

New Year Resolutions

by Chuck Robinson, Village Books, Bellingham, WA

Well,” I can imagine you collectively saying “Robinson’s finally lost it.” It’s only September and he thinks it’s January.” But hold on. Perhaps it’s the memory of my many years in the halls of academe but, for some reason September has always seemed much more like a new beginning than January. So what I have here is a modest suggestion of some possible “New Year Resolutions.”

1. Clean up, toss out, touch up.

If yours is like most bookstores you will see your highest traffic—and most motivated buyers—over the next four months. Now is the time to spruce up the place. You likely have at least one bedraggled display that should be consigned to the trash and a little deep cleaning and a couple of brushes of paint couldn’t hurt most stores.

2. Get inventory in line. I know that most of us would love to prove that those books that have been moldering on the shelves for ages will really sell “some day.” However, “bad books” cover up or crowd out “good books.” Take a good look at your inventory and get it in line both dollar-wise and title-wise before the height of the season.

3. Plan your work and work your plan. As the season becomes busier most of us won’t have the time to think about a number of aspects of the business. Now is the time to pre-plan your advertising buys and promotions. Are you going to host a special “top customer party”? (we

do this very successfully each year) Now’s the time to plan the event and file the plan away in your tickler file.

4. Consider some major rearrangements in the store. In our first year of business, Dee and I were struck by the fact that simply moving a display or a section brought new attention to it. In the lull before the storm you might consider some major or minor rearrangements to the store to give it a fresh look. Take Paco Underhill’s advice and create some non-traditional sections (not just temporary displays) based on reasons folks buy books. Here are some of my ideas: “Great Vacation Books,” “Gifts for Non-Readers,” “Books I Wish I Had Read When I Was a Kid.”

5. Resolve to SELL books. I don’t mean to resolve to be behind the register to take money from folks. I mean resolve to put up shelf talkers, to talk to every customer about books, to stock up on quirky favorites and put them in readers’ hands. Resolve to make “seller” the operative part of the title “bookseller.”

6. Do a customer walk-through. Ok, so what’s a customer walk-through? Just pretend you’re a customer and walk through your store the way that customers do. Take a notebook or a small recording device and make notes about what you see. Perhaps a display should be tidied up or your signage needs to be updated. You’ll likely see things you haven’t noticed before as you have scurried about the store. Try to get everyone who works in the store to do this.

7. Schedule some book talks for October and November. Now I’m not talking about author appearances. I mean that you, or someone in your store, talks about books of the season. These might be themed—“Great Books for Grandparents to Give Grandchildren,” “Books for Someone Who Has Read Everything.” I think you get the idea. This is just a chance for you to share your expertise with your customers. Bake up some holiday cookies put on a pot of hot chocolate and subtly sell some books.

8. Plan a staff party to decorate the store for the holidays. Get some pizza and beverages or other refreshments and go at it. This is not only a good way to get the store decorated but it’s a great way to get the staff together to talk about other plans for the season. It’s unlikely this party will be in September but, it’s the perfect time to get it on everyone’s calendar.

9. And, finally, plan to have fun! The vast majority of booksellers I’ve met over the years are all smart enough to realize there are much better ways to get rich and much easier ways to make a living. If you’re not having fun, this business just isn’t worth it.

Chuck Robinson is co-owner of Village Books in Bellingham, WA and our General Philosopher BookPro. Chuck may be reached at: chuck@villagebooks.com or 360-671-2626