Book Buddies Swarm Over Sparta  Feb 8, 2008

Last Thursday, a dozen booksellers and other people in the book business--including Shelf Awareness--spent about four hours talking with new bookseller Donna Fell, who bought Sparta Books, Sparta, N.J., in late November and wanted advice about the store. Organized by wholesaler Bookazine and the New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association, the Book Buddies visit will likely be the first of many such consultations.

Bookazine sales manager Ron Rice, who has worked extensively with Fell, said booksellers tend to help each other "as business owners" and he hoped the Book Buddies program will help booksellers feel ever more "comfortable calling up each other and asking questions."

When Carol Viall owned Sparta Books from 1985 to 2006, the store had done well. But it suffered under its next owner and was in danger of closing when Fell stepped in, buying the store "for the community," she said. Fell added the store still has some residual goodwill from the Viall era and that demographics in the area are good: a onetime summer town, Sparta now has a year-round population of about 17,000, a substantial number of whom commute to New York City, and there are many upper-middle income families with young children.

After a baptism by fire--taking over the store just as the holiday season started--Fell focused in January on reconciling and building inventory. Now she said, she's ready to do more.

The visitors immediately suggested that the store, located in a shopping center, needs some esthetic changes. As Margot Sage-El of Watchung Booksellers, Montclair, N.J., put it: "You should add your personality." One quick fix the group recommended: Fells could decorate and fill the space above bookcases around the 2,400-sq.-ft. store with publishers' posters of authors and book covers or artwork by local artists (who would come and bring friends) or even artwork by students in local schools (who would also visit).

The group also recommended Fell join the ABA and NAIBA and begin attending events and meeting other booksellers.

Fell was holding the first meeting of her book club that night, and booksellers suggested that Fell hold many more events--even if they don't draw many people--because customers like to sense that something's happening at bookstores.

The group promoted authorless events, and Tom Williams of Mendham Books counseled that "when asking for authors, be relentless, and never rest on your laurels. At an event you could sells three times as many books as a Barnes & Noble down the road, but the next time the publisher is setting up an author event, it will go to a B&N down the road."

The booksellers seemed to approve of Fell's approach to discounting and her loyalty program. The store discounts hardcover bestsellers 10%, and Fell did away with a loyalty program with its own card and now gives out a $5 coupon on computer on purchases of $100.

Fell expressed some frustration with the advertising she has run in a local paper, but booksellers encouraged her to continue, and Margot Sage-EL suggested she submit information to the paper and get to know staff at the paper.

The booksellers encouraged Fell, who taught in the local school system for many years, in her efforts to develop school and educational business, with special events for teachers and
book fairs. At Moravian Book Shop, Bethlehem, Pa., "schools keep you going during the slow months," Stephanie Anderson said. Fell already offers teachers 10% off on book purchases.

With just a couple of part-time people helping her, Fell said she felt that she did and had to do most everything in the store, which is open seven days a week. Rita Maggio, who opened BookTowne, Manasquan, N.J., just last year, sympathized, noting that she has two people who work 20 and 10 hours a week, respectively, but has them doing all that she does except ordering.

Sage-EL, who has owned Watchung Booksellers for 12 years, said that it took a while to grow to a staff of five nearly full-timers and various part-time help. "You do everything at first, and you do it a lot longer than you want," she said. As for the type of staff to hire, NAIBA's Eileen Dengler put it succinctly: "Hire the smile; train the skill."

The group also gave Fell tips on returns, keeping track of inventory and the importance of doing regular stock checks in various sections on a rotating basis, something that Harvey Finkel of Clinton Book Shop, Clinton, N.J., called "a good downtime project." Bookazine's Ron Rice added that the store should "let the community determine a store's inventory. Don't buy what you think the community wants." At Watchung Booksellers, the staff writes down in a book the titles people ask for that the store doesn't have. "We don't necessarily order those titles right away," Margot Sage-EL said. "But we keep track of them."

Stephanie Anderson of the Moravian Book Shop said that after six months, decisions about buying and returns will become "intuitive" for Fell. Many of the attendees had been at the ABA's Winter Institute two weeks ago and mentioned presentations there. Restaurateur Danny Meyer was quoted several times, particularly concerning trying to create a place that has "the incredibly rare combination of feeling like a place where you are going out and coming home at the same time," as he stated it in Louisville. (Harvey Finkel of Clinton Book Shop said that he was so impressed with Meyer's book on hospitality, Setting the Table, that he is requiring his staff to read and digest it.)

Margot Sage-EL noted that "all a customer wants is for a book to be validated," which is easy to do with staff pick cards, reviews and even reviews and recommendations by customers. Eileen Dengler said that she and others like to buy what book clubs buy.

Stephanie Anderson of the Moravian Book Shop suggested that Fell could draw more younger people by publicizing that there is wi-fi in the store. She recommended making it a free service--"I carry a laptop with me all the time and love places that have free wi-fi," she said--but create a password that would change monthly. "Make customers ask for the password at the main desk," she commented. "Then they're much more likely to buy a book."

Anderson also suggested creating a store profile on FaceBook, which has become much more popular than MySpace.

At the end of the visit, Fell said that she had picked up a range of tips she wanted to put into effect. Perhaps most important, she felt that "she wasn't in this alone."-- John Mutter

Sparta Books is located at 41 Theatre Center, Sparta, N.J. 07871; 973-729-6200.

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