



Ideas that Work: What's the Best Advice You've Ever Received?
Heartland Fall Forum 2017

Kate Schlademan, Learned Owl

Do not fall in love with your inventory.

Nina Barrett, Bookends & Beginnings

Do not hang on to people on your staff that aren't working for you thinking it's going to get better. It's not. One of the hardest things about owning a bookstore is also being HR. It's hard, but learning to let people go is important to the health of your store and to avoiding a staff poisoning situation. It's like a break up. "As much as I love you personally, it just isn't working out."

Suzy Takacs, The Book Cellar

The best advice I receive is from Sue Boucher. She told me to get a bookkeeper. I thought I couldn't afford it and had to do it myself, but having one is the best thing ever. They check up on every penny you've spent and earned and that attention to detail makes a huge difference to my store.

Emily Hall, Main Street Books

My dad once told me great advice. "You have to resign your position as general manager of the universe." To me, that means I focus on the things I can accomplish--focus on the things I can do today, and there will always be another day to do everything else.

Jamie, Women and Children First

Don't freak out and think you've performed poorly if one person messes things up. When one customer orders a ticket wrong or whatever, remember it was only 1 of 500 customers and it's the anomaly, not the norm, letting it slide more easily off your back.

Jessilynn Norcross, Mclean and Eakin

We all have customers who get way too up close and personal. Here's what you do. You take a step back, but leave one foot where it was--and they can no longer get too close to you.

Pamela Klinger Horn, Excelsior Bay Books

After taking an excellent social media class, I was reminded that posts animals always get more traffic than those without, so I post the ARCs and books I'm reading with my dogs. It's a successful approach, and authors often say they know they made it when their book is pictured with my dogs.

Not sure who said this

People will judge you by the company you keep. Curate all of your store's associations, even in social media feeds. Watch out for spammers, people who purchase followers, etc., and don't follow anyone who isn't posting high-quality content.

Jessilynn Norcross, Mclean and Eakin

Frequent customers expect you to remember their name. Someone taught me the value of saying "Hey you!" when someone walks in the door, and invariably the person thinks you said their name. It's amazing and it works every single time.

Sarah, Pioneer Bookshop



Don't take every customer personally. Sometimes it's them, not you. That person might be having a bad day. They may have come into the store just to show off their breadth of knowledge of novels. If those people walk out of the store without a book, it's OK.

Rick DeVoe, Fair Trade Books

People will always remember how you made them feel. We carry lots of used books. Every time a customer comes into the store for the first time, we ask them a bit about what they like to read, and gift them one free book of our choice that we think they will like. It's our tradition. The experience makes them feel special. We say, "We do ask you one thing. We ask that you say out loud 'books make great gifts.'"

Shelley Olsen, Paperback and Pieces

The woman I bought my store from gave me the best advice. She said you have to carry something more than just books. You have to carry a nice array of sidelines to help you financially.

Harriet, Loganberry Books

On International Women's Day, we shelved all the books written by men backward. The result was astounding and slanted the picture of our store toward one of white privilege. The act went viral nationally and I learned two important things. 1) There's lots of ugly trolls out there who are not local and who do not read, so don't waste your time on damage control with them, and 2) the national viral news cycle is extremely short, so don't get too wrapped up in it. Respond to as many as you feel necessary, but it will be over before you know it.

Bridget Piekarz, sales rep at Random House and former bookseller

Touch the books. Whatever you do, touch the books. Straighten them, alphabetize them. Knowledge about your inventory will sink into your brain and you will really understand what you carry and where everything is. You can find things for customers without having to go to the computer and it's like magic.

Rebecca George, Volumes Bookcafe

My staff is weird in a glorious way. Our most successful social media stuff is highlighting how weird we are. Book lovers are equally strange and love it. Often, our most successful events are not book events. 100 people showed up to view Obama's farewell speech. Our monthly comedy night gets 60-70 people every time. Lego animation event with adults and drinks. All these are great non-book events that really create community.

Jill Miner, Saturn Booksellers

Join your regional association. It's one of the best things I ever did for my store, and being on the board was awesome. Booksellers are super smart. Take advantage of each other.

Judith Kissner, Scout & Morgan Books

We carry used and new books, and when I started, I was fortunate enough to have mentoring time with a veteran. She told me it's just as important to let you customers know you also buy used books in addition to selling them—and also that you have to reject a lot of books, maybe even 80 percent of them to have a truly great selection. Whenever someone says "You have such nice books," she thinks back to that veteran.

Mike Gustafson, Literari



As we opened our store, we took a vision writing class from Zingerman's, the famous deli in Ann Arbor. We picked a day in the future 5 years from now and wrote down everything that we see happening in the store on that day--ambiance, customers, the overall look, title selection, amenities, etc. It turned out to be a great way to get all staff on the same page. I did the exercise with Hilary, my partner, and the actual visceral experience we envisioned synced up. We ask our employees to do it, and it's a super way to get to a common point and allows everyone to see the cathedral you want to build. You read it out loud and it makes it come true. Zingerman's has some literature on how to do it. (Google "Zingerman's Visioning" and you can find it.)

Kristen Sandstrom, Apostle Islands Booksellers

It's okay not to read the bestsellers because you don't have to read them to sell them. One of our customers commented, "You always have something else, once we've read the more popular titles" Permit yourself not to read them and instead read lesser known titles, and you'll sell more over time.

Bob Dobrow, Zenith Bookstore

We're a new store, so my previous year was spent doing nothing but getting advice. Ask for it. Booksellers are such a great community. Everyone is willing and able, so ask for advice. We couldn't have done what we did without all the great wisdom from everyone we met along the road. Specifically, get a mentor. I followed Judith Kissner around for the day, asking questions, and it was the best day I spent getting detailed and useful advice.

Diana, Lake Forest Book Store

When creating events, look to your community. Some of our best events have come together because someone in our community has an expertise, such as a meditation expert we hosted who brought in a whole new group of customers we don't often have. Host pop-up events. We had a hygge pop up, sold candles, blankets, etc., and it as very successful.

Sandy, Prairie Path Books

When someone comes in looking for something specific and you don't have it, say "when do you need it?" This opens up the conversation, and if you ask who it is for, if it's a gift, you can help them find something else that might work. Also, she feels like she has no male customers. How does she get more?

Cynthia Compton, 4 Kids Books & Toys

To get male customers, do a promotion called "we're dad's best friend." Create a Father's Day registry to get guys in the door to register the 5 books they'd like to get. Give them a coupon.

Liz, The Book Celler

Look at your fellow booksellers and stores around you as community, and not just as competition. If there's a snafu, other stores can help you out, provide missing books, etc. Plus, you just want people buying books whenever they can.

Arlene Lynes, Read Between the Lynes

If you don't stock a book, don't say "Can I order that for you?" People don't want to impose on you. Instead, say "that book will be back in the store on xxx, so can I set aside a copy for you?" This small change makes a big difference.

Someone on the staff of Mclean and Eakin



I'm an avid nonfiction reader, and the average reader of these titles is typically older, and when they see me, they sort of laugh when I ask if I can help them out. (They profile her and assume she can't help them.) Don't get discouraged. Keep asking them, and then you will prove your knowledge and they will grow to trust you.

Someone on the staff of Saturn Booksellers

I have some advice for bookstore employees. Jill Miner always tells us, "And by we, I mean you." Don't wait for the direction. Just do it. Be a leader and get the work done.

Tom Lowry, Lowry's Books

I love hiring young people, managing them, watching a young person grow up and mature, growing more confident over time. I have a plaque on the wall called the employee hall of fame. The way to get on the plaque is to be hired in college or high school. At this point, I have the children of some of the people on the plaque working with me now. It's a point of pride and some people have a goal to make it to the plaque.

Also, there's always a silver lining in mundane tasks. When you do returns, you get tired of the stacks being on the floor for too many days, but someone will always buy those books. Customers love those random stacks. We always mark them down because it saves me time and money, and the customer feels a sense of gratitude.

Jessica Peterson White, Content Bookstore

Advice regarding downtown holiday business district festivals. Northfield's has been going on for 15 years. Remember to be patient and keep at it. Find an organization that can be the sponsor so that the event isn't totally grassroots or all on you, like a chamber of commerce, anyone willing to organize volunteers, etc. Get those volunteers to beautify downtown. We get a small army of high school kids to place luminaria around. Get larger companies with deeper pockets to do something in a common space, block off street with reindeer or wagon rides, so that merchants aren't carrying all the weight. Over time, many businesses will buy into it.

Kris Kleindeinst, Left Bank Books

In the life of a bookstore owner, there are hard times, bad news, Amazon, etc. I often think, why do we even have February? The most important thing that keeps me going during a lack of cash flow is remembering, as long as I open the door, someone will come in and give me money, and as long as that happens, you're gonna be ok.

Tom Lowry, Lowry's Books

I'm not that great at displays and merchandising, so one of my friends made flower pots that look like a stack of books. Everyone asks about it. Steal the idea and make front of your doorway pretty. Ask for some help from your talented friends.

Kelly Estep, Carmichael's Bookstore

We did this exercise at Winter Institute. Create a deck of cards with meaningful bookstore-related words on it. Pick words that describe your business and why you are in it. Do this with your entire staff, asking each person to pick three words. It's a great reminder of the personality of your store and also why you come to work every day.

* * *