

It's All In The Details

by Brian Sweet, Trail's End Bookstore

I'm supposed to be writing to newer booksellers. So I'm thinking, what is the most important thing to remember? The answer, I believe, is everything. We, as bookstore owners, managers, and workers are responsible for every last detail that happens in our stores. It's the details that make a business, any business, successful. What kind of details?

Neatness of the store: I am not a neat freak. You should see my kitchen cupboards at home. But our business is not our home. Customers come in and immediately pass judgement on us based upon our appearance. Are the carpets dirty? Do the walls look like they are freshly painted or is it time for another coat? Are the signs that are hung professionally made or homemade? Are the books neat or falling over in stacks on the floor? Again, the appearance of the store gives your customers their first impression; before they can look at the titles on the shelves, and before they talk to your smiling staff.

Organization: A store with an organized back office will operate more efficiently than one that is a mess. O.K., go look at it now. Is the desk teetering under piles of papers and advanced readers copies? Let's be honest, you're never going to read all, if any, of those ARC's. We don't have

time to be bogged down in excess clutter. Open those white boxes from ABA full of books you'll never sell, look at them, pull out the two that are possibilities, chuck the rest. And decide about those two in the next week. We don't have enough time to read all the books our store does carry, much less the books that we're not going to carry. Pitch 'em!

Staff Training: Can the people at the front counter answer every question that a customer may ask as well as the owner? They need to. Their training must be systematic and comprehensive, for they represent the store. What is systematic staff training? Check out a copy of Michael Gerber's E-Myth. It is an amazingly helpful tool in developing training methods, manuals, and much more.

The Numbers: Everything revolves around numbers. Our business plan is the plan for the dollars before they come into the store as sales and before they leave the store as expenses. The payroll budget HAS to be set before it is spent. The staff schedule has to be made based upon this budget. With no plan, we're just floating along without direction.

More numbers: Turns. The industry standard is three turns

(i.e., three sales) of a title per year. We must constantly evaluate our stock and get rid of the duds. You may love The Grapes of Wrath, but if your love doesn't turn into sales, it should be gone. It's costing you money. I think of the books as paying rent to be on our shelves. They need to sell three times a year or they're evicted. The biggest bonus we have in this industry is the ability to return merchandise. Use it. Return them. Then get some new stuff.

More numbers: Co-op dollars. Go get them. Its free advertising money to drive people into your store to spend money.

More numbers: Participate in ABA's ABACUS survey each year and then use the results to make your business better. What a tool! They take your income and expense details, compare them to other stores, by size, sales, and profitability, and then tell you how you're doing. Wow! How much could they charge for this service? But it's free.

My 600 words are about up. These are just a few of the details. We have to pay attention to them all and a thousand more. Everything matters.