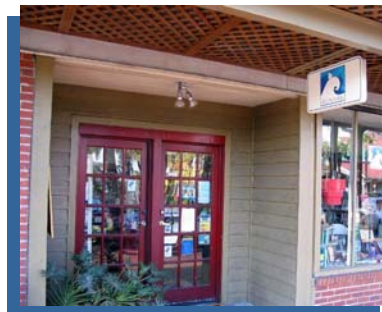


My Life as a Bookstore Owner

By Rona Brinlee, THE BOOKMARK



I have owned a bookstore for over 12 years, and during that entire time, I have never been bored. Contrary to the belief of my customers, I also don't get to sit around and read all day. In fact, I've never read at work.

I am constantly reminded of the old adage about the best laid plans... And while some days it seems my "to do" list gets completely changed or ignored, there is a certain rhythm to the day, the week, the month, and the seasons. Much of this is determined by interactions with others. These "others" include customers, publishers, authors, the media, and ad reps.

Some things are done daily. I either run errands before we open at 10 am or get in at 9 to get some work done. It seems whatever time I arrive, the phone starts ringing. I was fortunate to have a major crash the first week after I bought the store, so backing up the computer is now an everyday necessity. (This came in handy when the hard drive on our main computer recently died). The morning routine also includes accounting, reviewing sales and orders, and of course checking email. (Often after a quick perusal, most of these are relegated to later in the day). Since THE BOOKMARK orders at least 90% of our books directly from publishers, I place orders every day with different publishers, as I meet their minimum order requirements for free freight and better discount. We order books from a wholesaler three times a week, largely to fill customer special orders quickly and restock hot titles. These daily activities require 2 to 3 hours of my time, depending on how frequently I am interrupted to do other things.

THE BOOKMARK is a small independent bookstore located in Atlantic Beach, Florida -- 15 miles east of the city of Jacksonville and one block from the ocean. The store is approximately 2,000 square feet (1,500 sf of selling space). I am the only full-time employee with a staff of four to five.

One of the most exciting parts of the day is when deliveries arrive, and they come every day. Staff has

the job of opening, unpacking, and "receiving" the new and reordered titles (entering the data into our inventory system), and then, finding them a home on the shelf and/or on display. In a small store like THE BOOKMARK, with a small staff, this part of the day can go on, interrupted by the telephone and customers, for much of the afternoon. Fridays and Mondays are big days for receiving shipments since Tuesday is a popular "lay down" day, book industry jargon for the day a book officially is released for sale. For us, Tuesday, Thursday, and Monday are the days we usually receive books from our wholesaler. These orders are always received first so we can call customers to let them know their orders have arrived. With a cascading effect, these boxes create additional work to file invoices, call publishers about missing titles/invoices, and resolve the large number of errors made by publishers. I'm continually amazed at (and often frustrated by) how often publishers ship the wrong title, leave books out, or send damaged items.

The best place to be is always on the floor selling books. It's by far the most fun. Plus, no matter how exceptional your staff, some customers prefer to talk to the owner. Honestly, sales do increase if I'm out there selling. Customers are the most important people, of course. Most days, unfortunately, less than half my time is spent selling books. This increases during our peak seasons (the holidays and especially in December), in part because we're busier and I'm needed on the sales floor, and in part because this is the time publishers are smart enough to leave booksellers alone to sell.

Some customers shop on the telephone. Local schools order books by phone or email, requesting price quotes, orders (hopefully), invoices, and delivery.

Throughout the day, publishers call with questions ranging from the mundane (regarding an invoice) to the sublime (asking if an author can come for an event – though it took a long time and a lot of work to get publishers to the point of saying “Don’t call us, we’ll call you”). We host several author events a month. In addition to the actual day, there is the time in advance to plan, order, promote with ads and press releases and emails. Local authors (mostly self-published) also call or drop in with their books. These take time, patience, judgment, and a great deal of tact.

Saturdays and Sundays have a completely different feel. No publishers or vendors call, no deliveries arrive, and on Sunday there isn’t even any mail.

Certain tasks do not demand attention daily, but must be tended to at least every week. These include paying bills, changing the window display (both to entice passersby with new books and to keep books from being damaged by the sun), and for us, reporting our sales to *The New York Times* and Book Sense bestsellers’ lists. Payroll is biweekly and takes less than one hour to calculate and process. For me, the most time-consuming part of payroll is writing notes to my staff – thanking them for their help and noting special achievements or contributions. Given the time I spend on things other than dealing with customers, my staff is critical, and I want them to know they are appreciated (since they’re not getting rich by working in a bookstore).

Every month there are certain administrative duties, including, for example, calculating/paying taxes, paying publishers/vendors, and reconciling bank statements. These tasks require 1 ½ to 2 days per month, plus extra time each quarter and the end of the year.

Part of the rhythm of the month also includes returning books to vendors, which is a privilege unique to the book business. Because we’re willing to take a chance on a new author or book, publishers generally allow us to send books back for credit to our account after we’ve given them 90 days to sell (and we’ve paid for them). To keep our inventory fresh and new, we pull old inventory that isn’t selling, process the return (which deducts on-hand quantities from our system), box these books, and ship them back for credit. This takes several days.

More fun monthly activities revolve around the two in-store book clubs. I facilitate one during the day for a group of 12+ women who are dedicated and loyal. A lively 1 ½ hour discussion is followed by some shopping.

If selling books is the most important thing a bookseller does, buying the right books to sell is perhaps the second most important. To do it well takes time, but it’s time that’s fulfilling and well spent. Publishers have two or three seasons a year, and with these come catalogs (usually 4-6 months before the season begins), followed by sales reps (in person or by phone). To prepare for a meeting with a publisher’s rep, I review the catalogs along with the store’s sales history for specific authors and types of books. For a major publisher, this could take 2 or more hours. The meeting with the rep to talk about each book in the catalog can take 1 hour for a small publisher and 3 to 4 hours for a larger one or a commissioned rep (one who represents many different publishers). All of this is to say that this is a time-consuming process at defined intervals during the year.

What I’ve mentioned so far is the routine – what’s scheduled or anticipated. There are always the surprises – some good, others less so. One day I’ll get a call to be on television or speak to a group, and the plans for the day get shifted. Another day, the computer will go down, and I’ll spend the day dealing with that and handling sales the old fashioned way.

My goal everyday is to have a different “to do” list than the day before. (There’s never a day without a to do list.) I work 6 days a week for about 50-60 hours, depending on staffing, events, etc. During the week I usually work from 9 - 7. I work fewer hours on Saturdays (because there’s less administrative stuff to do on the weekends). Sunday is my day off. And while I don’t often take advantage of this, you can take time during the day if you need it. Finally, just remember ... being a bookseller, you will never be bored. Along with the idea that I’ve never been bored is the fact that there’s always something to do.