

## *A Referral Program Pays Big Dividends*

by **Stephanie Bond**

There is a particular store where I usually shop for my husband's clothes—the location is convenient, and the business typically boasts a good selection. The last time I was in the store, I was looking for something specific, something the store didn't carry. The salesperson surprised me by asking if I'd checked another men's store across the street—I hadn't. He thanked me for checking his store first, then he called the other store to see if they had what I was looking for. They did, and I was grateful the salesman had narrowed my search. The next time I'm shopping for men's clothing, I'll definitely return to the first store.

Contrast that experience with the last time I was in a bookstore and asked for a book that wasn't in stock. The salesperson was apologetic, and guessed at when they might get in another shipment. He also offered to special order the title, although he couldn't guarantee when it might arrive. This bookstore was part of a small independent chain, so I asked if another location might have the book in stock. He shrugged and said he wouldn't know unless he called, and he was just too busy—perhaps I should call them when I returned home.

Are you cringing? The first salesperson was apparently more interested in fostering a long-term customer than closing a short-term sale. And since you the bookseller are not only competing with traditional bookstores down the street, but also with airports, grocery stores, drugstores, discount stores, warehouse stores, and on-line mega stores, can you see the value in fostering long-term customers? One way to do just that is to develop an aggressive (and reciprocal) referral program with other booksellers in your area.

Visit a couple of competing booksellers in your area and broach the idea of reciprocal referrals. If the owner/manager agrees, each store's employees will need to be informed of the program, and the phone number for the referral store(s) posted for convenient access. Don't forget to promote the referral program with posters that read, "If we don't have your book, we'll find a bookstore that does!" Consider printing referral slips (or use the back of bookmarks or business cards) for writing down the name of the book and the salesperson who made the referral call for the customer to take with her. If you give the customer something tangible, she's more likely to follow through on picking up the reserved book.

You might take the referral program a step farther and collaborate with other indies in your area to have bookmarks and/or flyers printed with each store's name and specialty. A reciprocal referral program will not only ingratiate your customers to you, but will keep those customers walking through the doors of traditional bookstores—a healthy habit to encourage.

And who knows? After the barriers of adversarial competition are broken down, you and your fellow booksellers might brainstorm other programs where synergy would enable each of you to do things you wouldn't be able to do on your own. ~**SBond**

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