

Welcome!

Chris Powell

CBLDF Retailer Resource Guide Editor

Welcome to the 3rd Edition of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund Retailer Resource Guide! Let me start by thanking you on behalf of the CBLDF staff, Board of Directors, and volunteers for joining us as a Retailer Member of the Fund. Your financial contribution, along with the time and energy you devote to the Fund and its mission are essential and appreciated.

Our mission statement says, “The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of the comics art form and its community of retailers, creators, publishers, librarians, and readers. The CBLDF provides legal referrals, representation, advice, assistance, and education in furtherance of these goals.” We believe that providing tools and resources to our retailer members helps build stronger, well-respected stores that are a vital part of their communities. Those stores are better able to confront challenges to their First Amendment rights, with the support of the Fund.

The articles in this guide have been written by retailers and CBLDF staff with many years of experience, and I think you’ll find them useful for both the information contained within and as jumping-off points for ideas and projects of your own.

Again, thank you for your support and keep fighting the good fight!

Earning Your Customers' Loyalty

Eric Kirsammer

Owner

Chicago Comics & Quimby's

I am extremely fortunate to have loyal customers at both of my stores, Chicago Comics and Quimby's. I feel the stores act more like a matchmaker, than a broker, and are part of a community of readers and creators that has a long tradition. In a way, we provide the space for this community to happen. Of course, a wide and thoughtful selection is also important to any serious comic fan.

At both stores we're selling a particular culture and our customers want to go to a store where people are knowledgeable about current products and trends. They come to our store to find out what's happening in comics, what people are talking about and what they need to read to participate. We try to create an atmosphere where customers will come for the experience as well as the products we sell. At my stores we don't push customers to buy products they don't really want; we try to learn their tastes and make suggestions, but we always respect what they choose to read. Likewise, if someone asks, "is this any good?" we answer them truthfully. I would rather have a repeat customer who knows that we're more interested in creating a relationship than make a particular sale. People don't go back to stores if they feel they've been lied to or bullied into purchasing something.

We try to give our customers excellent service at every visit. Hiring the right people is key. I look for friendly and open people who are enthusiastic about the product and can interact well with customers. Knowledge about comics is essential and allows the staff to really relate to the people who come in. From there, we train new hires to "treat the customer like you would like to be treated." It's simple, but ultimately identifying with the customer is the best incentive to providing good customer service. We also try to demonstrate how much we value our customers by going out of our way for them when we can. At Chicago Comics, we once sent comics to a subscriber who was in the hospital. Ten years later he still talks about it. We hold comics for customers working overseas, sometimes for 6 months or more. We special order like crazy. We pay retail for books customers want if we cannot find it. We go to conventions just to look for books for customers. We hold books for customers that we think they might like. We also buy books from customers that we do not need in order to help them through tough times. We have close relationships with some of our customers and often feel as loyal to them as they do to us. This is the part that I liken to being a bartender. Price and selection are important to get people in the door, but the community is what keeps them coming back

At Quimby's, the store's mission is an important part of who we are and who our customers are. We are dedicated to carrying the weird and off beat, the things that intrigue people and make them uncomfortable. The books that we feel are important will most likely never be found in a corporate bookstore. We like products that stretch the boundaries of expression. In this regard, we try to nurture the next generation of creators by giving them a chance to reach out to the community and sell their books. Quimby's has a massive selection of self-published "zines" and comics that really don't generate much income, but we carry them

because it is the store's mission and it's important to our customers. We hold several events a week to build community and support artists. Many creators are also customers – the community kind of supports itself.

It's important not only to have a community that customers feel part of, but also a physical store that customers are comfortable in. A place that they are proud of and feel like they belong.

All these things create loyal customers. The store is an important part of the community, so we embrace that role. We support local charities, donate to fund raisers and always provide a gift certificate when a customer asks for a donation. We have open consignment policies that let creators try to sell their work. We hold a lot of events; a lot of them will not be financially successful in the short term, but they build and support our community.

We are the place people come to feel connected to their passion. A lot of these people have been reading comics for a long time and we are charged with carrying that on. In a way we become another room in their house: the room with all the cool stuff in it. All of these goals obviously need to be balanced with the needs of the business, but, fortunately, building community and creating loyal customers is good business.

Giving Customers What They Need

Chris Powell

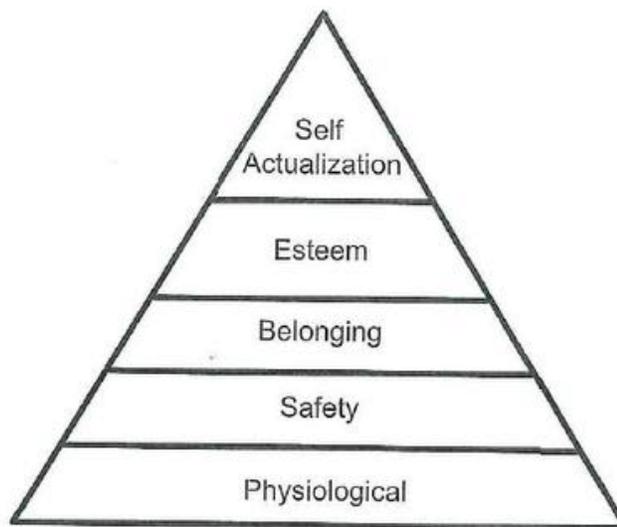
General Manager/CRO

Lone Star Comics & mycomicshop.com

In the first half of the 20th century, Abraham Maslow published the paper *A Theory of Human Motivation* then his book, *Motivation and Personality*. While written as a study of the psychology of human development, it also has applications in areas like marketing, management, and sales, particularly in specialty retail such as comic book stores.

The Pyramid

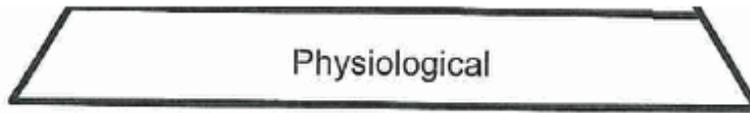
Maslow proposed that peoples' needs build on one another, so his theory is depicted as a pyramid, with each need represented:



The needs are broken down into 4 main categories, leading up to the person's "self-actualization", or letting that person be the most that they can be. While it is not in our power to provide all that the customer needs to achieve this goal, I consider it a success when someone leaves our stores feeling better about themselves and the world around them than they did when they came in!

Maslow's categories are **physiological**, **safety**, **belonging**, and **esteem** needs. The reason that these are typically portrayed as a pyramid is that each level, going up the pyramid, depends on the needs below it to have been met. If one of the needs is deficient, it is difficult or impossible to build on that to reach the next level. I'll cover each of the levels, providing some examples and showing how one builds on the next.

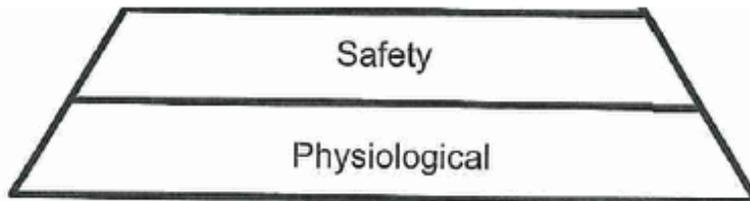
Physiological Needs



Physiological needs are, essentially, “the basics” and are, frequently, the easiest to meet because they are already being provided for to keep a happy and healthy store staff.

These represent people’s most basic survival needs such as appropriate temperatures, air quality, bathroom facilities, etc. When a customer comes into your store, they want to feel comfortable and not be bombarded with overpowering scents. They want to have access to sanitary restroom facilities, too, whenever possible. Many stores also carry snacks and drinks, which serve the dual purpose of providing a profit center AND keeping customers happy.

Safety Needs



Safety needs is another fairly self-explanatory category. Customers want to feel safe in and around the store, or they will be distracted and anxious. Safety is an area where many stores miss the mark, because they don’t think about these needs broadly enough.

Meeting a customer’s safety needs begins outside the store. If the parking lot is poorly-lit or in disrepair, is littered with broken glass, or is populated by loitering groups, those things will weigh on the customer’s mind during their visit. This directly impacts the amount of time they want to spend in the store, and how comfortable they feel about returning for future visits.

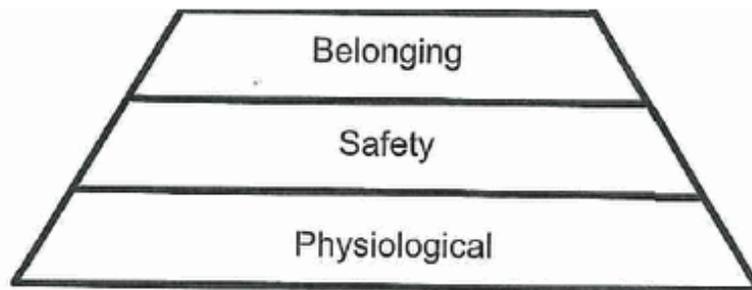
Besides the condition of the parking lot, window visibility is an important consideration. Many of our younger customers are dropped off at the store by a parent, and those parents may be wary of a store whose windows are completely obscured by fixtures, posters, or (yes, we’ve all seen it) grime. These parents are less likely to bring a child back to the store or will rush the child with a time-limit if they feel unsafe.

Particularly once the customer is inside the store, their safety is our responsibility. That means you need to provide a safe shopping environment that’s free of dangerous equipment, spills, etc. and where ALL your customers feel safe. If you see a young customer being harassed others or a poor woman has trapped that in a corner by “Dale, the X-Men X-Per” and his history lessons, make sure you help them out.

Another area where some stores miss the mark, in my opinion, is that it needs to be evident to customers who the employees of the store are. There are any number of ways to do this, but it is important to choose one and to be consistent. Customers want to know who to turn to with questions or concerns, and can feel uneasy if they don't know where to direct them. Some stores have name tags, others have cool lanyards (a place to keep all your "flair"!), I've seen stores with aprons and some even have t-shirts or sport shirts with a store logo embroidered on them.

Given all of that, one of the best and simplest ways to show that your store is a safe place is to make sure that it's well-lit and inviting and, most of all, CLEAN.

The Need to Belong



In the world of specialty retail, this is a particularly vital need that a store must address. In today's world, comics and graphic novels are available from many different sources. That might be as simple as a local competitor, but it could also be a mass-market book store, a web retailer like Amazon.com or one of the many online subscription services for comics. Heck, it could even be a digital source on an e-reader, which is becoming more and more common!

Successful specialty retail stores survive and thrive by building relationships with their customers, then maintaining and nurturing those relationships over time. Customers that feel like they "belong" in a store are more loyal and are less likely to be swayed by lower prices at another store.

There are a lot of ways to build these relationships and to provide "added value" for your customers, but I'll hit a few here to provide some ideas that you can use to develop a plan of your own. The easiest and, coincidentally, most effective way to show a customer you care about them and value their business is to learn their name. Like Norm on Cheers, everyone loves to be recognized and this is an area where "big box" stores don't excel.

Once you know the customer's name, then you get to move on to the "advanced maneuvers", as I call them. These are things like favorite books (which help you make recommendations), spouse's and/or children's names, DISlikes (every bit as important as the things they do like), and what activities they may participate in outside your store. Some of these may come up the first time a customer visits your store, particularly their likes and dislikes when it comes to the product they buy from you. Others take longer, and require you to have formed a real bond with the customer, asking about their family or activities.

This can seem very daunting, and it can be. Those that are “born to sell” find it to be second-nature, while others must work extra hard and may go so far as to make little notes for themselves.

This is an area where a store Point-of-Sale system can come in particularly handy. Our system allows us to record the customer’s purchases, notes we may want to add, and the names of their children and spouse / significant other. It even allows for birthdays, which is really good information that I’ve yet to put into use. The record of prior purchases is also very useful, as you are able to answer the inevitable question, “Do you remember if I bought this last week?” It’s also nice to be able to help their friends shop for them for holidays or birthdays.

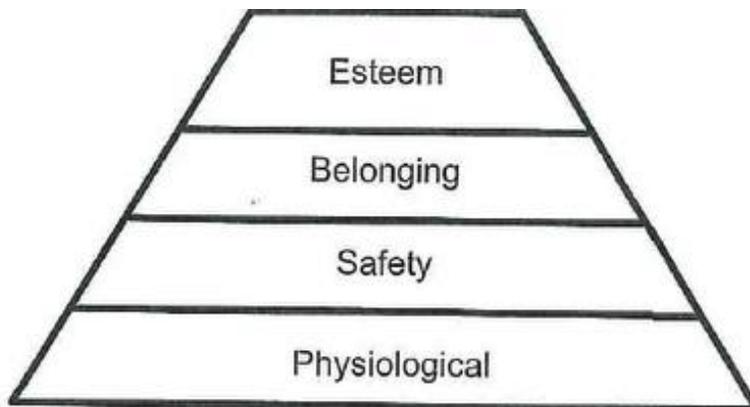
Another way to show your customers that they belong is to have some sort of loyalty program that is tied to their visits or purchases. Some stores give discounts, while others award points that can be redeemed for gift cards, in auctions, or other store promotions.

A store newsletter is a great way to keep customers informed about what’s going on in the store, and can let them have an “insider’s view” into the store’s operations, where appropriate. If you attend a convention or a meeting with others in the industry, share what you can in your newsletter, and your customers will feel like they were there, too!

Social networking is the latest way to build and maintain a community in and out of your store. Having a Facebook or Myspace page for the store or a forum on your own website lets customers stay in touch with you and, just as importantly, one another. Make sure you are keeping the page up-to-date, using it to promote new products, events, and other things that make your store stand out.

I mentioned that it’s good for customers to have contact with one another, and that’s very important. Customers congregate with others of similar interests, so having a book group or parties celebrating various comic events can help your customers connect with one another. If they’ve made friends at your shop, they are even more likely to continue to shop there.

Esteem Needs



A customer's esteem needs in a retail environment are probably better described as "respect needs". Customers want to be treated well, of course, but they also want to be respected by the store's staff and by other customers.

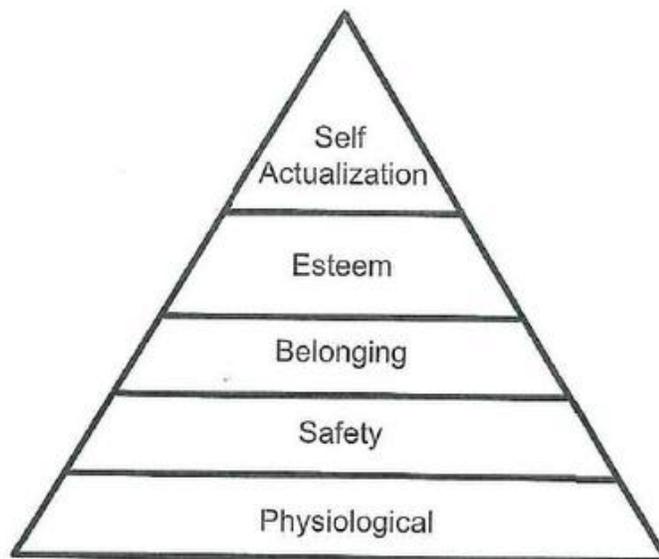
You can do this by showing respect in the usual ways, thanking them for shopping with you and acknowledging their contributions to the store, but it's also good to pick up on which customers may need a little "extra".

In my store, for instance, I met a young man about 15 years ago. His name was James Adams, he had blue hair, earrings, and tattoos and was in his early teens. He was accustomed to being "watched" in retail stores, and was rarely treated the way one would hope to be.

Picking up on this, I paid him a little extra attention, and made sure that the staff referred to him as "Mr. Adams", which he got a kick out of. Whenever he came in, it was "Oh, it's nice to see you again, Mr. Adams" or "Oh, Mr. Adams, I think we got in something you can't live without." and you could tell he appreciated it.

A few years down the road, he came in with a young woman he was seeing. It was her first time in a comic book shop and was a real demonstration of the trust we'd built up, since he knew that we wouldn't make him look like a dork in front of her. She was really impressed that he was a "big shot" and no longer saw his hobby as something that detracted from him. Years later, I was invited to their wedding and now have the pleasure of seeing Mr. Adams and his 2 children every few weeks when their weekly visits coincide with mine.

Self-Actualization



As I mentioned before, the end-result of Maslow's progression of needs is "Self-Actualization". This is where the person becomes "all they can be", reaching their full potential. There's a reason it's called SELF-actualization, this is not something we can do for the customers. What we can do, though, is contribute to their well-being in ways that set

them up to reach this step on their own, but putting together the building blocks that support the goal.

Maslow and the Store Staff

I've focused on customers here, but every one of these lessons can be applied to the men and women that work in the store, as well. I'd go so far as to say that a store whose staff aren't having their needs met will find it impossible to fully meet the needs of their customers. At the very least, it will be much more difficult.

Physiological and Safety needs are very similar for customers and employees, although the employees are in the store for much longer periods of time than customers. That will necessitate an area to prepare and eat food, in many cases, or other arrangements to be made.

The Need to Belong is also very important for the staff of the store, they need to feel that they have input in how the store operates or the decisions that are made. This doesn't mean that they have more "say" than the owner of the store, but they should feel included and know that their voices are heard.

The Esteem Need is one that can be met with employee recognition programs or by the assignment of additional responsibilities that show the employee they are trusted, valued and respected. This can also be supported with regular staff evaluations, where their performance is discussed, goals are set, and ideas are exchanged.

Understanding Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can give you insight into the motivations of your staff, customers, and suppliers. Using that information to improve those relationships can make your store stronger and keep it a fun place to work!

Playing Host for Fun & Profit

Atom! Freeman and Portlyn Polston

Owners

Brave New World Comics

Over our ten years of owning and operating Brave New World Comics in Santa Clarita, California, we've gotten pretty good at some things. We've made a damn pretty shop. We sell a lot of comic books. And we throw a fantastic party. But, it's taken every one of those 10 years (and lots of mistakes along the way) to get all of those right at the same time.

A few years ago, our friends at ComicsPRO asked us to teach a class on the subject. At that time we were pretty certain we knew what we were doing and had a copy of PowerPoint, so why not? We gathered some photos, made some lists, and Atom! tried to figure out how to put his spreadsheets into an algebraic formula. It was a hit. Except, of course, the algebra. We're still hearing about that one. Which brings us to today when our friends at the CBLDF are asking us to write the whole thing down and we have to answer the obvious question...

I sell comics for a living, why should I bother throwing events?

On the surface, that's a very valid question. It would be nice to go back to the days when all you had to do was find the right location, display your products right and then keep up with the ordering and bookkeeping. But, those days are gone. Print advertising no longer works. Customers have lots of options for finding the things we sell. Our job has gotten a lot more complicated. No longer are we merely retailers, we are community leaders. Instead of shops, we run the pop-culture meeting place of our communities. To do anything less is to play to the strengths of the multi-national corporations who want to take away our livelihoods. Lot's of places provide stuff. Few provide community and even a piece of home.

Okay, I get it, and I want to, but how do I even get started?

Like anything worth doing throwing events can get complicated fast, so it's best to stay organized. Over the years, we've put together a checklist you will want to decide on and execute to stay organized and find success.

Facets of a Successful Event

- Scheduling
- Budget
- Promotion & Advertising
- Staff
- Event Design
- Talent
- Entertainment
- Food & Beverages
- Take Away
- Data collection

- Post Mortem

Let's deal with those individually.

Scheduling: We've found that to have a successful events calendar, you have to always be promoting. Each one feeds the success of the last and you should be prepared to announce your next event while you're in the middle of the current one. We keep one of those desk blotter calendars spread out on one of the walls of Portlyn's office. This way, at a glance, we can see where there are holes in our promotional calendar and fill them with something exciting and crowd getting. But, be careful not to overcrowd your calendar. Get too many big events going on at the same time and you risk confusing your customers.

Budget: Our rule of thumb is to never spend more on an event than that event will net you over and above what you would have made on that day without the event. Too confusing? Yeah, that's why Atom! tried coming up with a formula. Let's break it down: Take your average Saturday. Now, ask yourself how much more you reasonably (that's a tough one) expect to sell on that Saturday because of the event. Remove Cost Of Goods from those extra sales. There's your budget.

Promotion & Advertising: These days, this all comes down to social networking and in-store marketing. We are currently working on an event that will take place at an offsite location that we're projecting 300+ paying attendees to. And we haven't spent a dime in promoting it. Get yourself Facebook and Twitter accounts. We could write another thousand words on how to handle this alone, but you might just as well Friend or Follow us and some other retailers who are getting it right more often than us and pay attention. That's what we did. If you haven't already, PLEASE get a Constant Contact or other e-mail newsletter account and start writing one every week. It's cheap and incredibly effective. Also, teach yourself some basics of design or find a designer, because in-store flyers and posters still work.

Staff: How many more bodies are you going to need to run this thing? Remember, more people on the floor means more theft. It also means more opportunity for handselling. Don't forget to staff this thing and don't be afraid to ask for volunteers. If you are building the community you should be building, you'll have plenty of people who will be happy to help for the cost of a store t-shirt.

Event Design: Each event is its own brand. It should have its own look and design. Think about that looks when you are making every aesthetic decision for the event. All of the design work should go towards building a cohesive brand identity for the event.

Talent and Entertainment: For decades the only events comics retailers would throw were creator signings. Artists and writers would sit behind a banquet table and chat for 30 seconds at a time with each fan who braved the line. But, most of these events (with the exception of big name talent in metropolitan areas) have started seeing diminishing returns. Why not bring in new kinds of talent. We've had success with local bands, stand-up comics, improv teams, and even burlesque troops. Whatever you decide on, keep in mind the audience you have and the audience you want when going after talent.

Food & Beverages: This one is a big way of defining your store at these events and can be a huge way of boosting your profits. And we've seen lots of ways this is handled successfully. Some stores serve beer and wine and, in some cases, even a full bar. You will want to check with your own counsel, but the thought is that these are private parties and so long as you aren't selling the alcohol you aren't violating the law. We've also seen this go bad (who really wants to clean vomit off of every surface of your only bathroom for hours after everyone has left?). But, some people do spend more when they are relaxed. We've gone the other way, though. Instead of alcohol, we've focused on a line of gourmet sodas that we sell year round. And instead of giving them away, we see a large portion of our event profits from them. No matter what you decide, people will stay longer if they have something to nosh and sip while they are there. And the longer they stay the more likely they are to spend.

Takeaway: Remember that great wedding you went to last year where the bride and groom did that funny thing and how much fun that reception was? Of course you do. Because when you went looking for a pen in the junk drawer yesterday you saw that cool takeaway they left at the table for you to take home. Use this power to remind your guests of how much fun they had at your store. Think about what sort of freebie you can have for them to take home along with all the cool stuff they purchased.

Data Collection: This is one of those boring behind the scenes aspects of running an event and as a result it's the first one to get overlooked. If you've done your promotion right, you'll be seeing a lot of new faces on the day of this event. If you ever want to see them again, you'd better figure out a way to contact them. And while you're at it, you might want to find out which of your promotional efforts got them in so you can do that again next time. And while you're at that, you could get some cool demographic data to figure out which neighborhoods you should focus on. There are lots of fun ways to get this data (raffles, giveaways, asking) but at the bare minimum don't forget to plug your Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail list.

Post-Mortem: Remember that budget? How did you do? Did you overspend? Could you have spent more on advertising and done even better? Too many staff? Too few? What product sold out with this group that you'll want to have more of next time? And for that matter, how did Free Comic Book Day of last year stack up to this one? What lessons did you learn from this one you'll want to remember next year? Take some time and write all of that down. You will be glad you did even if you never read it again.

There is much more we could add to running a successful event. But, one of the things we've learned is that there is no one successful formula. Even when we think we've found one for our shop, it changes on us. So, throw a party. Try something new. But, pay attention to what worked and what didn't. Most of all, have fun.

Point of Sale Systems & How They Can Help Your Store

Rick Lowell

Owner

Casablanca Comics

With comics retailing, the difference between success and failure are often the same things that affect all businesses. Two things in particular are cash flow and profitability. One of the best ways for a comics' retailer to manage these areas is with the use of a point of sale (POS) system. There are several systems available to retailers and each has its own pros and cons.

One of the things that a POS system will allow you to do is keep better track of your inventory and ordering. Inventory cost is probably the biggest expense for most retailers and the most important to manage. Our stores have been using POS systems for close to twenty years and I believe that we have saved tens of thousands of dollars by ordering "correctly". By that, I mean that having the ability to examine sales trends and history allowed us to be more accurate with our ordering. This benefits the store in several ways. By ordering enough product we were able to maximize sales. At the same time, we often were able to order just enough so that we sold all that we could without having multiple extra copies. Those extra copies can add up and unsold merchandise can become stale very quickly. I would much rather have the money spent on those books than dead stock. This becomes especially important for stores who are ordering small quantities of books. Having one or two copies left over when you are ordering twenty or more copies of a book is not ideal but not crippling. In the case of a store ordering five or less copies of a book, those one or two unsold copies could be the difference between profit and loss.

There are many other benefits to using a system. Most POS systems will automatically generate orders based upon your sales which can then be transmitted to your various vendors. This can shorten the amount of time spent on ordering dramatically. Also a good POS system will not only tell you what you sold, but also when you sold it and even who the customer was. Knowing when you sold something is an important piece of data. A book that you sold one copy this week and another last week probably should be reordered. The book that sold this week but had not sold otherwise for two years could probably be skipped. If you are just counting books you would not have that information, or even if you did it may not be easily accessible in the reordering process. Knowing when you sold something can also be useful in preventing fraudulent returns.

As important as knowing what you have sold is being able to track what you have not sold. Product that has not sold for a significant amount of time is tying up valuable cash flow and display space in a store. With a POS system you should be able to track your stale merchandise so that you can mark it down to sell and recover your investment.

A good POS system will help you keep track of special orders for customers, allowing for better and more accurate customer service. You will also be able to provide the customer with a detailed itemized receipt, which presents the store in a more professional appearance. It will also allow you to study purchasing trends by customer. The various reporting possibilities can help with ordering decisions, and knowing a customer's previous purchases can help with suggestive selling.

There are several systems on the market today that are specific to the comics industry. One of the things to consider is whether the system is compatible with the ordering files from your distributors (most notably Diamond Comics). Many systems include a subscriber or pull list module. Generic systems can be used in many retail environments, but do not always adapt well to the specific needs of the comics retailer.

The cost of starting to use a POS system is what sometimes stops people from using one. In my experience, the cost is easily recovered over time with the savings from ordering accurately. Talk to other retailers who are using the various systems on the market and hear what they have to say. If you make the decision to start with a POS system, it is very likely that after a month or two you will wonder how you ever did things before without one.

Reaching Out to the Community

Chris Proulx

Co-Owner

Double Midnight Comics

Looking for a good way to raise awareness of your store's brand? Get out of your store and get active in your community! Being an active member of your community gives you an opportunity to create goodwill towards your store, open new doors and even help others out in the process!

When my partners and I opened Double Midnight in 2002 we made a conscious effort to be a fun, family friendly store. In order to spread the word we decided we needed to get out of the store and attend events where families could be found. Over the years we have attended minor league baseball and hockey games to give away free comics. We also always order extra comics for Free Comic Book Day to distribute throughout the year. When we run out of them we give away coupons for free comics instead. This is something that we did during our city's Holiday Parade last year. For many kids this is their first exposure to the world of comics! We find that getting out to the public and handing out comics rather than waiting for them to come to us is an excellent way to spread the word about the store. This is our chance to introduce people to the medium and hopefully create new readers. We look ourselves as the frontline in the comics army and we always put out our best efforts when interacting with the public.

A few years back we started setting up at the "Day for Kids" a children's expo hosted by our local Boys & Girls Club. At the Day for Kids we distribute comics, have artists on hand for sketching, raffles and other fun events. Our booth is always well attended and we make a lot of kids happy throughout the day! While these events are not money makers for us they do raise awareness of our brand in the community and drive traffic to the store. In addition, these events sometimes lead to new opportunities. After setting up at the Day for Kids I was asked to sit on the planning committee for the following year. Serving on the planning committee led to the establishment of additional professional connections. Recently, we were asked by our local Chamber of Commerce to help them with their annual volunteer dinner which had a superhero theme. The attendees had a great time at the dinner and we were invited to join the Chamber. It's still too early to determine what will come of the Chamber membership but we are looking to make the most of it!

Another way we get ourselves out in the community is to work with area libraries. Through our library initiative we assist local libraries in starting or expanding their graphic novel selections. We also travel to libraries to give talks on comics and help set up comic related workshops. In the summer we provide libraries with items such as gift certificates and graphic novels to use as prizes for their summer reading programs. We work with both public and school libraries and have had great responses from both. With school libraries we provide free comics and run a contest in conjunction with Free Comic Book Day. The school that sends the most students wins free graphic novels for their library! Working with libraries is a great way to get materials out to potential readers and it puts some extra money in your pocket!

In addition to our comic related outings we also run several charity events throughout the year including food drives, fundraisers for the Santa Fund, silent auctions to benefit the Boys & Girls Club and the Make A Wish Foundation and more! We also routinely provide gift baskets and gift certificates to area charities to use in their fundraising efforts. In the coming months we will be sponsoring a superhero marathon for the state's largest children's hospital, and running a blood drive. We are also currently planning a volunteer program for 2011 to reward our customers for their volunteering efforts in the community! We firmly believe in giving back to the people that support us. We are always looking for ways to be seen positive force in the community!

Smile, You're on Slanted Camera!

Charles Brownstein

Executive Director

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund

Whoever said any publicity is good publicity has probably never been the target of a media sting. Comics are getting more media play than ever, which has its upsides and downsides. The good news is there's a buzz that comics are cool, which seems to be boosting the business. The bad news is, well, bad news. Sometimes the camera can cast an evil eye that sees the field in a negative light. We've assembled a selection of attack journalism tactics and offer some tips about how to safeguard your store against sordid spin.

Attack journalism is seldom subtle and sometimes sneaky. Many reporters come in with a story already in mind and they're looking for quotes to support that story. That story may be at odds with the story you believe to be accurate. To counter spin them into understanding where they were wrong is difficult, but it can be done. The most extreme reporter may charge into a store with cameras running and a list of accusatory questions. Others might inject an innocuous interview with a handful of compromising questions.

"These guys are interested in something they can put on the news that is going to be sensational and gather ratings," explains one West Coast retailer. "One of the techniques they use is setting up a situation, for instance sending kids or even an adult into a store to try to buy something they question. The main angle in these stories is 'children in danger,' but in my experience they're not really on any high moral crusades, they're looking for an angle. And it doesn't really matter if the item is legally obscene or actionable, if they can make a program out of it, that's more important than making a case."

"Just because they walk in with cameras doesn't mean you need to talk to them immediately," explains a Texas retailer. "If you're the owner, politely tell them that you're conducting business and that you'd be happy to talk to them if they set up an appointment. If you're an employee, tell them that they'll need to set up an appointment to speak with your boss or the store spokesperson. You're under no obligation to talk to the camera as soon as it arrives and they need to respect that."

Designating a spokesperson is an important aspect of media relations, hostile or otherwise. Whether it's the owner, manager, or a well-spoken associate, putting your store's best voice forward will be beneficial.

When your store spokesperson speaks on camera, the most important rule is to stay calm and professional. "You have to be personable. Speak clearly, speak softly, speak on point, and be aware," advises a Northern California shopkeeper. "If they take issue with the content of a comic you sell, explain that like movies or TV or any other entertainment medium, there are comics for all sorts of audiences. Show them: take them over to your children's section, show them your superhero section or manga, or reference, or art comics. Show them that there's more to comics than fantasies for adolescent boys."

“Don’t give them anything they can use against you in the edit suite,” advises a New York retailer. “For instance, they’ll say a sentence and try to make you repeat it, or try to get you to agree with it. Or they’ll ask you a yes or no question and try to get you to defend the indefensible. Something like, ‘Have you stopped selling porn to kids.’ You can’t answer that yes or no. If you need to pause to recover from the ambush, then take the time, but not awkwardly. Stay polite, but take control of the situation. ‘Have we stopped? We’ve never sold porn to kids.’ If they have a receipt or something incriminating, then admit that sometimes mistakes happen, but repeat the fact that while it may have happened once, that your store does not do that. Don’t let them use you as a punching bag. Try to avoid getting flustered, try to avoid giving them a reaction shot. Instead admit that there may have been an isolated mistake.”

In dealing with hostile media, as with most matters, the best offense is always a strong defense. One of the best ways to spin away from a negative story is to emphasize the positive things that your store does for the community. The effective PR. spokesperson will always be talking about community involvement, whether that includes freebies for charities, library programs, or reading groups. Community involvement, beyond being a positive point to talk about when the press is around, is also a way to build strong roots and support in the community so if a problem does occur there are some friends around.

Having procedures in place for media relations is also crucial. You should have a written procedure in your policy manual for media relations and should emphasize this point in new employee training and with periodic meetings. Coaching your staff on how to work with journalists or asking a customer who works as a reporter to share their insights will help prepare your store to react intelligently and effectively.

You also want to have a working knowledge of the issues that the media will attack. If the press’ top slam story involves children in danger, then you should have a thorough understanding of your community’s standards for adult material and your store’s procedures for carrying such items. This is already fundamental for doing business with adult material and should be spelled out in your policy manual and reinforced with training and periodic meetings with your staff.

With up to date knowledge of your product mix, an understanding of your community’s values, a pro-active, responsible operating philosophy, and a calm, intelligent demeanor, you’ll be better able to weather whatever storm the cameras whip up.

Specialty Selling

Chris Powell

General Manager/CRO

Lone Star Comics

There are a lot of “flavors” of sales-related businesses, some are “big box” retail stores while others are “mom and pop”. There’s “grocery stores” vs. “farmer’s markets” with a few stores in between. If you’re a retailer member of the CBLDF, you are part of what is often referred to as “specialty retail” along with greeting card stores, independent toy stores, game and hobby stores, and countless other businesses that don’t depend on large national advertising budgets or lots of investors pouring money into your store, profits or no.

Because we sell entertainment goods, they are not something that our customers **MUST** have, even if we like for them to think so. Our customers also visit us regularly, many of them every single week. Those are things that set us apart from a lot of other businesses that have sales as a focus. If you saw your car dealer or insurance broker every week, you’d have a very different relationship with them than you do now, when you (hopefully) only see them every few years.

I mentioned before that most of us don’t depend on national advertising budgets, so what **DO** we depend on? First and foremost, it’s the personal relationships you make with your customers. Those relationships are what keep them coming in every week, and spending money with you that they could easily spend elsewhere.

Nurturing that relationship is important, because it is too easy to abuse it if you aren’t consistently reminding yourself and any employees of its value. I’ll cover that in more depth later.

So who is it that needs to maintain these relationships? Who exactly works in sales in your store? The answer is “everyone”! If someone is cleaning the bathroom or unpacking boxes or sweeping the sidewalk, they are impacting the customers’ impressions of you and your store. Too often, we focus on the people working the sales floor or checkout counter, but don’t stress enough to the rest of the team that they are vital, too.

Let’s talk about some of the things that contribute to sales that we don’t always think about. Most of these are more “infrastructure” than they are “technique”, but they are every bit as important.

Outside the Store

When customers approach your store, what do they see? Are the windows completely covered with posters or signs, making it impossible to see what’s beyond the front door?

Posters can be a great resource, but they need to be used wisely. Many of the posters we receive in our stores are so specific to our clientele that they don’t benefit us much to passersby, whereas a nice display of product or signage that reaches out to new customers

may garner you some fresh faces. Think this through when deciding what to put in your windows, as they are a useful tool in your specialty retailing toolbox!

Are your parking lot and sidewalk clean, well-lit, and well-maintained? These are areas where customers form impressions before they even cross your threshold, so don't ignore them.

On the Phone

No matter how hard you try, you can't sell something to someone that decides not to come to your store because of a bad experience on the telephone. If a customer is calling your store for the first time, what impression will they be left with after calling?

Consistent phone greetings that are animated and convey the fun and excitement that people expect from stores like ours will get you off to a great start. Let them know who they are speaking to, listen carefully when they are speaking, and SMILE - it actually makes a difference in how you sound on the phone!

Remember, the customers shopping in the store can hear your side of the phone conversation, but not the other side. You should always be thinking to yourself, "How does this sound?". If your best friend wants to call and talk about the crazy night that you had the night before, that's probably not something that you want to have your customers listening to when you could be helping them find what they need.

Sometimes, a customer will call with a complaint. If at all possible, take that call off the sales floor. You don't want other customers to hear you dealing with it, and you need to be able to focus 100% of your attention on resolving the complaint and salvaging the relationship with that customer. If you are alone or the store is packed, explain that you'd like to give them 100% of your attention and ask if you can call them back.

If you must put someone on hold, *ask* if that is OK. With the prevalence of cell phones or customers calling long-distance, some would rather you call them back or they will give you a call later, rather than have their minutes tied up on hold.

Inside the Store

Much like the outside of your store, you want the inside of the store to make the customer feel safe and welcome. Is the store clean and organized? Are the lights working or are sections burned out and giving parts of the store a "cavey" look? Are the aisles wide enough that customers can easily navigate them without bumping into one another? Can a customer in a wheelchair safely navigate the entire store?

The appearance of your employees is something that you must consider. Each store is building its own unique "feel", so they will have different expectations for the people working there. Whatever dress code you choose, though, it should be consistent and customers should be able to easily distinguish the staff from the other customers.

How interesting is your store? Many successful stores build themed displays that help customers find new products based on other products they enjoyed. Comic shops may want to have some Free Comic Day or other books that they can hand out to kids, being aware of the content inside or to readers that they are hoping to interest in a new series or genre.

Stores that carry both comics and games will want to have “demonstration” product out for people to flip through or play with. Employees that are able to demonstrate new games to customers will gain you new customers and will also make for a better shopping experience overall.

Are collecting supplies convenient to the products they are designed to work with? You should also have a small selection at the counter to hand directly to a customer, rather than asking them to walk across the store with you so that you can show them what you have for sale.

Have you invited the arch-nemesis of retail into your store? He is known as “The Stool” and provides a handy place for employees to sit. Simply put, it’s difficult (some would say impossible) to look alert and attentive when sitting on a stool behind the counter. Employees need to be free to circulate around the store to help customers and The Stool does all he can to prevent that.

They’re Here! Now What?

So you’ve diligently worked to provide a great experience for the customer all the way from their initial phone call to their walk through your front door, but where do you go from there?

Let’s start with the greeting. This is more than just yelling “Hey, you!” from across the store, it’s actually the opening that can set the tone for the rest of the customer’s visit to your store. Give them a moment to get oriented in the store and then, if you know the customer, greet them by name. If you don’t, introduce yourself and make it clear that you’re there to help them.

When you greet the customer, it’s best to avoid yes / no questions. We are all conditioned to answer “no” to questions like, “Is there anything I can help you find?” or “Are you looking for anything in particular?” so do your best to avoid them as an opener. Instead, start a conversation with the customer, asking them how they’re doing, what they’ve been reading, or something like that.

While it is your job to support your store and its employees by selling things to customers, you don’t want them to FEEL like they’re being sold to. I think of this as “conversational selling” and it can be as simple as walking through your comic racks talking about things going on in your community or in the customer’s life while handing them books and telling them a little bit about them. This way, the customer feels that you care about more than the contents of their wallet!

When you’re talking to the customer, make sure you are actively listening and getting clarification where it will help you identify and meet their needs. If they say they are looking

for a new book, ask what books they have been reading and what they do or don't like about various books. This will help you zero in on a selection of books that you think they'll enjoy. If you make recommendations, follow up on their next visit. This is a good opportunity to remind that that you had made the recommendation in the first place and to reinforce that you cared about their experience even after the sale.

I mentioned the importance of putting the product into the customer's hands. This is true whether you're selling comics, games, toys, or any other physical product. Once you have placed it in their hands, the customer has more of an opportunity to form an emotional attachment to the item. It's already theirs, they just haven't paid for it yet! For this reason, we're always happy to open any book or item that has been sealed in shrinkwrap. We sell very visual products, and it doesn't do any good if the customer can't see inside.

Reading books on selling that are written for the wider world of retail, you're going to encounter the phrase "closing the sale" or "asking for the sale" along with some high-pressure tips on how to do so. These have a place in retail, and are an integral part of the selling process. In specialty retail, however, more finesse is required than you'll sometimes read in these books.

Where they'll encourage you to jump in with "What would it take for you to take this home today?" or "I'll just wrap this up for you!" conversational selling and the awareness that the relationship with the customer is as or more important than this one transaction will lead you to take a softer approach. Offer to leave the product at the cash register to "free up" the customer's hands, getting their tacit admission that they intend to buy the product, but don't be pushy.

When the customer has walked all around your store and found lots of things they can't live without, remember that your sales job isn't finished when you start ringing them up. You should always have some interesting things near the register to show them or supplies for their comics. They're already buying, so it's the best time to show them that one more little thing they didn't know they needed!

At check-out is also a great time to reinforce any upcoming events that you think they might be interested in or preorders that you want them to be aware of. If they're buying a run of Green Lantern comics, that's the time to make sure they know about the Green Lantern statue in the new Previews Magazine!

Lastly, thank the customer and close with a "See you this weekend" to reinforce the idea that you're looking forward to their next visit. Where appropriate, make sure first time customers have the store's contact information and your name, and encourage them to call if they have any questions or would like you to hold something for them to pick up.

Individually, these are all little things, but they add up to a great customer experience from beginning to end!

Supplementary Reading

For Everyone:

Why We Buy : The Science of Shopping, by Paco Underhill

Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service, by Ron Zemke

Customer Service for Dummies, by Karen Leland

Hug Your Customers, by Jack Mitchell

Briefcase Books : Customer Relationship Management, by Kristin Anderson & Carol Kerr

For Store Managers / Owners:

Coaching Knock Your Socks Off Service, by Ron Zemke

The Big Book of Customer Service Training Games, by Peggy Carlaw

Skills for New Managers, by Morey Stettner (Don't be fooled by the title, this is one of my favorite books for managers of all experience levels)

Motivating Employees, by Anne Bruse & James S. Pepitone

Uncharted Waters : Expanding Into New Product Lines

David Wheeler

Owner

Dragon's Lair Comics & Fantasy

One of the great things about our stores is that as they grow, they attract new customers. These customers bring new needs, desires and income to our stores while also challenging us to meet their needs. The happy challenge and opportunity that these customers offer us is the need to bring in new offerings both to intrigue our older customers and acquire the attention of the newer ones.

Growth is not easy or simple. As store owners, we should not simply bring in whatever products strike our personal fancy. As a matter of fact, sometimes our customers want things that we do not have *any* personal interest in. There is nothing wrong with this at all, nor is there anything wrong with catering to these desires, so long as it does not push our stores in a direction that we do not want them to go. If our stores exist only to gratify our own egos, instead of the needs of the community that we support, such a store will neither grow nor last long. The store must grow in the direction that our customers want.

We can learn about the interests that our customers have in a number of ways. We can and must talk to them. Casual conversations can lead us to have a general idea of what types of products can be attractive to our clientele. Surveys can also give us clues. Questions about the types of television shows and movies they watch can encourage us to bring in products that directly tie into those productions. When we find that many of our customers watch "The Big Bang Theory", it is not a great stretch to bring in t-shirts or other items that fans of the show will want.

If we learn other hobbies that our customers enjoy and find out how well served the customers are by the existing outlets for those hobbies we can consider bringing those products as well. For example, if we find that many of our customers are involved in scouting and there is no store selling items scouting items locally, and if it fits our store concept, an owner could arrange to bring in these materials. One store that I know of, Rainy Day Games, found that their customers played disc golf. As this community was underserved in their area, and as it did not conflict with their store concept, they began bringing in discs to sell and developed a profitable sideline.

Beyond the obvious tie-ins, once we know the types of shows and hobbies our customers enjoy we can extrapolate and bring in items that we think will catch their attention. If a customer is a fan of Buffy the Vampire Slayer it is a fair bet that they will appreciate items from Firefly. If your customers are fans of Steampunk, for example, you can increase your stock of Girl Genius graphic novels and so-called "hybrid" stores may consider games such as Victoriana and the miniatures game Warmachine, both with a Steampunk feel.

You can also use new product lines to sell to people who typically visit your store in conjunction with your regular customers. If you have a lot of children [as customers] who come in with parents [who aren't yet customers] you might want to look at some higher-end items to pique their interest. (In this specific example, you also might want to work on

CBLDF Retailer Resource Guide

www.cblfd.org

Uncharted Waters: Expanding Into New Product Lines

programs that would engage the parents in your store such as programs to reward good grades). If you have men who come in with women, you could bring in fantasy art to woo them into becoming customers. You are already getting these potential customers into your store, now it is your job to make them part of your clientele. When they start coming in without their companions you will know that you have succeeded!

We can look for additional products from a variety of sources. Monthly catalogs will bring many items to our attention. Do not hesitate to seek direct contacts with the companies selling through industry catalogs. These catalogs can be a great source to make you aware of new products, but if you are committed to bringing in a new line you can often make better deals directly with these companies than you can get through distribution. Some industry trade groups, such as ComicsPRO, may also work out discounts or promotions with various suppliers of interest. You should be aware of these, as well, and take advantage of them as they fit with your concepts of where you want your store to grow.

Industry trade shows can reveal additional items of interest as well. Do not limit yourself to the obvious or easy - visit gift shows and peruse catalogs for teacher supply stores. Go to renaissance fairs and if an item strikes your eye find out who the maker is. Don't hesitate to bring in products that enhance the feel of your store. All these sources give you the chance to make your store stand out as a neat and interesting place to visit.

You should plan to bring in a fair representation of any new product lines that you decide to try out. Being too cautious is worse than being too optimistic in your expansion, within reasonable limits. Those limits will differ from store to store and must be determined by the store owner. If you bring in only a few samples of a new line you may make it appear tacky and insignificant, as it will be swallowed by your more comprehensive offerings. What you need to do when bringing in a new line is to do so with fanfare that will generate excitement. If you are unable to afford to bring in a line with that sort of commitment, it is often better not to bring it in or to bring it in at a later date.

You should have a good idea about how much money your customers are comfortable spending in an average transaction at your store. Don't bring in products that would cost more than they are comfortable paying. You can push this a bit, but if you bring in products that average twice or more what your customers like to spend at your store you can expect those products to languish unless they are extremely special or in demand.

Companies want you to succeed in selling their products. Though they certainly want to make some immediate money, the smart companies will want you to make the best possible presentation of their properties for several reasons. First they value their reputation in the industry and want to make sure that you present their products in the best possible light. They also know that if you have enthusiastic customers that you will strengthen your commitment to them by reordering. Finally, they may have more than one line of products and if you succeed with one line you may bring in additional lines. For all these reasons, if you commit to at least the minimal amount that they think is appropriate to bring in, they will usually encourage your efforts with some sort of benefit. In many cases they will provide some level of point of purchase support. They may also provide an additional discounts, free

products or some other incentive. Usually these incentives will be greater the larger your commitment to their line is.

How much you need to bring in will vary from product line to product line. In most cases you will need to be able to cover a boutique area or "spotlight" area with the products. Typically this will be at least a 4X4 area. Obviously, larger products will cover more space but are also likely to cost more individually than smaller items.

This space requirement is obviously somewhat arbitrary, but exists to make a point. That is that you need to promote any new items that you bring into the store and that they need to have a big deal made of them. They need to be displayed prominently and you should have your employees make sure that customers notice them. You should announce their arrival in both physical and email newsletters, and you should promote them with signage, where feasible. You might even send out a Social Networking blast (I use Facebook the most) targeted to the demographics that you think will enjoy the product.

When the products arrive, be sure to merchandise them well. Focus spotlights on them, both figuratively and, if possible, literally. Make sure that you and your employees are well-versed on the product so that your customers' questions can be answered quickly and completely. It is okay to tell customers that you'll get back to them on a question if necessary but better yet to have the answer on your tongue.

Once you have had the product available for some time you will need to evaluate its long-term viability in your store. Look at the turn rates for this new product line. Does the cash generated per square foot compare favorably with existing products? Did the product line resonate with your customers? How did it make your store look? The answers to all these questions should be considered before deciding whether or not to continue supporting a new product line. Something that doesn't make money itself, but increases purchases in other areas, may still be worth carrying for those ancillary sales. As with all things in our business, it will have to be a judgment call.

If you have done well with a line reorder to restock or even consider expanding the line. You have hopefully accumulated special orders for additional parts of the line. Add them to the order.

If you have determined that a new product isn't cut out for your store don't allow bits and pieces of the line to languish in your store. After a few months of no or low sales blow the line out. Allowing it to linger piecemeal in your store will only give your store a cluttered feeling and that will be bad for your store's reputation and appearance. Keep in mind that when you move the product from the spotlight location that its sales may drop. After all you will be moving it from the best space in the store to one that is less prominent.

New product lines should be brought in at a judicious rate. There is only so much that your customers can absorb at one time. There are limits to what your employees can promote effectively. There are spatial limits to what can be merchandised in an exciting and highly visible manner. As with all things this rate will be determined by your assets; the physical size of your store and staff, the size of your clientele, your budget and the number and types

of customers that you have attracted. A new store could bring in a single new line every month or two and that could be perfectly adequate. An older store with more departments and a larger and more diverse customer base might bring in a new product line for each department over the same length of time. The trick is to neither overwhelm your customers with too many new offerings in too short a period of time nor to allow your store to become too static.

Expanding product lines is only one facet of store management. It must go hand in hand with the other activities of the store but it is essential to keep your store from stagnating or getting into a rut. Once a store starts to feel too comfortable shake things up a bit by bringing in new products. By doing so you will continue to pique your customer's interests and help to ensure that their interests keep them shopping with you rather than finding other places to spend their money. A bored customer will not stay a customer for long.

Writing Effective Press Releases

Charles Brownstein

Executive Director

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund

Communication is critical to any enterprise, whether it's letting your customers know about a new product or telling the world at large about a special event. The most common way of communicating with a broad audience is to send your message out through the media, and the most common tool for doing that is a press release.

Writing press releases is not mysterious. In fact, once you understand the purpose and formula of writing a strong PR, it's a simple science.

Fundamentally, a press release is a statement to communicate a subject of interest a specific audience. It must be clear, concise, and as brief as possible. It generally follows an established format. Let's walk through the steps.

Prewriting

Before you start writing, you need to identify two things: 1) What is your message, and 2) What outlets will be most effective in giving your message broad exposure?

Using a real life example, let's say you're Amanda Fisher of Muse Comics, and you're having a signing with Jim Lee at your store for which you want to spread the word. As discussed elsewhere in this guide, part of planning your special events is selecting appropriate timing, so let's say you're planning your signing to coincide with the release of *Superman Returns*.

So, in this case, your message is that Jim Lee is coming to your town to celebrate the release of *Superman Returns*. You will then have at least two tiers of outlets to communicate that message to: your local media, and the national comics press.

Once you understand who you're writing for, assemble a list of the outlets you'll be sending your message to. This will include the editors of the appropriate sections of your local media, such as: the Arts & Entertainment editor, the listings editor, and the features editor at your local newspaper, alternative weekly, and the nearest major metropolitan paper.

You'll also want to target the editors of the comics publications and websites that you and your customers read. Here, your work is simple: every major comics news site has contact information listed to send stories to the site.

Once you know what you're communicating and who you're communicating to, you can start crafting a press release of interest to those outlets.

Format

Press releases follow an established format. You should always use a readable, neutral font, such as Times Roman or Arial. PRs should always be printed on your store letterhead, and should include your store's name, address, phone number, and web address printed clearly on the top of the page. If you're sending your PR electronically, it's a good idea to send a version of your press release with your letterhead as a Microsoft Word (.doc) file, and also to place the text of your release in the body of the message.

On the top left side of the page, include release and contact info. For instance, if your announcement is "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE," say so. Beneath that line, include the appropriate contact person and their contact phone number and e-mail address.

Your subject, or headline, should follow in **bold** type and be centered on the page. Your headline is the most important part of your press release. It needs to be direct and snappy, because if it's not, the editor may not read any further.

The first line of your announcement should include the date of release and the location of your store.

The end of your release should also include a centered divider, which is usually three number signs. If you go to a second page, be sure to include "Page 2" on either the top or bottom margin of the page. A press release should never exceed two pages.

Finally, it's always a good idea to have some boilerplate information about your store to include at the bottom of every release you send. This is a brief description of your store that you can use again and again.

So, using our real-life example, before you enter any body text, your announcement will look like this:

MUSE COMICS & GAMES

2100 Stevens #107 Missoula, MT 59801 (406) 543-9944/phone www.musecomics.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT, Amanda Fisher

(406) 543-9944

Amanda@musecomics.com

SUPERMAN RETURNS TO MISSOULA WITH COMICS LEGEND JIM LEE!

June 1, 2006 (Missoula, MT) – Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2

Paragraph 3

Paragraph 4

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Muse Comics & Games, Montana's premiere comics and pop culture store, is nationally recognized as a leader in progressive comics retailing. Clean, open, and family-friendly, Muse offers the region's best selection of comics, graphic novels, and games. Since being established in 2001, Muse has published several anthologies of local comics, and led efforts to bring comics and graphic novels to schools and libraries in the community.

Composition

Now you're ready to compose the body of your release. Remember: be clear, catchy, and concise. Your first paragraph will include all of the essential information of your event in brief detail, including: What your event is; Who your guest is; Where it happens; When it happens; and Why it's of interest.

The second paragraph will expand in detail, explaining who should care and why. This can be accomplished any number of ways, but usually involves a quote from the artist or host about the event. When targeting your local media, it is also important to look for a local hook – in this case, the fact that it's Jim Lee's first ever appearance in Montana.

The third paragraph will expand in detail about your guest, and the fourth paragraph will reiterate the critical information. Sometimes, you may also add another paragraph including a quote to further emphasize your event, and to provide reporters with a sound byte they can use in an article derived from your PR. Your final paragraph should include the basic location and contact details for end-readers to reach you for more information about the event. Once you've gotten the hang of it, these rules are flexible, but let's follow them for now.

So, to follow our above example, your announcement may read like this:

MUSE COMICS & GAMES

2100 Stevens #107 Missoula, MT 59801 (406) 543-9944/phone www.musecomics.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT, Amanda Fisher

(406) 543-9944

Amanda@musecomics.com

SUPERMAN RETURNS TO MISSOULA WITH COMICS LEGEND JIM LEE!

June 1, 2006 (Missoula, MT) – Jim Lee, the visionary artist of Superman and Batman, is coming to Missoula on June 30 to celebrate the long awaited release of Superman Returns! Lee will be joined by fellow artists Ale Garza, Carlos D'Anda, and Sandra Hope at Muse Comics for a signing to be followed by an exclusive screening of Superman Returns to benefit the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund!

Jim Lee's dynamic illustrations have invigorated some of the world's most beloved superheroes, earning him the distinction of being the best-selling comic book artist in America. This will be his first appearance in Montana. "Jim Lee's contribution to comics and pop culture is extraordinary, and we're proud to be able to bring him out to meet our community for this special event," says Muse owner Amanda Fisher.

Over his 20 year career, Jim Lee has worked on nearly every major superhero comic published in the United States, with memorable runs on Superman, Batman, the X-Men, and the Punisher, all of whom went on to enjoy success on the silver screen. In the 1990s he founded WildStorm Productions, which introduced a number of successful new comics creations to the world, including WildC.A.T.S., Gen 13, and The Authority. Today Lee is one of the most popular and in-demand artists in the world.

The Superman Returns celebration begins at 5 PM on June 30th, when Jim Lee and company will sign for fans at Muse. Following the signing, Lee will join fans at a special opening day benefit screening of Superman Returns. Tickets for the screening are available for a \$10 donation to the CBLDF at Muse Comics.

Muse Comics is located at 2100 Stephens #107, Missoula, MT 59801. For more information, please call (406) 543-9944 or visit www.musecomics.com

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Muse Comics & Games, Montana's premiere comics and pop culture store, is nationally recognized as a leader in progressive comics retailing. Clean, open, and family-friendly, Muse offers the region's best selection of comics, graphic novels, and games. Since being established in 2001, Muse has published several anthologies of local comics, and led efforts to bring comics and graphic novels to schools and libraries in the community.

Sometimes, in catering to the audiences of the media you're courting, you may want to tailor your press release to meet the needs of the outlet. So, in our real world example, the above announcement was appropriate for local and regional media because it emphasized the movie and personality angle. But for the comics world, where we know who Jim Lee and his compatriots are, the more attractive angle for websites to pick up the story is different from the local angles emphasized above. In that case, it can be useful to build upon the work you've already done and craft a release just for them. Here's the real world example that Amanda Fisher created for the comics media:

MUSE COMICS & GAMES
2100 Stevens #107 Missoula, MT 59801 (406) 543-9944/phone www.musecomics.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
CONTACT, Amanda Fisher
(406) 543-9944
Amanda@musecomics.com

JIM LEE FINDS HIS MUSE FOR FREE SPEECH!

June 1, 2006 (Missoula, MT) –CBLDF Defender of Liberty Jim Lee and fellow creators Ale Garza, Carlos D'Anda, and Sandra Hope will be appearing at Muse Comics in Missoula, Montana on June 30 to celebrate the arrival of *Superman Returns* and raise money for the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund!

"As a retailer, and especially as a comic book fan, I've always felt that the CBLDF's work is essential," says Muse owner Amanda Fisher. "It's great to be able to team up with Jim, Ale, Carlos, and Sandra to put together an event that gives back to our fans and that allows us all to give back to the Fund, an organization we all depend on."

The Superman Returns celebration begins at 5 PM on June 30th, when Jim Lee and company will sign for fans at Muse. The signing will be capped off by two silent auctions for rare DC RRP books by Jim Lee to benefit the Fund. Books on auction are the 2004 DC RRP edition of Superman #204, and the 2005 DC RRP edition of *All Star Batman & Robin* #1. All proceeds from the winning bids will be donated to the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.

Following the signing, Lee and the WildStorm crew will join fans at a special opening day benefit screening of *Superman Returns*. Tickets for the screening are available for a \$10 donation to the Fund at Muse Comics.

CBLDF Executive Director Charles Brownstein says, "Amanda and her team at Muse have always been strong supporters of the Fund's work with their regular membership drives, auctions, and raffles to raise money for our cases. We're grateful for all the effort they've put into this event, which will surely kick their support up to an even greater level at a time where our casework needs all the funds we can muster."

Muse Comics is located at 2100 Stephens #107, Missoula, MT 59801. For more information, call the store at (406) 543-9944 or visit www.musecomics.com

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Muse Comics & Games, Montana's premiere comics and pop culture store, is nationally recognized as a leader in progressive comics retailing. Clean, open, and family-friendly, Muse offers the region's best selection of comics, graphic novels, and games. Since being established in 2001, Muse has published several anthologies of local comics, and led efforts to bring comics and graphic novels to schools and libraries in the community.

Comparing the two versions of the above press release, you'll see that they follow the same basic format, but contain different emphases to better fit their target outlets.

Both press releases tie to the larger hook of the release of *Superman Returns*, but the first release emphasizes the appeal of Jim Lee, whereas the second release assumes the appeal of Jim Lee and emphasizes the charitable aspect of the event. This is seen in both the headline and the angle of each release.

In both releases, the first paragraph gives all of the necessary information about the event. In the first release, the second paragraph explains why readers will care by emphasizing who Jim Lee is and introduces the local hook that this is his first appearance in Montana. In the second, the reason we emphasize readers will care is because it benefits a prominent industry charity. Both contain a quote that can be pulled by reporters in a write-up on the event.

In the third paragraph, the first release reinforces our emphasis on why readers care about Jim Lee by further expanding on his accomplishments and appeal. In the second release, we play with the structure slightly by bringing the description of the day's festivities into the third graph, but we stay true to the structure by emphasizing how the event serves a charitable purpose, which, after all, is our hook.

The fourth paragraph of the first release restates in detail all the critical information. In the second release, the fourth paragraph concludes our detailed statement of the critical information. Again, the structure may be tweaked slightly, but remains true to the overall outline.

The second press release contains a fifth paragraph with a quote from a representative of the organization receiving the benefit from the event. This serves to further reinforce the event purpose, and to provide the target media with an additional quote to use in articles derived from the press release. Both releases end with the critical contact information.

As you can see, these two models follow the same basic structure, and when you compare them to other press releases, you will find that most follow that same structure.

By mastering the basic structure and format requirements of press releases, you can plug in whatever information best conveys your message and send your announcement out with confidence.

Follow-up

OK, you've written your release. Before you send it, it's a very good idea to get someone else to proofread it for you, because nobody, not even the most seasoned writer, catches every error. After adding your final corrections you're ready to send it into the world.

If all goes well, sending the press release out is just the beginning. You also need to be prepared to properly follow up.

It's a good idea to have photos of your store, of your guest, and of their recognizable project available electronically in several formats in case a publication wants visuals to accompany a listing or article. In most cases you should be able to get images of your guest and their work either directly from them or from their publisher.

You also want to be prepared to talk to reporters calling for follow-ups, where you emphasize your target message. These topics were discussed in the articles on PAE and Successful Store Events elsewhere in this publication.

If you don't hear back after sending out your announcement, don't be afraid to follow up with your local media on your own. Reporters for small town papers tend to be very accessible. But be aware that while many local newspapers will run items of this sort, don't be surprised if some do not. In the newspaper business, space can be precious.

However you are called upon to follow up, being prepared, professional, and courteous is a must. A press release is an invitation to your store, so just as you wouldn't invite someone to your house if it were in disarray, you should not invite someone into your store unless you can put your best foot forward.

The Down & Dirty

The above is just an illustration of how to craft a press release using established formats and structures. When crafting your own, it should be a good guide for the notes you'll want to hit, but here is the road map of the essentials you need:

- Company Letterhead, Name, Address, Phone Number, Web Address
- Contact Person's Name & Details
- Immediate Release or Release Date (all caps)
- Proper formatting – End of release divider, page numbers, basic font
- **HEADLINE** or **TITLE** in **BOLD/CAPS**
- Paragraph 1: (Date/City)-who,what,when,where and why.
- Paragraph 2: The hook, why readers will care
- Paragraph 3 – Final: Summarize, detail, and restate the important information
- Last Paragraph: Your location and contact details
- Boilerplate information about your store

Online Marketing Demystified

Francie Soito

Co-Owner

Black Cat Comics

What is Online Marketing?

It is easy to get overwhelmed by the vast sea that is online marketing these days. Anything we do to promote our business online can fit under the umbrella of online marketing. This can include anything from buying keywords on Google to having an online website to selling our items on eBay. It takes so much just to keep our doors open every week that sometimes online marketing can seem like a daunting task – especially with limited resources. But as small business owners, online marketing can be a key and vital tool to help not only maintain our business but help it thrive.

Online marketing has taken on many forms over the last decade from what once meant putting up a simple website ala online brochure that never changed to creating interactive experiences where users are actively involved with the media they are consuming. Recent studies state that we spend anywhere between 14 – 30 hours per week of our time online. More and more of us rely on the Internet as a main form of entertainment and communication; a way to stay connected to each other and with what’s happening in the world around us.

As business owners we need to go where our customers are and market to them in a way that complements and even enhances what they’re already doing online. Gone are the days of ‘build a website and they will come’. We are now competing against hundreds of thousands of advertisers that are all competing for their time and attention.

Getting the Word Out There vs. Getting Money in Your Cash Drawers

For most of us, it’s almost a luxury to be able to have a marketing budget to promote our stores and get the word out. It can take tens of thousands of dollars in TV, print, online and radio to promote our store brand. Brand marketing focuses primarily on promoting a brand which can include your store name, logo and maybe a tiny snippet about your store.

Brand marketing poses many challenges to the small business owner, especially those of us with limited funds. For one, it is hard to measure the effectiveness of brand marketing. We need to be able to see some results from every \$1 we spend and it’s not that black and white with brand marketing. There are research firms that can measure ‘brand awareness’ but that takes several thousands of dollars and probably trumps the amount of money you would spend on the advertising campaign itself. You could ask folks that come through your doors, ‘How did you hear about us’, but most folks either don’t remember or say they heard about you from a friend. And it can also be a challenge to get your staff to remember to ask new customers how they heard about you.

The second challenge to brand marketing is that it is expensive. The idea is to get the word out there so you have to cast a very wide net to purchase as many eyeballs as possible and that can quickly add up – especially if you decide to target that audience to a specific demographic, i.e., Males 18 – 24 yrs. in a specific geographic location. Getting the word out there with brand marketing is the traditional way to market your business and get new customers, but if it doesn't translate back into our cash registers than it can be a big burden and disappointment both in time and resources. With our foray into brand marketing our existing customers acknowledged seeing our ads but it never really translated into us getting new customers.

Another tool in the marketer's tool belt is direct marketing. Direct marketing is much more focused than brand marketing as it has a very clearly stated goal such as, "drive Internet sales by 10%", or "promote the sale on X-Men books this weekend" vs. a brand marketing campaign which would be along the lines of "Black Cat Comics in Milpitas – come check us out". Another key distinction between the two forms of marketing is that direct marketing is measurable – you can measure the impact for every \$1 you spend or ROI – return on investment. This is a key distinction and one that is critical to small business owners who need to make every dollar count.

In an ideal world we would have money to invest in both brand marketing and direct marketing to build and grow our business. But if it's a choice between the two I would suggest focusing your efforts on getting people in the store buying your products through direct marketing and let your existing customers promote your brand for you.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Online marketing channels have evolved into a science by enabling the small business owner to create their own advertisements and measure and test the efficacy of their campaigns. Sites like Google, Yelp, Yahoo! and Facebook provide tools to create an ad, target your audience, measure the clicks to the ads, hits to whatever you're promoting and provide insights into the audience that is interacting with your ad. All of these tools are virtually the same whether you're spending \$100 or \$10,000. The challenge is that they're all a bit different and all a bit tricky to maneuver but once you've mastered one the rest are fairly easy to repeat.

Let's walk through a specific example like Facebook. First we should briefly cover the question, "Why should I advertise on Facebook?". According to their press page Facebook now has more than 500 million active users worldwide with an average of 130 friends and spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook. It's becoming ubiquitous like Google – almost everyone on the Internet is using it. And one of the first rules of marketing is to go where your audience is, don't make them come to you.

Facebook has several different tools to help promote your business. They have what's called Facebook Pages which are profiles you can create and customize for your store for **free** and can take anywhere from about 30 – 60 minutes to set up initially and about 30 minutes - 2 hours a week to maintain. On our Facebook Page we have basic information like our store location, hours, bus lines, etc. as well as store and event photos; news and

info on what books are coming out for the week and we've recently added weekly videos highlighting the key books.

Our Facebook Page provides us with an opportunity to directly communicate with our customers, provides them with a channel to communicate to us and creates a sense of community linking our customers with not only us but with each other. We also use our Facebook Page to better understand our customers and how they're interacting with our Page using the Insights tools. We can see what city our customers are coming from, their age group and gender which helps us define our target audience and provides us with direction on what audience we should target in other marketing channels.

Maintaining a Facebook Page takes time and effort. If you don't have the bandwidth to post new updates on it at least once a week than it might not be for you. Having a Facebook Page that is never updated or refreshed reflects poorly on your business and your brand image.

Another tool on Facebook are their ads that appear on the right hand side of the screen.



These ads are easy to create and take anywhere from 5 min. – 30 min. from start to finish. Like with any marketing endeavor, it's key to establish your goals up front so that you're objectives are clear and your marketing messaging supports your goals. Once you have these in mind creating the actual ad is the easy and fun part.

When creating a Facebook ad there are 3 sections: Design your Ad, Targeting and Campaign, Pricing and Scheduling. In the first section, you create the ad by uploading an image like your logo and create messaging on what you want your ad to say. A key here is to make the messaging active, not passive and have a clear call to action, meaning, tell them why they should click on the ad, what's the benefit to them if they click on the ad. In this section you also specify where you want the ad to click to. It can be your website or it can be a Facebook Page or something else you'd like to promote on, i.e., an event or sale.

The second section is honing in on your target audience. Here you can specify certain geographic cities, age, gender, likes, interests, etc. of your audience. This is where having audience insights from a Facebook Page or something similar can really help provide

Estimated Reach
4,040 people

- who live in the United States
- who live within 25 miles of Milpitas, CA
- age 18 and older
- who like comics or comic books
- who are not already connected to Black Cat Comics

guidance on what kind of audience you should focus on. In this section you also have the opportunity to add specific interests or keywords of the audience you're looking for like 'comic books, comics, x-men, batman', etc. This way the ad will only appear to users who have those keywords in their profile. Another unique targeting capability on Facebook is what users are connected to. For instance if you're promoting your Facebook Page, you can avoid advertising to users who are already members of your Facebook

Page so you're not wasting your ad dollars. Also, as you create a specific target for your ad, Facebook adjusts the number of total possible eyeballs that will see your ad in the box to the right. This is helpful to know how wide of a net you are casting with your ad.

The last section on campaign pricing is the trickiest not only on Facebook but also on the majority of other online ad tools. Most tools provide you with a few different pricing options: one to pay for every time a person clicks on your ad (CPC) or one to pay for every time someone sees your ad (impressions or CPM). If your goal is branding than it's more about the latter, if your goal is direct marketing than it's the former. For us because we try to make every dollar count we always opt for the cost-per-click model. My view is, 'why should I pay for my ad appearing on a page if someone doesn't click on it, especially if there is no way of knowing if they actually looked at my ad or not?'. If I choose the CPC model I'm getting the CPM impressions, or eyeballs, for free anyway so I might as well get the most for my money.

3. Campaigns, Pricing and Scheduling

The screenshot shows the Facebook Campaign Manager interface for setting up a campaign. It is divided into three main sections: Campaign & Budget, Schedule, and Pricing. In the Campaign & Budget section, the Campaign Name is 'Holiday Sale', the Budget is set to 2.00 USD per day, and there is a note that this is the maximum amount to spend per day. The Schedule section shows two dates: 'Today' at 1:00 pm and '12/1/2010' at 1:00 pm, both in Pacific Time. There is a checkbox for 'Run my campaign continuously starting today'. The Pricing section has two radio buttons: 'Pay for Impressions (CPM)' and 'Pay for Clicks (CPC)', with 'Pay for Clicks (CPC)' selected. Below this, the Max Bid is set to 1.00 USD, with a suggested bid range of 0.91 - 1.43 USD. A disclaimer at the bottom states that all bids, budgets, and other amounts are exclusive of tax and that the suggested bid is in simple mode.

The amount of money you want to spend on the campaign is up to you. To give you an example, if we want to have an ongoing brand campaign to let people know about our store we'll spend probably the minimum of \$2 per day. This way I'm not stretching my pocket book especially since I'd have a hard time measuring the overall impact of the campaign. If however we're promoting an event like Free Comic Book Day, we may spend anywhere from \$10 - \$25 per day the 2 weeks leading up the event. It all depends on your goals and your budget. The more you spend the more impact you *can* have but that's not a guarantee. I would suggest testing your ads and their impact by dipping your toe in with small budgets before committing hundreds of dollars a month.

Most ad tools will provide you with a 'bid' suggestion given your target criteria. It's good to shoot for somewhere in the middle so that your ad doesn't get the worst placement and having the highest bid doesn't always guarantee having the best placement so there's no need to pay top dollar for it. Once you've ironed out this last piece the final step is reviewing the ad before submitting it for review by the publisher, in this case Facebook, before it goes live.

The last thing to mention here is that most ads do not go up instantly – the majority of publisher sites have a review process where an actual human being reviews your ad to

make sure there isn't anything offensive before it goes live. I mention this because if you are promoting an ad for an event you're having today, don't expect it to go live for 4 – 8 hours. Create your ads at least 1 day (preferably 3 days in case there are problems) before you need them to go live.

As another general rule – since these ads are easy to create and relatively cheap to run (you are in control of how much you want to spend) I recommend creating 2 – 3 ads for every campaign you run. This way you can test which ad performs best via click rate (which ad produces the most amount of clicks given the number of times the ad was shown) and direct the rest of your campaign on the best performing ad.

Similar to the Facebook Page, Facebook Ads and most other publishers provide detailed analysis about how, who, when people are clicking on your ads. This is helpful in again better understanding your audience as well as measuring the impact of your ads.

Most advertising tools are similar to Facebook in how to setup an ad and measure the results; where they differ is in the details, i.e., reporting insights, user-friendly interface, etc. They all offer helpful tips on how to get started, how to use their tools and how to create the most effective campaigns.

There are also quite a few free tools out there that can help promote your business namely Yelp, Google Places and Yahoo! Local. Try googling your store and see what pops up in the search results. It's worth the effort to see how customers are finding you and gives you the opportunity to update, add and sometimes fix some of your store information on these various sites.

Why Should I?

I'm sure at this point some of you may be asking, why should I go through all this effort, why should I change the way I do things? Speaking frankly, in these tough economic times we all need to get out of our comfort zone and get creative about driving buzz in our industry. It's no longer just about promoting our individual businesses, it's now become a necessity for all of us to help promote comics and create excitement for the medium. By making our stores exciting places for people to visit and share both online and offline we can help strengthen our industry and ensure a long and healthy road ahead.

Francie Soito has over 13 years of experience in marketing and market research and has worked for such companies as HotBot, Macromedia, Yahoo!, LinkedIn, Facebook and AOL. Francie is the co-owner of Black Cat Comics in Milpitas, CA along with her husband Mark Causey which they've owned for more than 8 years. Francie can be reached at francie@blackcatcomics.biz.

Moving Do's & Don'ts

John Munn

Owner

Comic Book Ink

Someone asked me recently, "Why did you move Comic Book Ink twice in the last eight years?"

I answered, "The first time was because our location was buried under construction and we didn't have any choice. We were forced to. The second time was because the location phenomenal and we didn't have any choice. We would have been foolish NOT to."

COMIC BOOK INK, opened in 2002 in the Proctor district of Tacoma, Washington. It was on a block that had a lot of foot traffic and was close to three schools. **In 2004**, the building that we were in was being renovated to make way for a bank. A huge yellow dumpster was parked in front of our shop and sales dropped over 33%. Our lease had been up for nine months and on July 1st our Landlord came in and gave us a 30 Letter to move. They said that they wanted to expand the restaurant next door and that we were in the way. We found a great space at East 72nd and Portland Avenue, 15 miles away and it might as well have been on Mars. The effort to promote the fact that we had not closed, and we were in a tough to find location, was mammoth in terms advertising and energy. The foot traffic in front of our shop all but evaporated. We lost almost 50% of our subscribers and our rent tripled in a space that was three times larger than our original location. In five years time, we were able to bring our shop back to where it was fiscally when we moved and saw a 5% increase in our bottom line overall

In March of 2010, we saw that our lease was ending in August. We took proactive steps to try find a better location. After seeing numerous sites, we signed a lease for our new home at the **LAKWOOD REGAL CINEMA COMPLEX**...right next door to the County's largest Movie Multiplex. We would be the first thing you see when you saw when you entered the complex and our visibility would grow in leaps in bounds. Since moving, our rent has dropped 20% and we gained 600 square feet of space. The amount of foot traffic has been phenomenal and our bottom line has increased by close to 33% overall. We have spent next to nothing on advertising the move, but used our Website and Social Media Sites to promote the new location. We also prepped our customers for six months in advance that we were moving...including Free Comic Book Day. We also expanded our six year relationship with the Lakewood Regal Cinemas and teamed up for a number of co-promotions with our new neighbor.

What have we learned in our two moves?

1) DON'T MOVE! Unless you have the perfect "**Trifecta for a New Location**" (High Visability Vs Where You Are Now, More Space and Less Rent)...**DON'T MOVE!** After establishing your business, and its location, the very worst thing you could do is to leave it. If a business leaves it established space...most people think you have closed completely. The costs of the move...including the amount of advertising you will have to

CBLDF Retailer Resource Guide

www.cbldf.org

Moving Do's & Don'ts

spend...could very well be enough to bury your business. If you have the capital, open a second location instead...building open the strengths that you established with the first store. The move from Proctor to Portland Avenue crippled us for years. Even when we were about to move to Lakewood, folks were still coming in and saying, "I didn't know you were still around! We thought you closed at years ago!"

But if you are really intent on moving, please remember these things:

2) TRIFECTA of a NEW LOCATION: Remember the three points - **High Visibility Vs Where You Are Now....** Does the new location all but triple the amount of people that will see your business? **More Space...**Does the new location allow for expansion? **Less Rent...**This is just as important as visibility. Will this new location cost you less in order to offset any costs you might spend in promoting it initially? In this economy...now is the time to negotiate in your shop's favor.

3) PREPARE YOUR CUSTOMERS: Give yourself time to prepare your regular customers, and subscribers, that you are moving. Get them involved. The first time we moved, we had a month to tell them and were allowed a post a sign in the window of the old location for a week. 38 People showed up to help us move, but a lot of our customers were caught off guard and we lost, more than we gained, for years. The second time we moved, we sent them a personal e-mail, a press release through constant contact, put a letter in their subscriber files, put signs on the windows and sent regular updates through our Website and Social Media. Almost a hundred people showed up to help us move to Lakewood and they all felt like they were helping us move to a better place.

4) ALERT the MEDIA: Press releases to all the local media outlets can really pay off if you have built relationships with them. Because we have been lucky enough to have done numerous signings at our shop, as well as been a part of a lot of charitable outreach, our local paper did a three page article on our move!

5) ALERT the "SOCIAL" MEDIA: There is no better advertising, outside of your own Website, that Social Networks like: Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (even MySpace) as well as e-mail programs like Constant Contact. The first time we moved, we spent over \$20,000.00 in print and telephone book advertising. The second time we moved, we eliminated all telephone print advertising and ended up spending less than \$500.00...and a third of that was on new business cards (with maps on the back).

6) PREPARE YOUR "NEW" CUSTOMERS: From the moment we signed the lease, we had signs in the windows telling people Comic Book Ink was coming. For five months, we had COMING SOON Signs, mixed in with Comic Book Posters, telling the world that was passing the shop...that we were coming on August 1st! We even kept the doors open during renovation for lookie loos to get sneak peeks and ask questions!

7) MAKE TIME for the UNEXPECTED: Start immediately with local governments to get your new Licensing, Permits and Ordinances set. It will allow for hiccups. Even with six months of lead time, we were still dealing with issues with the city of Lakewood the day before we opened.

8) PREPARE YOUR NEW SPACE: Just like moving from your current home to a new one...make sure the new space is ready for you immediately. Have the walls painted, the floor ready, the slat wall up and all the other construction ready before you put one item through the door. Have your phone, internet, security systems and mail ready to receive you the moment you walk in. This might include running these systems for a week at both spaces at the same time...overlapping to insure zero loss of coverage. And, of course, contact Diamond Comics and get them into the loop immediately. They will be just as excited for you as you are about the possibilities that await you!

9) PREPARE YOUR OLD SPACE: You know what sells the fastest and the slowest at your shop. Prepare for that. Have a sale one day at a time...Slowest Selling items to the fastest...ending with the Newest in the Shop. The day after each sale, box up that item in store. This serves twofold. It will clean up some dead wood and the boxes will slowly re-introduce the reality the move is actually happening...to old customers and new. Give yourself at least ten days for this process.

10) PACK to UNPACK: This is the absolutely most important step! Pack up the boxes in your Old Store in order of the location that you are going to place the product in the New Store. In other words, the items that are going to the BACK of the NEW STORE should be waiting to move at the FRONT of the OLD STORE. Make sure they are well labeled as to their contents so there is zero confusion. Have Staff, and or Family in the know, at both locations to guide the folks who are helping you move. Move your fixtures first and have them in place to be putting the moved items into them immediately!

And finally...

11) MOVE on YOUR SLOWEST SALES DAY: We moved on a Sunday and re-opened the next day on Monday!

Do these points work?

In terms of Sales? The second move has proved the “Trifecta of a New Location” to be true, but..then again..so did the first move!

In terms of the Actual Physical Move? In the two times that we have moved Comic Book Ink...we were only closed 1 Day of Business...both times.

If you ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO Move...Remember:

Be Organized. Be Prepared. Be Proactive instead of Reactive....You'll do just fine.

ABOUT COMIC BOOK INK:

Comic Book Ink opened its doors on October of 2002 and is now located at 2510 South 84th Street, Suites 15A-B, Lakewood, Washington 98499. The store is a seven time nominee, and two time finalist, for the WILL EISNER SPIRIT of RETAILING AWARD. The shop is also the 2010 Winner of the KING 5 TELEVISION BEST IN WESTERN WASHINGTON AWARD. Comic Book Ink has mentored numerous fledgling comic book shops and believes in ethical retailing and the firm belief that working with other shops as family, instead of competition, grows the industry rather than diminishes it. You can contact John Munn through their website (www.comicbookink.com) or by phone at (253) 761-4651.

Event Planning & Promotion

Chris Powell

Lone Star Comics

CBLDF Retailer Resource Guide Editor

Events are a fantastic way to bring new customers into your stores and to enhance your stores' reputation with your existing customers. Besides a broad selection and staff with expert product knowledge, events are a great way to distinguish your store from local and online competitors, even in the most crowded of markets.

When we discuss “events”, this covers a broad range of special events that can be held in your stores. They may be creator signings, appearances by media guests from TV or movies, release parties for new comics or graphic novels, social events like speed dating or mini-proms, or even a birthday party for a character like Captain Kirk! There are many articles on what makes for a fun event, which is very important. Just as important, though, is that the event meet the store's behind-the-scenes needs and that takes organization. Successfully organizing a special event requires that attention be paid to the scheduling, an event's budget and staffing levels, and promotional avenues that can be used to publicize the event.

SCHEDULING

Store owners and staff should monitor publisher and creator social networking and news sources. This can provide advance notice of opportunities that have the potential for strong special events. That may be that the creators are attending a convention near the store (minimizing travel expenses) or starting to work on a book that's new to them, publishers are launching a new series, etc.

Our stores maintain a large calendar on the office wall with notes about upcoming events for the next 3-6 months out, even if they're only in “theoretical” stages so far. That gives us time to make contact with publishers or creators, Diamond if we need additional stock, and keeps us from piling events on top of one another needlessly.

Six to eight weeks before an event, we've completed final plans and budgets for the upcoming event, including any co-op or sponsorship applications. At that point, we begin our in-store promotion of the event, set it up on the various social media websites, and brief the staff on any special scheduling or needs for the event.

Approximately 2 weeks from the event, we post more heavily on social media sites (Facebook, Twitter and our own blog), finalize press releases and send them out, and begin running any paid ads that we may have included in the budget.

BUDGETING AND STAFFING

If you don't plan carefully, an event's budget can really get away from you. While not every event must make a profit, you should know what the costs are and plan accordingly so that the marketing payoff offsets any expenses you incur that aren't offset by increased sales.

A budget for a store event should include, at a minimum:

- Talent-related expenses, such as meals, lodging, and travel.
- Additional payroll if an increased staff presence is required. Remember to include overtime where applicable.
- Decorations
- Refreshments
- Additional product brought in for the event
- The cost of any promotional / giveaway product tied to the event
- Production of flyers / signage for the event
- Paid advertising in social or traditional media
- Offsetting co-op funds, if applicable

Determining what is and is not a successful event, monetarily, varies by store. What doesn't change is the store manager's need to understand the costs throughout the planning process.

PROMOTING AN EVENT

The best-planned event in the world can be done in by poor or non-existent promotion. Today, there are more ways than ever to get the word out about your events, it just takes time, energy, and sometimes money to make it happen.

We make heavy use of online community calendars, to begin with. Most areas have free calendars sponsored by community websites or newspapers, and your events can be posted there along with other events. One benefit to this is that many newspapers and television stations, particularly freelance reporters, scour these online calendars for quick, easy news items that they can use as filler.

We also have a mailing list of local news outlets and online comic news sites. We send them our press releases 2 weeks prior to the event and again a few days before the event.

The press releases are most successful when accompanied by some sort of promotional gift related to what's in the release, we usually include toys or candy and the people in the newsroom love them.

Constant Contact and other e-mail mailing lists offer a great way to reach out to customers who have expressed an interest in your events. With DC co-op, which will be discussed later, you can probably even subscribe to the service for free!

We use Facebook as a means of staying in touch with our customers for everyday announcements like new product releases, in-store tournaments and events, etc. It is also a strong source of new customers, thanks to affordable paid advertising. Below, you'll find a quick primer for setting up free event listings on Facebook, along with paid ads for events.

FACEBOOK PRIMER

I'm going to assume that you already have a store "Place" page set up. If you don't, there are numerous tutorials online for doing so.

On your store's page, there is an "Events" button where you can set up an event, giving it a time and date, location, catchy name / title, and an image that makes it "pop" on the page. Once you have an event set up in the system, you're ready to promote it!

From the event page, you can share the event on your store's Timeline (formerly "Your Wall", send it out as a message to all your "fans", invite specific people to the event, or share it on your personal Timeline. As your customers RSVP to say they're coming, their friends will see it in their newsfeeds or may be invited by your customers.

Paid advertising will let you promote your event to people in your community who may not even know your store exists. After you've set up an event in Facebook's system, click on the "Advertising" link at the bottom of your Facebook page. There will be a green "Create an Ad" button that will then let you choose which of your existing ads you would like to advertise. You'll use the existing image from your event or upload a new one, and then tweak the ad copy. The page will show you a preview of your ad in real-time, so you will see what a Facebook user will see when they are presented with your ad.

Once your ad is laid out to your liking, you'll select various demographic and interest information to control WHO will see your ad. This is one of the strongest features of Facebook advertising, since you don't have to spend money promoting your event to someone who is unlikely to care. You'll be able to choose age ranges, marital status, distance from a particular location, and much more. You can also choose from interests that the Facebook members have listed on their profiles, things like X-Men, comic books, comics, toys, writing, etc.

As you enter the information and narrow or widen the focus of your ad, you'll be shown a live calculation of how many Facebook members meet your criteria and will have your ad displayed on their pages. At that point, you are ready to set things like the daily or weekly budget for your advertising run and how much you're willing to pay for the advertising.

There are 2 ways to pay, "per click" or "per impression". When you "pay per click" the click, you are only charged when a user actually clicks on your ad and visits your event's page. With "pay per impression", your ad will be displayed to many customers and you pay whether they click on the ad or not. This is most similar to newspaper ads. The price

per click is typically higher, since that is a more valuable response than someone just seeing the ad. You will choose how much to pay per click or per impression, and Facebook will automatically choose how often to show your ad based on that information. A lower-priced ad will be shown less often than a higher-priced one, but that can also make your advertising budget last longer.

Once these steps are complete, Facebook administrators will take about a day to approve your ad and it will go live. For this reason, it's best to set up the ads at least a few days before you really want to start running them.

CO-OP ADVERTISING

In the Direct Market, only DC Comics offers co-op advertising at this time. There are guidelines posted on the DC Vendor Page on Diamond Comics' website, but I've included some highlights here.

When retailers place orders for DC Comics each month, a percentage of their purchase is set aside as a "co-op balance" that they can spend from if they meet certain criteria.

Retailers can get pre-approval for ads that feature DC characters and projects, along with their store's contact information, address, and other marketing messages. If approved, ads typically qualify for up to 50% reimbursement. That amount can be as high as 75% if multiple stores or certain high-profile projects are involved. In 2011, DC expanded the program to include things like Facebook advertising, online mailing lists, and more.

A retailer can download the pre-approval form from Diamond's website, fill it out, and fax or email it to Maryanne Marlowe at Diamond. Her contact information is on the forms, and she will usually respond with approval or comments within a day or two. If approved, the ad can then be placed and paid for (The retailer pays 100% at the time the ad is run). After the retailer has paid for the ad, they'll send Ms. Marlowe another form for reimbursement, and will receive credit to their Diamond account within a few weeks.

Outside this traditional advertising arrangement, DC has also included a store's online mailing list in their co-op opportunities. If a retailer features DC products in the newsletter (the cover image and Previews solicitation, typically), then they can get a \$25 credit for each listed item, up to \$100 per month.

Co-op is a very straightforward process, but one that many retailers don't take advantage of. If you have any questions, you can contact Maryanne. If you need artwork that you can't find on the Diamond website, you can contact Matt Keller at DC for help. His email address is Matt.Keller@dccomics.com. Remember, these programs are always subject to change, so contact Diamond or DC Comics to verify the details before placing any ads.