

# Building Productive & Profitable Relationships with Your Local Libraries



**Forging a shared  
community mission that  
benefits everyone**

Presented by **The Association of Booksellers for Children** in conjunction with the **Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)**, a division of The American Library Association (ALA)

# Introduction



## **Public libraries and bookstores share many common goals:**

to provide a community center for the exchange of ideas, to connect readers to great books, to encourage a love of reading for all ages, and to inspire people with great authors and programs. Yet often bookstores and libraries miss the opportunity to work together to their mutual benefit because they stumble over their differences rather than build on their shared values.

## **There are many benefits to working together including:**

- **Cultivating new customers/audience.** Don't assume your customer is their patron. It's surprising how many library patrons don't visit bookstores, and how many bookstore customers never visit the library. Yet both groups are book lovers, and exactly the demographic you (and they) want to reach.
- **Pooling limited resources to great effect.** At a time where margins are shrinking and public funding is tight, these partnerships can significantly extend the reach of both organizations in serving their respective patrons.
- **Gaining a higher public profile.** Joint programming and events are newsworthy and great opportunities for generating media attention.
- **Amplifying Buy Local initiatives.** Buy Local is a two way street. Dig in and get involved. Invest in those relationships that Buy Local requires.
- **Creating great events that neither institution could do alone.** Bookstores often need a bigger venue. Libraries can't sell books. Working together we can create wonderful events where everyone wins—especially the community.
- **Becoming the book vendor for large community literacy efforts.** This is the most obvious sales benefit to building these relationships, and it does not come overnight. However, it would be a mistake to focus only on this. All of the benefits above will lift the bottom line, and all require a sustained community investment on your part.

## Understanding the library perspective



**Any good partnership begins with understanding where your partner is coming from.**

One of the bookseller complaints we often hear about building these relationships goes something like this...

*“I can’t figure out how to get my local library to buy from me. They buy from [insert distributor here], and I can’t match their discounts, terms, packaging, etc. I give up.”*

**To that end, here are a few key things libraries want you to know:**

- **Library funding comes from taxpayer money.** Libraries have a responsibility to get the most they can for the dollars they have. That generally means they are obligated to buy a book from the vendor that gives them the best discount. This does not mean they don’t want to work with you, or that they don’t support Buy Local.
- **No library system is uniform.** Some systems are centralized, some are not. You should never assume about how the decision-making is being done. Even if the buying is being done centrally, there is often discretionary income at each branch. If a librarian has discretionary income, they will likely spend it with you if you have built a relationship.
- **80% of library funding is local.** Local businesses are part of the community the library serves. Your taxes pay for it. It’s YOUR library. Advocate for it and get involved.
- **75% of public libraries serve < 25,000 people, and in even the largest systems, \$ for acquisitions is the first thing to be cut.** Libraries will welcome any partnership that will help them stretch their resources and build their collections directly or indirectly.
- **Staff changes often require constant bridge building.** Keep investing.

**Bottom Line:** Before undertaking a community partnership with your local library it is important to broaden your perspective, and to adjust your focus from selling to libraries to selling WITH libraries. The most profitable potential partnership you have with a library is in the area of joint programming and promotion.

# Getting Started



## **Now what?**

Getting these relationships started can be tricky. You may have tried and given up, or perhaps you're overwhelmed and don't know where to start. Here's what we suggest.....

## **Articulate your vision**

If you have tried to approach your local library and haven't had any luck, make sure you are doing a good job explaining where your community mission overlaps and how the library can benefit. Articulate the reasons (besides sales) that you would like to form a partnership. [Refer to page 2.] You can draft a letter, an e-mail, a fact sheet, or just do it in person, but it is critical that you internalize these ideas so that you can be persuasive. Make sure you address the concrete benefits to the library, emphasize service to the community, and expanding their readership by exposing your regular customers to the library's offerings.

## **Get the lay of the land**

Are you a library patron? Does your local library have a mission statement? How about a 'Friends of the Library' organization? Are any of the Board Members customers of yours? Has the library recently suffered budget cuts? Do you know what the current library programs are? Is there a public relations or programming person who books events? Even a half hour of web research will tell you a lot about your library's set-up. Being familiar with the programs & organizational structure is an important part of making a thoughtful overture.

## **Take a librarian to lunch—Start with the question “How can I help you?”**

Librarians are generally a very nice bunch who appreciate great conversation, and who would love to join you for an outing. When you extend the invitation explain that you are interested in figuring out how your business can support the library, because you see it as part of your community mission. Approach the date as a fact-finding mission, and see what comes up. Here are some questions to get you started:

- *What's your biggest challenge these days?*

- *If we were to do some programming together to benefit the library, is there someone on staff I should speak to specifically?*
- *Is there some area in the collections that the you would love to develop?*
- *What is the most exciting area of programming you have going?*

### **Propose the first program**

After you've had a chance to think about what you've learned, propose a first program based on your resources and the input you got from your fact-finding luncheon. [See the IDEAS THAT WORK section at the end for a list of possible ideas.]

If you've never worked with the library before, start small and build. Great starters include a Book Dedication Program, in-store displays that relate to Library Book Clubs, a new book night at the store for librarians, Galley Donations, and cross-promotion of library programs in the store and in your e-newsletters.

It is better to promise less and deliver more than the other way around. That being said, these programs build, so don't be afraid to ramp it up!

## **Overcoming Common Roadblocks**

*My library won't do anything with a "for profit" business. I can't even post flyers!*

Local businesses pay local tax dollars, and are as much a part of the local community as any of the other patrons. If your library has an attitude or policies that are anti-partnership, then articulate your case for a shared literacy/community mission and take it to the management. YALSA has several stories of libraries changing their policy once a local business has made their case. It is YOUR library, so get empowered, and get involved.



***I've tried making contact with my library, but they show no interest.***

You are either not articulating your case for how the library would benefit from a partnership clearly enough, or you haven't found the right person to connect with. If you are trying to reach a public relations person and are getting nowhere, go back to a staffer in the children's room, and build that relationship instead. Then they can advocate for you from the inside.

***I tried offering author visits to the local library and got into trouble because my author visits are free, whereas libraries usually pay a stipend.***

This is tricky, and we talk a little bit more about different strategies for this below. However, you can try to pair the author visit with some other local events, a store signing, or offer to book several paying visits in the region for the author in exchange for honoring your co-sponsored event at the library.

***When I do sell books at a Library Event, attendees expect a deeper discount than I can afford to give.***

If there is a precedent of discounts at library events, change the arrangement into a benefit. Give a percentage of the full sales price back to the library as a store credit. That way you are in control of the discount, you lose only a wholesale percentage of the discount as opposed to the cash value, and patrons will pony up full price without whining.

***I went to all this trouble to do a co-sponsored event with the library, and no one came. I felt like I was running around like a crazy person for nothing, while the library barely promoted it.*** Format future events as library benefits, and donate a sliding percentage of sales back to the library in the form of a store credit. The more sales/attendees, the deeper the percentage they receive. Be very clear about it up front. This places the burden of marketing on the library, and if it goes well you sell more books with a lot less hassle. This sliding scale technique works great for school bookfairs as well.

## Top 5 Pitfalls to Avoid at All Cost



**1) Approaching the library from a hard sales perspective.** Nothing is a bigger turn-off for librarians.

**2) Offending librarians with your “I’m an expert” routine.** They went to school to become book experts, and they have the student loans to prove it. Don’t let your ego step on their ego.

**3) Giving up without investing time to change policies/perceptions.** Encounter a wall? Libraries are public institutions that are duty bound to serve the community, and they are answerable to a Board. As a community member, you have the right to ask the library to be more civic minded. Heck, you can even get on the Board yourself, and change things from the inside.

**4) Not thinking creatively about possibilities.** Almost any program the library runs is an opportunity for partnership, but it’s a two way street. Invite the library into the bookstore to collaborate as well, and look for opportunities in the larger community. Cross-over events help expose new customers/patrons to the charms of your partner organization.

**5) Thinking of the library as “competition.”** It’s not an either/or situation. Libraries can be the source of regular referrals, as patrons looking for popular books find the library shelves empty and a waiting list that goes for six months or more. Librarians want to help their visitors, and if they like you and know your business as a good partner, they will send many sales your way.

**THE LAST WORD:** Approach these relationships as a community building effort first and a sales opportunity second. Focusing on sales at the expense of real community partnerships will actually jeopardize the very thing you want—to do business together. Build lasting community partnerships based on a shared mission, and soon you will find the sales as well as wide range of other positive benefits.

## Ideas that Work



Here's veritable smorgasbord of ideas from ABC booksellers who have successful partnerships with their local libraries. We have arranged them by degree of ambition and complexity. We encourage you to start small and grow these programs over time.

### STARTERS

- **Shared cross-promotion of reading club programs.** If a library does a reading club, the local store can stock the book, as well as related titles. Librarians can direct readers to the store, and the store can promote the library program as well. Some stores offer discounts to club members.
- **Offer customer service training to library staff as an in-service.** Many libraries require staff to take continuing education, and retail-oriented customer service is a big topic in the design of newer libraries. Offer your local library a seminar on retail customer service best practices.
- **Offer galleys to libraries for staff or for young readers.** We've all got them. And not all library staff have access to advance ARCs. Here's a great way to offer the library a valuable resource that costs you nothing AND helps you clean out your back room!
- **Booktalking—sharing advance information.** One ABC store has a casual monthly get together of all the local kids' books enthusiasts (mostly librarians) to talk through the hot new titles. They serve wine and nibbles, and have a great time. They also share information about upcoming events, and get feedback about program ideas. You can also offer this as a complimentary program for parents at the library.
- **Co-sponsored Game nights/Anime nights.** Many libraries with strong YA programs are offering (Video)Gaming, Genre, and Anime nights for teens. Sponsor these programs, and make sure you stock whatever books these kids are interested in. Some stores use these groups to research what books to bring in to their YA/Graphic/SciFi/and Fantasy sections.

- **Book dedication program.** Initiate an ongoing program for customers to buy a book for the local library that will be dedicated in their name. One store suggests young readers do it on their birthday, so they can donate their favorite book every year. Offer beautiful bookplates for inscription, complementary delivery to the library, and a discount to the customer or a percentage credit to the library for additional book purchases.
- **Buy a Book, be a Hero.** A variation on the dedication program. Work with the local library to develop a wish list, stock and identify those books in the store, and let customers buy them for the local library or classroom.
- **1% makes a difference.** Some libraries have policies that require them to buy books from the most cost-effective source, even when librarians would like to buy local. If you can give a point more in discount than the distributor, librarians can then buy from you!

## INTERMEDIATE

- **Literary Theme Parties.** Partner with the library for a thematic party around a major book release. (Think HP3, or Twilight.)
- **Local Author Nights.** Co-sponsor a luncheon or evening with a group of local authors at the library. One ABC store does a moveable feast, and another invites local authors to speak on various thematic topics related to writing and current events.
- **Literary Scavenger Hunts.** Work with the library to develop an annual scavenger hunt through some of the more obscure holdings of the library. Esoteric reference books, periodical bind-ups, and classics are all great material. Offer the winners a gift certificate, and make sure you get the local paper's attention. Celebrate the non-wired world.
- **One-off publisher sponsored author appearances.** If you are in a major market, and you are offered author visits from publishers, consider co-producing an event at the library. This does get tricky with authors sometimes, because libraries usually pay fees to authors, while bookstores do not. You may need to find some middle ground depending on expectations. However, it is a great press opportunity, and can be aligned with a library fundraiser or gala event.

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**ADVANCED**

- **Community Reads program.** Known by different names, these are programs where the town/library/bookstore collaborates to get everyone reading the same book. Programs can be as simple as an online discussion board, and as elaborate as an entire week of events culminating in a gala author appearance. These programs have a lead time of a year or more, and are most effective when multiple private and public organizations participate. In most states, these programs are already happening, but bookstores are not yet sponsors. See a national searchable list here: <http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/onebook/>.

Check out these successful examples:

<http://www.mydesertrose.com/napervillereads/default.html>

<http://bigread.wustl.edu/>

<http://www.browncountyreads.org/press.html>

- **Children's Author's Breakfast.** These programs range from one keynote author to a moveable feast with a dozen authors or more. These can be planned as part of a local book fair, with a local conference, or as an in-service for local teachers and librarians. Anderson's, which hosts one of the largest of these programs, started out with one author at a country club. Now they have a moveable feast with local IL authors, and four national authors. The event is part of an extensive city-wide literacy celebration. (<http://andersonsbookshop.com/childrensliteraturebreakfast.php>)
- **Develop a Regional Guide to A/I visits for schools and libraries.** This is a branded piece that you would send to all local schools and libraries that would list all the Authors & Illustrators in your area that do visits, along with guidelines for a successful event. You can partner with your regional SCBWI chapter to get the information, and develop relationships with these local authors to get their referrals as a preferred book vendor for visits.

**Check out these resources for building your own A/I Guide:**

*Anderson's Guide to Local Authors and Illustrators:*

[http://www.abcfairs.com/Forms/Illinois\\_Author\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.abcfairs.com/Forms/Illinois_Author_Guide.pdf)

***YALSA's Online Wiki of YA Authors by State:***

[http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/List\\_of\\_YA\\_Authors\\_by\\_State](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/List_of_YA_Authors_by_State)

**SCBWI**—Most regional chapters of SCBWI have directories of authors who do programs like this one from the Illinois chapter: <http://www.scbwi-illinois.org/Speakers.html>. Find your local SCBWI chapter here: <http://www.scbwi.org/regions.htm>

## A final word about Author Appearances

**Author appearances are a fantastic way to generate a great community event and strong book sales.** They are also fraught with problems, logistically and in terms of differing expectations on the part of authors and libraries. Publishers send authors on the road to major markets to promote new books at no cost to bookstores and other select venues. However for most of the rest of the time, many authors make their living through the stipends they get for appearances at libraries and school visits.

**Most ABC Bookstores approach this problem in one of three ways:**

- 1) For bookstores in major markets who often get authors, they will pair school visits up with store appearances, and call it part of their store programming. The publisher foots the bill, the author doesn't get a separate stipend, and the school or library is grateful.
- 2) For bookstores who get calls from local schools/libraries looking for an author visit (ie: schools and libraries will pay), stores refer the organization to local or regional authors, and let them negotiate directly. As a courtesy, authors usually ask the store to vend books where appropriate, and stores can respectfully request this courtesy in advance.
- 3) For stores in more remote markets, a great (but labor intensive) way to generate these kinds of sales is to book an entire regional tour for an author, handling all details, and selling books at each venue. A bookseller who does this to great effect is Ellen Mager at *Booktender's Secret Garden* in Doylestown, PA. Folks interested in finding out more about how she does this should drop her a line at: [ellensbooks\\*at\\*aol.com](mailto:ellensbooks@aol.com).