

My Toddler Reads Shakespeare

A customer service survival kit for building children's book sales

So, you are ready to get serious about your children's department. There are two main customer groups to focus on as you consider your customer care strategy for building sales. The first are the children who visit your store. The second are the adults.

Nowhere in your store can customer care make such a difference in your sales. I've heard varying estimates that **between 70 and 80 percent of sales in the children's department are hand-sold.** A good interaction with your customers of all ages can make the difference between a good sale and no sale, so it's imperative that you do not take your staff's customer service skills for granted. Let's look at some strategies for connecting with your customers.



Kid Communication 101

The Prime Directive: Think of Kids as Customers

This may seem obvious, but to many booksellers who are unused to working with children and young adults, it is hard to get past the sticky fingers, lively bodies, and unpredictable behavior of the youngest customers that come into their stores. As for teens, it is easy to mistake their moody or stand-offish behavior as somehow anti-social or a threat.

But there are a few very good reasons to change the way you think about the children and young adults who come into your store. How about this:

- **Children under 12 influence \$500 billion of purchases per year.**¹
- **Children aged 4-12 made \$30 billion in purchases in the US, in 2002.** This number is up from \$6.1 billion in 1989.²
- **Children aged 12-19 spent \$170 billion in 2002.** That's a weekly average of \$101 per teen.³

And these numbers just keep going up.

Pretty compelling, don't you think?

¹ Campbell and Davis-Packard. (2000) How ads get kids to say I want it! *Christian Science Monitor*, September 18

² Schor, J. (2004). *Born to Buy*, New York: Scribner, p. 21

³ Teen Research Unlimited (2003) (www.teenresearch.com)

These young customers can become an important part of your customer base, and increase your overall sales if you can figure out how to make them feel welcome and comfortable. And really, it's not that hard once you and your staff master the basics of Kid Communication 101.

say "Hello," "Please," and "Thank You" to Kids

Children deserve the common courtesies that adults use with each other. Using these common courtesies shows that you respect kids as customers in your store, and it makes them feel comfortable, which is one of the keys to repeat sales. As a bonus you are modeling good behavior that they can follow!

Use Door Openers

Door openers are invitations to say more, to share ideas and feelings. They tell the young customer that you are really listening and interested, that her ideas are important, and that you accept her and respect what she is saying. Door openers are an opportunity to hand-sell, **but their primary purpose is to establish a connection with the young customer**, and to make them feel important. Different door openers are appropriate at different ages.

Age	<i>Examples of Great Door Openers</i>
2-4	A simple observation works great. <i>"Hey, you're wearing beautiful yellow rain boots today!"</i> -or- <i>"I see you brought your Teddy to the store today!"</i>
4-8	Look for clues to indicate what the young customer might be interested in, and then show them something new. <i>"I see you've got your Red Sox Shirt on today. Do you like Baseball? (yes) We have some great new baseball books over here."</i>
8-14	This is a tricky group. They are right on the cusp of adolescence, and do not want to feel like they are being treated like a child. Usually, taking a clue from what they gravitate naturally toward in the store should lead you to a good opening. Do not hover. <i>"Hey, I saw that you were looking at the new Ranger's Apprentice book. Have you ever read A Wizard of Earthsea?"</i> If a customer in this age group seems uncomfortable with too much attention, give them plenty of space to browse themselves, and praise their selections honestly when they come up to the register instead.
14+	This group should be treated just like an adult customer. Any contact with this age customer should not feel as if you are prying into their affairs. A simple, <i>"Are you finding everything you need?"</i> is great, which can be followed by a suggestion based on what they are looking at if it feels appropriate. <i>"Hey, I see you're checking out the graphic novels... have you seen the latest stuff by Adriane Tomine?"</i>

Communicate at Eye Level

Eye contact improves communication. When talking with very young children, it may be necessary to stoop down to their level or to sit at a table with them.

Listen Attentively

Get rid of distractions and pay attention to what your young customer is saying. You may need to stop whatever you are doing and listen to them. It is difficult to run the register, re-shelve books and, at the same time, pay close attention to what the child is saying.

Caution: Do not pretend that you are listening when you aren't. If you are busy—talking on the phone or working with another customer—tell the young customer you'll be with them in a moment, and then be sure to follow through.

Talk with, Not at, children

Talking "at" a child is one-sided, directive conversation: "Put that down," "You are going to spill that;" "Quiet down." Adults who talk "at" children often use the excuse that a small child cannot converse at the adult level. But no one—including a young customer—likes to be talked "at." Forming the habit of talking "with" children rather than "at" them will be especially helpful when talking with teens.

When talking with Parents Include the Kids

This is pretty simple. Make sure you include kids in any conversation you are having if it is appropriate. If they are picking out a book for a friend, ask the young customer about that friend's likes and dislikes. Or, ask what they like, and if they think their friend has read it. Kids will feel respected, and parents won't forget how good your customer service is.

Figure out how to say Do more than Don't

Do you and your staff find that you have to use the words "Don't" and "No" often when dealing with young customers in your store? It is imperative that you get in the habit of re-phrasing your requests in positive language. It is possible to get the desired result without having to use the words "Don't" or "No". Parents and kids will take the hint when you use negative language, and you will lose their repeat business if they feel unwelcome.

Tell the child what to do rather than what not to do. Talk to young customers as you talk to your friends. If adults would talk to children with as much consideration as they talk to their friends, they could really communicate with children and be on the way to excellent relationships.

<i>Examples of Don'ts:</i>	<i>Examples of Dos:</i>
Don't drop the books on the floor	Put books on the table (please)
Don't run in the store	Walk in the store (please)
Don't slam the door.	Close the door softly, please.
Don't draw on the table.	You can color on this page.

Create soft space

In a nutshell, make sure you have some soft space in the store that invites a child and/or a parent to slow down and look at the books. This could be as simple as a single chair in the corner, or as elaborate as a reading area with beanbags, couches, and a story rug.

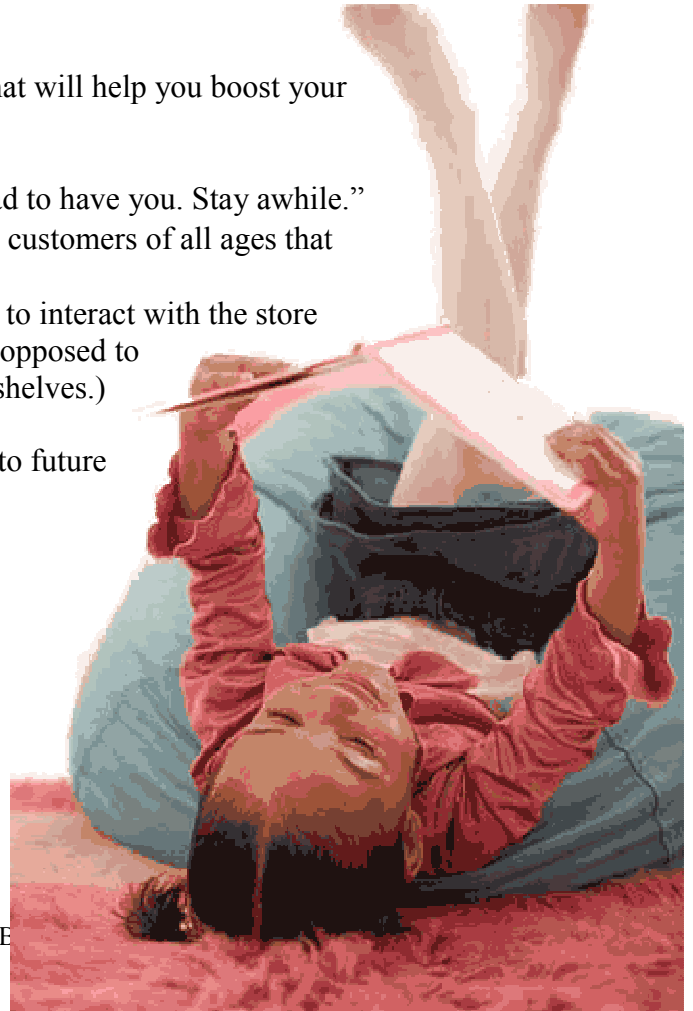
Now I know, what you're saying.... You're saying "But they just read the books, and then leave. My store is not a library!" It is true that a small percentage of the people in your store will not purchase what they handle. But having that soft space speaks volumes to your customers, and it will help you build your sales far more than it will hurt them.

Retail experts such as Paco Underhill (*Why We Buy*) will tell you that the longer people stay in your store, the more they will buy. By spending more time, they will find more things to become attached to. Also, a comfortable shopping experience encourages larger average sales.

Creating soft space accomplishes three things that will help you boost your sales and improve your business:

- It says "Welcome to the store. We're glad to have you. Stay awhile."
- It creates a sense of pleasant comfort for customers of all ages that encourages loyalty and repeat business.
- It gives young customers an opportunity to interact with the store environment in an appropriate way. (As opposed to an inappropriate way, like climbing the shelves.) This reduces damages, and builds good customer habits, which in turn will lead to future sales.

One bean bag goes a long way.



"My TODDLER reads Shakespeare" and other customer service challenges

No where else in your bookstore will you find yourself helping customers who are not the end users of the books as much as in the children's section. This is one of the most challenging aspects of selling children's books.

Think about it—you are expected to be a reading specialist, a librarian, a child psychologist, a butler, and a mind reader with the memory of an elephant all in one. Oh, and you're also supposed to recognize a book by a description of its color, and/or a description like "It had a horse on it."

A tall order indeed.

No wonder uninitiated booksellers are afraid of the children's section. It's like taking a pop quiz every day. (I've graduated high school, thank you very much.)

But there are some basic skills and solutions you can adopt to support both your staff and customers in the children's section. These solutions will help customers find what they want more easily, and they will arm staff with some basic working knowledge that will help them handle questions more easily.

Make it easy for customers to find what they want before they ask

- **Make common-sense sections, and mark them clearly** so that customers can easily find what they need before they have to ask you for help. Many customers do not have the time or the inclination to browse the children's books thoroughly. They want to find their section, especially if they are under a deadline, like an impending birthday party.
- **Structure the sections so that they flow** naturally for better browsing. Ideally, customers should be able to understand what comes next. Early readers before middle grade readers, and YA books after, for example.
- **Provide a map** of the children's section
- **Add an obvious "recommended" section** (or one in each category) with staff picks and printed reviews so that customers can look for new titles. Point this out at every opportunity to train customers to check it out.



- **Make use of focal displays** such as end caps, tables, shelf-talkers and Booksense Picks displays to highlight themes such as holidays, author events, or key titles
- **Provide special sections for frequently requested themes**
 - Some possible examples: vehicles, pirates, knights, dinosaurs, family issues like new siblings, divorce, etc.

Make it easy for all staff to help most customers

- **Commonsense sections and recommended shelves help staff as well**
- **Make sure your staff can quickly run searches by keyword.** Do this by adding keywords to your POS system, or by providing an accessible internet terminal. There is much debate over what internet source to use for these searches. Obviously, we would not like to be seen using Amazon, (although it is hard to beat for intuitive keyword searches), and many bookstores report using the Booksense site instead. In a day and age where customers are used to being able to get their own answers quickly, your staff will be at a disadvantage if they can't do the same quickly.
- **Make thematic booklists and cheat sheets.** "If you like Harry Potter, here are 10 other books to check out!" Many bookstores laminate these lists and keep them at the desk or hang them in the children's section. If you approach the lists in a creative and offbeat way, this could become a store signature.
 - Other possible useful themes: historical fiction, local interest, new baby/best shower gifts, mysteries, horses, spy, etc.
- **Have a regular mechanism for staff to share new titles.** Divide up ARCs and regularly report back. Keep a notebook. Before putting up a staff recommendation, leave it behind the counter for all staff to read.
- **Ask new staff who have never worked with children's books to check out a good reference book.** Good references include: *100 Best Books for Children* by Anita Silvey, *Great Books for Boys*, and *Great Books for Girls*, by Kathleen Odean, or *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading*, by Esme Codell, which is particularly good for subject lists.
- **Get store subscriptions to review magazines such as PW, The Horn Book, School Library Journal, or Booklist (ALA).**
- **Get your staff on a list serv**, where books are regularly reviewed, and staff can ask questions of other booksellers. ABC, NECBA, and many of the other regionals have great list servs to help booksellers draw on the collective knowledge of other booksellers.

Solutions to the Top 7 Challenges

My toddler Reads Shakespeare

<i>What they say</i>	<i>What they mean</i>
My grandchild is very advanced for his age	Give me something with some substance

This is also known as “My grandchild is a genius”. In our experience, what this usually means is “I want something serious for this child”, and after murmuring quiet sounds of affirmation, the best bet is to either steer them to the classics (fairytales, poetry, gift books), or toward “educational” books.

I Need a Book for a Child I do not Know

<i>What they say</i>	<i>What they mean</i>
I know nothing about this kid except her age	Give me something that's tried and true

Here's where a good list of the top sellers in a category works great. Customers with this request really want you to put a book in their hands that you know is good, and that is universally enjoyed by readers in an age category. This book shouldn't be the one EVERY kid is reading now, because chances are good the recipient has read it too. Try for a mid-list book that is wonderful, sells well, and is a little bit of a discovery.

I Hate Every Suggestion You've Made so Far

<i>What they say</i>	<i>What they mean</i>
Nope. Nope. Nope. Nope. Nope.	I'd don't know what I want, but I'll know it when I see it.

You've asked all the right questions. (Age, likes, dislikes, reading level, disposition)
You've pulled book after book, and nothing is working. What next?

- You can ask frankly for a little more direction from the customer, with a line like “It seems like I'm missing the mark. Can you tell me a little bit more about”;
- You can say, “Why don't I let you browse a little bit on your own. Perhaps you will find something we aren't thinking about. Let me explain the sections.”
- You can ask for help from a co-worker who might have another idea. Definitely hand off the customer if you are getting frustrated.

It's possible that they may have some personal reason that is getting in the way of the decision. They may be crabby. They may not know enough about what they want. They may decide to go home and come back later with more information. That's okay. You've done your best.

The Only Book I Want is the One You Don't Have in Stock

<i>What they say</i>	<i>What they mean</i>
What do you mean you don't have it? I came in especially for that!	I had my heart set on it, and now I am disappointed

This is a tough one. It is possible that the customer is so set on that book, that they will accept no substitute. This is especially true if the book is in a chapter book series.

Two possible solutions would be a) To offer to order the book, and then give a realistic estimate of when it will come, and/or b) Gently see if you can make an alternative suggestion. "I know you are really looking forward to reading X. Do you want me to show you this other book that I think you'll love? Maybe you can read it while you're waiting for X to come in."

What do You Mean It Doesn't Come in Paperback?

<i>What they say</i>	<i>What they mean</i>
But I saw it in paperback for \$2.99 at Target!	Are you not being honest with me?

Another tough one. You don't want to go into a discourse about the publishing industry, and sound all whiny about how the chains and book fairs get proprietary editions. You can simply say that "Unfortunately, those big stores have their own books printed. I wish we could offer you the same thing! Would you like me to show you some other titles that do come in paperback?" Keep it short and sweet.

I Want Something New Like (book you've never heard of)

<i>What they say</i>	<i>What they mean</i>
Can you recommend something? The last book I read and loved was (insert obscure title here)	I love to read and I am hungry for a new and wonderful book!

Don't get thrown by the fact that you don't know what they're talking about. Just say "Tell me what it was that you loved about it", and proceed from there.

That book is too Baby-ish

<i>What they say</i>	<i>What they mean</i>
That book is too easy/young for him (or me)	I want something more serious -or- I am not a baby

What if you are in the right age section, you are making a solid recommendation, and you get this response. The appropriate reaction depends on whether this statement is coming from an adult or a child.

If it's coming from an adult, it is probably a variation on "My Child is a Genius" (see above), and you should steer them toward the classics.

If it's coming from a child, you need to tread lightly. Many children will give you this answer if they are feeling insecure, and want to project an air of maturity. They might LOVE the book, but they need to assert their independence in front of you, their parent, or their peers. The best bet in this situation is to drop the recommendation, and ask some open ended questions about what THEY think they might like. This will allow them to steer the conversation, and you can make another recommendation that is still appropriate, but that satisfies the child that you are taking them seriously.

