

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?

For campus bookstores, remaining relevant to today's students requires new forms of engagement—bolder, more sophisticated and, in many cases, designed to include them in something bigger, whether it's an environmental cause, a social network, or a national dialogue on academic material.

By Mark Leslie Lefebvre

During this year's September Rush at Titles Bookstore, McMaster University I felt a burst of pride over an idea we had to help ease the frustration students feel when it comes to the long line-ups they face, both getting into the store and then purchasing their required course materials.

We hired a local rock band (Skirmish) to perform where they were lined up, offering the students something entertaining to engage them while they waited. Of particular note, two of the band members are Physics professors at McMaster. So it wasn't only a fun musical distraction for the everyday humdrum of purchasing course materials, but an eye opening one as some students recognized their teacher performing one of their favourite party songs.

We started doing this type of thing a couple of years ago. Last year, we hired a

wandering magician to amuse the students with simple card tricks and other sleights-of-hand. Students seem to enjoy the treat, and we received comments about how unexpected it is that the bookstore should invest money in something with no material return.

But of course, as unique and interesting as I think this is, my store isn't alone in these types of efforts. Once you start looking you'll realize that campus stores across our nation are putting a great deal of effort into offering something more to a group of people who have, traditionally, been 'forced' to shop there.

What they're really doing is attempting to turn the campus bookstore from a place that you "have to go to" into a place that you "want to go to." By providing products and services that students not only need, but also desire, campus bookstores continue to strive toward that all

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The Bookstore at Western not only gives out reusable bags during Orientation, but makes a donation to ReForest London whenever a customer uses it.

important goal of being relevant to today's students.

Today's students are incredibly sophisticated, in touch and have spent most of their years living in an "on demand" and "have it now" world. They don't want to shop at their grandparents' campus bookstore; nor do they want to shop at their parents' bookstore. In fact, with the tremendous rate of change they're used to, even the bookstore their older sibling shopped at might seem tired and old.

So, to paraphrase a Rush song, changes might not be permanent, but change definitely is. Campus bookstores are continually changing and "upgrading" themselves all in the pursuit of relevance.

Among the things campus bookstores involve themselves in are grassroots "green" movements on campus. For that reason, campus bookstores, like other booksellers and retailers everywhere, have been involved in exploring reusable bag options, reducing the use of plastic bags.

But sometimes, it's not enough just to have a reusable bag. The campus store at University of Western Ontario in London, for example, not only gives out reusable shopping bags to new students and parents during the academic orientation, but makes a donation to ReForest London. Every time a customer uses a reusable bag or does not take a bag, the cashier drops a recycled plastic chit into a container, representing a very visible unit of donation that students can see and understand immediately. Since the launch of the program in December 2007, they have saved



more than 20,000 bags. And in May 2008, The Book Store at Western made a \$1,000 donation to ReForest London.

"The program is not only an incentive to use reusable bags," says Stephen Cribar, sales manager for The Book Store at Western, "but it also provides a tangible outcome that benefits our community. More trees! The goal is to reduce plastic bags by 25 per cent during 2008, which will mean a large enough donation to ReForest London to plant 100 trees."

Cribar's store is demonstrating that a passive activity—*not* taking a bag—can produce real benefit; students can easily see how they're making a difference. They have shown that by involving and including students, they can more properly stay in tune with what's important to them.

That's one of the reasons why they've been running a successful Book Store Advisory Committee. Chaired by Carolyn Young, the store's communication manager, the committee is a healthy mixture of students, faculty, bookstore staff and other support personnel at Western. Their



Plasma screens offer Queen's students empathy and entertainment as they line up to make their purchases.



Skirmish plays rush—campus rush—at Titles Bookstore, McMaster University.

objectives are to share feedback, ideas and perspectives from all groups on campus through active discussion, equity for all members and ensuring the store meets its mission statement to support the best student experience at The University of Western Ontario.

Campus stores aren't just holding important advisory committees in which students can actively participate and give feedback, but some of them are actually closely tied to student groups. The University of Alberta bookstore in Edmonton, for example, partnered with their Students' Union back in 2002 by first opening up their books and illustrating their commitment to servicing student needs. This partnership grew successfully into a long-running relationship that

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

has inspired a larger national bookstore and student partnership effort. In 2007, the University of Alberta Bookstore and Students' Union hosted a roundtable including bookstore and student representatives from 13 Canadian universities and all five major publishing companies. A national dialogue on academic materials was firmly established. In February, 2008 several of the representatives reconvened, this time under the name of the Canadian Roundtable on Academic Materials (CRAM). Their ongoing efforts and communications can be tracked at <http://the-cram.ca>.

The Campus Bookstore at Queen's University was established in Kingston Ontario in 1909 by two engineering students attempting to offer their peers more reasonably priced school supplies. The mission of this student-owned enterprise continues to focus on lowering the costs

of required course materials. The bookstore not only boasts among the lowest textbook prices in Canada, but also includes a full online list of alternative sources where students can purchase the same textbook. By including links to the University Library, local Classifieds of students wishing to re-sell their used textbooks as well as Indigo's and Amazon's websites, The Campus Bookstore at Queen's illustrates the type of instant single-search options that students are used to having. And by doing so, they make it simple for students to make an informed choice without having to browse multiple websites.

When asked about this practice, Chris Tabor, general manager of The Campus Bookstore at Queen's University, says that it's about relevance and basic understanding. "Marshall McLuhan said the medium is the message; what message does an advertisement in the Yellow Pages send to

a student customer with a Blackberry, who has never dialled a phone or owned a land line? Probably not the intended message."

Tabor, who is also president of the CCRA (Canadian Campus Retail Association), goes on to describe the plasma screens in the stores of CCRA members which are in front of 289,000 of the "brightest, most sophisticated young minds in the country." He says it is nonsense to believe presenting "the value of a textbook" bookmark will convince any Canadian student that a textbook which can cost as much as rent and increase at three times the rate of CPI annually is reasonable.

"However, with the screens we can quickly demonstrate our empathy." Tabor's store posts the "book of shame"—highlighting the most outrageous textbook price that term. "Students tell me that their favourite part of the campaign was the equating of the costs of Kraft dinner noodles, which stated that when put together end to end would draw a line to the publishers who set the outrageous price."

And it's the use of these screens, as well as the internet, Facebook and YouTube, that are helping a large group of campus stores get this message across in a promotional effort entitled Weirdblame. Toting the phrase "Don't blame the bookstore; we didn't pick your roommate either," Weirdblame.com hosts a video of a football player blaming the team mascot for losing the game, and introduces a free Segway among other weird prizes to students for taking a survey that helps educate them on the "broken market" of the textbook industry. "Since 1997 and thanks to Al Gore," Tabor quips, with an ironic grin on his face, "we now use the internet. We hear it's going to be big."

Whether it's using modern technology such as plasma screens, the internet and social networking tools, or in store events, visual displays that represent donated funds toward planting trees, these are just some of the continuing efforts being made by campus stores across Canada to illustrate their desire to be relevant in terms of suiting the needs and the desires of their customers. **CBA**

Mark Lefebvre is Book Operations Manager at Titles Bookstore McMaster University and a Campus Director on CBA's Board.

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