

Growing Tomorrow's Customer Base

by Stephanie Bond

By the time most people reach adolescence, their reading habits and general attitude about books are already established, depending on several factors:

Role models: If a child's parent(s) read, chances are better that they, too, will become readers. Or if another authority figure, such as a teacher, encourages reading outside of schoolwork, a child is more likely to develop into a reader.

Ability: If a child isn't a "good" reader, or hasn't learned comprehension skills, reading will be a frustrating rather than a rewarding exercise.

Availability: To become a habitual reader, a child must have access to books either through their home, a library, or a bookstore.

Distractions: Kids have more extracurricular activities than ever before, and more ways to spend their limited leisure time, including watching television and movies, listening to music, and surfing the Internet. Reading is a solitary activity that requires a longer attention span than is fostered in many homes.

Previous experience: If children are presented with reading material that is inappropriate to their reading level or uninteresting to them personally, they are less likely to associate reading with entertainment.

In this age of digital gee-whizardry, the task of attracting young readers to your store to buy a plain old book might seem daunting, yet if bookstores aren't proactive in growing readers, tomorrow's customer base will literally disappear. The success of the Harry Potter franchise has shown that kids are receptive to books and authors who find a way to engage their imagination through mass marketing, but how does a bookseller turn a single series phenomenon into a lifelong reading habit? By addressing the factors listed above in whatever capacity you and your staff can.

Role models: Posting signs or advertisements such as "Have you read to your kids today?" will remind reading parents that it's never too early to start reading to children. Appeal to a parent's desire for their children to succeed: "Students with top SAT scores have one thing in common—they *read*." And think of ways to reach parents who themselves have gotten out of the habit of reading—placing ads in the food court or adjacent restaurants? Passing out coupons at school sporting events?

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Ability: Consider offering an after-school program with a story-teller who teaches phonics while entertaining kids. Or work with local schools to set up a summer reading list with prizes to kids who read consistently or improve their reading skills.

Availability: Make sure your bookstore is kid-friendly, and encourage customers to bring their children on their next visit. Part of the fun of reading is *choosing* one's own book to read!

Distractions: A savvy bookseller must know how to merchandise effectively in order to compete with flashing lights and interactive games. Go to the source—hire a teen who reads avidly to assist young customers. Or set up a teen advisory panel and ask what they do and don't like about your store and your product selection. For instance, do they resent shopping in the “children's” department? Do you, instead, need to set up a “young adult” or “high school” section?

Previous experience: Retraining a literate non-reader to read is perhaps the most difficult task facing teachers and booksellers. These kids (and adults) are not likely to wander into a bookstore on their own, so you have to think outside the box. Use clever non-book displays that appeal to a younger crowd. (How about vintage skateboards or live creatures in your window?) You might even consider selling outside of the four walls of your store—set up a sidewalk kiosk, or instead of waiting for the crowds to come to you, take your books to the crowds by setting up a booth at events where teens might gather.

Above all, be persistent. Part of the strategy in breaking through the clutter of advertising and reaching out to young readers is repetition. If you set up a teen reading group or establish a recommended young adult reading list, it might take a while for it to catch on. Stay the course. Remember—growing tomorrow's readers is a long-term investment that you can't afford *not* to make. ~**SBond**