenty of examples of booksellers partnering with other local businesses and creating a healthy cross-over of their cus-

tomers base—many of which emerged at last summer's CBA Shop Local session. For example, Susan Chamberlain of The Book Keeper in Sarnia, Ontario has, for special events, partnered with a neighbouring coffee shop, purchasing coffee for the first 300 café customers, who then receive with their free coffee, a note stating that "The Book Keeper has bought your coffee today" and a coupon for her store. This not only immediately

tion with respect to all local arts-based events, creating a tighter sense of community spirit and trust.

Or how about the small things such as keeping the phone numbers of all local booksellers handy to give out to customers? That way, when a customer comes in looking for something you don't have it in stock, you can offer to call a neighbouring bookstore to see if they have it. You accomplish two things

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creates a strong sense of goodwill and community spirit, but it also strengthens her ties to another business.

Similarly, Lee Trentadue, owner of Galiano Island Books in BC, has forged relationships with several other local businesses in her small island community, including a local inn who offers event space for the bookstore in return for a bookstore discount to the inn's customers. Like Chamberlain, Trentadue has given a neighbouring business reason to have her store top of mind when it comes to making recommendations to their own customers. That is an incredible kind of market-share building with an initial cost, but a long-term and continually growing reward.

Bookstores often put up community-based posters for local theatre groups or musicians who are performing in their area. But wouldn't it also make sense for a local bookstore to take that one step further and advertise events taking place in the community and at other local bookstores as well? Doing so would offer their customers quick and easy informa-

with that: You give the customer what they were looking for, and you strengthen ties with a neighbouring store.

Queen's University Campus Bookstore has been doing something like that for years by listing for students *all* book-buying options available (whether it's the book carried in their store, the free version listed online at Project Gutenberg or the book listed on the Chapters/Indigo website or on Amazon).

Customers already know all these things exist, so why try to make it hard for them? Chris Tabor, director of the Queen's campus bookstore, saw sales increase from making such an offering. Sure, you lose some customers to lower pricing, but you gain a huge degree of trust with your customers. And when your customers trust you as the place to get real answers, they'll think of you first.

The beautiful thing about the concept of collaboration is that it can be as simple or as complex as each party is willing to make it. What other kinds of collaborations are possible? That's up to you. 