

Independent Bookstore

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A newsletter to help booksellers sell more books

Book Clubs Bring in Customers

Encourage These Groups of Book Lovers to Meet, Buy at Your Store

By Susan S. Stevens



Wouldn't you love to see these groups of booklovers in your store every week?

Put aside your idea of a reader curled up in an easy chair at home, thinking in solitude about the contents of a book. Instead, envision scores of readers getting together in your store to discuss what they have been reading.

Book clubs are big at many stores.

Some stores have more than one club, perhaps a group for people who enjoy mysteries, another for romance readers, others for teens and kids.

Membership in reading clubs range as high as 60. Some are as small as 6. In each case, however, more customers are coming in the door.

"According to our surveys, the average book group member consumes over 60 books a year," says Charles Mead, co-owner of Reading Group Choices. Of the total, 11.4 books are for group discussion, 39.4 are for personal enjoyment and 12.4 books are for gifts. "The numbers certainly indicate that this lucrative market segment is one that bookstores will do well to nurture."

Blue Willow Bookshop in Houston, Texas has 35 book clubs. Last year, all of the store's clubs read *The Birth of Venus* by Sarah Dunant, making it the store's top-selling title. The store recently focused on titles by authors who visited the store and made good impressions.

Blue Willow gives registered clubs discounts on books, a policy at most of the stores hosting clubs. Discounts are often 15 percent. Blue Willow also gives discounts to teachers and school book fairs.

Valerie Koehler, "girlboss" at Blue Willow, explains how the clubs began growing:

"I speak to book clubs, women's groups, etc. on a regular basis," Koehler says. "Pretty early on, I figured that if we catered to the book groups we would have people coming

in approximately once a month (unless they buy ahead). Most people don't just buy their book club selection."

Koehler assigned one staff member to keep up with the clubs, so the store can order the books assigned ahead of time and shop discounts with stock offers, freight offers and more.

"We grew this category from one shelf in our fiction section to a dedicated table in the shop," she says. "It is the most shopped table we have. People want to see what everyone else is reading. Lots of people get their

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ideas for future selections from this table."

The discounts don't harm the store's profitability, she says. "I don't feel it is detrimental to the bottom line."

Mead of Reading Group Choices says studies back that up.

ReadingGroupGuides, which is an online community for reading groups, helps clubs answer questions about books, offering hundreds of guides from many publishers. Carol Fitzgerald, co-founder and president, says the website has 225,000 unique visitors a month. "At least 3,500 book clubs are registered with us."

When ReadingGroupGuides began five and a half years ago, "We wanted to put everything in one place to build a community," Fitzgerald says.

"What happens if you love a book but just don't know what more to say about it in your reading group? Or what if you hate a book, but can't pin down the reason why? The guides contain discussion questions and background material on the author and the subject. Feedback from stores and clubs helps the organization provide what they are looking for.

"A lot of indies have helped make a book," Fitzgerald says. "We know they are setting trends."

Reading Group Choices operates in a similar manner, providing commentary for reading groups about books, authors, publishing trends and reading group trends. Groups can print out questions and answers. Its "On the Bookcase" commentary helps groups select their next discussion topic. Reading Group Choices is online at www.ReadingGroupChoices.com.

An author/reading group discussion contest allows reading groups to register online for a chance to have an author talk with the group on speaker phone. Six groups win each month.

ReadingGroupGuides also offers contests. Here is one club's success story:

"When we started our book club, it was to share our enjoyment of reading and to introduce each other to different genres of books," a reader named Debra in Biloxi, Miss. told Fitzgerald. "Little did we know that down the road this reading group would also be a way to share our tragedies and joys" after Hurricane Katrina hit Biloxi. "We only missed one week of meeting and now we meet at homes which are still standing and after each meeting of sharing our favorite book, we also share hammers, nails, and boards and help work on the person's home."

Biloxi's club won a book for Debra's "truly inspiring e-mail," Fitzgerald says.

A new venture is matching readers with clubs, she says. If a New York City reader wants to find a convenient club which reads the kind of books that person likes, ReadingGroupGuides will link them.

Then there's the not-so-small matter, for many clubs, of refreshments.

A Recipe for a Book Club, in addition to suggested readings and featured authors, contains monthly themes and recipes "to make each gathering of your book discussion group a joyous occasion." The Book Club Cookbook by Judy Gelman and Vicki Levy Krupp also offers monthly guides for good eating to go with good reading.

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