

Young and In Love with Bookselling

By Emily Sinkins

CBA's first Chase Paymentech Young Bookseller of the Year talks about her passion for the trade and her predictions for the future of industry

Since CBA debuted the Chase Paymentech Young Bookseller of the Year Award this spring, several booksellers have asked the question: “Why didn’t you think of this sooner?” Perhaps, to borrow from our National Conference tagline, we’ve been too focused on the “survive” and “thrive” aspects and not enough on the “revive” when it comes to recognizing achievement in bookselling. Now, as the industry is called upon to adapt and reinvent itself, it’s more important than ever to spotlight the efforts of the next generation of booksellers—those who bring new ideas to the field; those who will navigate the bricks-and-mortar bookstore into the future.

This new award was designed to recognize a bookseller under the age of 30 who exemplifies all the tried-and-true best bookselling practices while introducing innovative new approaches. Our inaugural recipient of this award—Mandy Brouse from Words Worth Books in Waterloo, Ontario—is a prime example of how the traditional model is enhanced by creative marketing and tech savvy.

An employee of Words Worth Books for nearly five years—who worked at a Kitchener, Ontario used bookstore for three years prior to that—Brouse, 28, has experience in many facets of bookselling, but it’s her natural talent for handselling combined with her facility for social networking that caught the attention of the judging panel. These abilities were encouraged and developed at Words Worth, where she recalls being given a great deal of responsibility right from the outset and where her co-workers share a passion for reading and a desire to communicate that excitement with customers whenever they can. When it comes to staff, says Brouse, Words Worth “attracts the kind of person who comes on in a full-time, serious way.” They possess diverse reading interests—each member

an expert in a number of genres, with very little overlap between them—and, notes Brouse, “different strengths that complement each other as well.”

As far as what Brouse likes to read—her tastes, like any die-hard reader’s, changing all the time—right now it’s non-fiction and graphic novels. The books she’s most passionate about, however, are those that comprise a “teen genre” that appeals equally to twentysomethings—like the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* series. As she puts it, “Books that cross over the interest divide between adults and teenagers are a great interest of mine ... Frank Portman, for instance, is someone I can recommend to any guy my age and know he’ll like it.”

Brouse has channeled her enthusiasm for this “crossover” reading into a teen blog called *Edge of Seventeen*, which since its inception eight months ago has

the blog is “getting a lot of attention pretty quickly,” Words Worth Books Event Coordinator Bronwyn Addico makes no bones about Brouse’s success with this initiative “The majority of our teen customers are loyal to our store because of Mandy’s teen blog.”

Brouse also contributes to what she refers to as “The Pet Blog for Employees of Words Worth Books,” otherwise known as *How to Furnish a Room*. This is where the personalities and recommendations of the full team are seen. “Six of us,” she explains, “do reviews on the blog.” Brouse also posts regularly on the store’s Facebook page, where she, along with her colleagues, shares information about events they’re involved with, articles or blogs they’re reading, or the publishing world at large—something readers are more interested in than people inside the industry tend to think, says Brouse. It

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attracted about 220 followers and gets roughly 100 hits everyday. She was well aware of the “slew of teen blogs online,” including popular American-based ones like *Bookshelves of Doom*, but wanted to create one that featured Canadian content and offered her an opportunity to connect with other Canadian bloggers. “I wanted to see what I could do, as a handseller by nature, to create that community.” While she rather modestly states,

comes down to “letting people know locally what’s happening in the world of literature.”

What becomes clear in speaking with Brouse is that profile-building comes not from using social media as much as possible, but using it as strategically as possible. That means knowing the style and type of information best suited to each online venue, as well as the audience for each—all of which she possesses keen

insight into. When I ask her for a few easy first steps for a bookstore with a website only who wants to attract more of a web following, Brouse says, “Facebook and a blog combined make a strong online presence.” Both afford “an excellent way of connecting casually with your community.” A blog, she finds, will attract more teens, while Facebook is more apt to attract their parents. Both can potentially grow your customer base; they may not be the kind of customers who visit the store regularly, but those who “keep you in mind and know what’s happening in your store,” and who, as a result, occasionally come in to buy a book or place an order via the website. While she acknowledges she’s lucky to work at a store with several staff to share the social networking duties, she believes that, even in a small store, posting to sites like Facebook needn’t be “a time-sucker.” As booksellers, she notes, you’re already receiving lots of information from publishers or book media—the kind of thing you can post links to while adding some commentary (just a sentence or two) of your own.

Developing that on-line presence requires work, of course, but Brouse approaches it “more as a reader than from a business perspective.” In many respects, it’s merely a reflection of the personal passion for books possessed by all your store’s staff—the handselling in-store extended on-line. And, Brouse nimbly makes these reader connections in both worlds. Bronwyn Addico illustrates: “Mandy has been so successful at hand-selling that one of our customers called us to ask if Mandy would choose two books a month to mail to her grandchildren. She gave Mandy the names and ages of the two children and said she trusted whatever Mandy would send them, requesting we charge her credit card for the sale and shipping. The kids have adored Mandy’s choices and have been requesting other titles based on Mandy’s picks.” This is an invaluable skill that simply can’t be taught.

Nor, really, can the kind of imagination that Brouse puts into her marketing initiatives—the contests and promotions that generate blog and website traffic and that have helped to more than double e-newsletter subscribers. It’s no wonder that marketing is where Brouse’s ultimate

career aspirations lie. For now, though, she is more than happy working full-time at Words Worth—in no small part owing to the level of innovation that Words Worth inspires. “We happen to have amazing bosses who let us think up new ideas.” Staff meetings are like “a roundtable meeting of the minds,” she says. “The store is always evolving, constantly at the fore ... I love that innovation and I love the feedback we get from



Bookseller of the Year Mandy Brouse accepts her award from Chase Paymentech’s Vincent Roopchan.

customers when we do something new and in a new way.” She’s heartfelt in her desire to connect books with readers, particularly younger ones. “Reading is so important for kids and especially teens,” she says, “I would like to continue being a part of that in some way.”

She may be a Young Bookseller, but she’s certainly got a lot of value to offer the community of booksellers, as evidenced by the high ratings received by the “Finding the Hidden Money” session that she and Addico led during CBA’s National Conference. She believes the concept—finding new sources of revenue—is one that will become even more important in the future. You can’t just wait for customers to come in, she notes, “You need to get out there and find out what you can be doing in a very active way.”



At her first ever National Conference, she enjoyed making connections with other booksellers, “sharing the tricks of the trade with each other,” and “being part of a larger whole.”

Now, embraced by the larger bookselling community and representing a new generation of booksellers, does she share widespread industry trepidation about what’s on the horizon? “I think that’s pretty much the norm ... to worry about what’s coming,” she acknowledges, but she thinks booksellers are well-equipped to

handle whatever comes their way. “Any challenges we’ve faced we’ve come up with a solution to.” As for the big bogey monster of the moment, Brouse says, “I don’t worry that e-books will eclipse print books.” She believes people will buy both and that publishers will “find ways to continue the passion for print” while booksellers will achieve a viable solution for selling e-books in bookstores. And, I have to say, hearing her talk about books and the business of selling them with such excitement; discovering that younger generations—even the most tech-obsessed among them—are eagerly engaged in reading and literary discourse; and glimpsing the future of the industry through the eyes of someone as passionate about it as she is prepared to turn it on its head to see it survive, I feel pretty optimistic myself. **CBA**