

The Skype Solution

How a children's author and an independent bookstore owner use free technology to increase sales.



By Suzanne Selfors and Suzanne Droppert

Selfors: There's been a lot of discussion lately about how to "save" our independent bookstores. James Patterson announced his *Bucks for Bookstores* campaign, and Sherman Alexie began the *Indies First* movement. I applaud these efforts. Every writer I know feels a special bond with independents. In my neck of the woods, I'm blessed with two amazing stores—Eagle Harbor Books and Liberty Bay Books. For my launches and local school visits, I take my business to Eagle Harbor. But this year, I had an idea about how to partner with Liberty Bay.

At a library event back in Sept, 2013, I met the owner of an independent. When I asked if he'd like my contact information for school visits, he told me his store had never participated in a school visit. I was surprised. No, actually I was dumbfounded, because what I've learned in my seven years of writing books for children, is that school visits are win/win. The author builds readership and makes connections

with librarians and teachers. Students are encouraged and inspired. Teachers are supported. Librarians are celebrated. And bookstores sell books. Bingo!

However, not every school can afford an in-person visit. So, like many children's authors, I've discovered the joy of Skype. I love this technology. At 8:30 am, you'll find me in my office, cup of coffee in hand, with a classroom of fourth graders smiling at me from my computer screen. But after a couple of years of Skyping with classrooms all over the world, I realized something was missing. While I'd been signing books during my in-person visits, the Skype students were left to find the books on their own after I'd said good-bye.

Wasted opportunity.

So I went to Liberty Bay Books with the following idea—let's create a way for book sales to be a fun part of the Skype visit. I knew there'd be a lot of kinks to work through, but I also knew that Suzanne Droppert would be up to the challenge. My main request was to keep the process as simple as possible, so the school librarian wouldn't feel overwhelmed or discouraged.

DROPPERT:

When Suzanne Selfors came to us with this idea of Skyping with elementary schools and having the orders come through our bookstore, we knew immediately it was something we wanted to be a part of. In the past, we've hosted authors at local elementary schools and have sent out order forms in advance. Then we hand deliver the books to the school. Having had those experiences, it wasn't a stretch to create an order form for Skype visits.

After some trial and error, here's how we do it. Suzanne provides us with the date of her upcoming Skype visit and the contact information for the librarian or teacher. We email the form we've created and request a return-by date so we'll have time to ship. On the order form we use the list price and an additional charge (\$.50-\$1.00) per book to cover the shipping costs. The order form includes the list of books and at the bottom asks to whom the books should be autographed. The teacher distributes the order forms to the students and collects the cash or checks made out to Liberty Bay Books.

The teacher sends us an email that includes the number of books of each title, and the names for inscription. Example: (3) *Smells Like Dog* for Bobby, Sara, June. Once an order is received, Suzanne comes to the store and signs each book to each individual student. Then they are shipped, timed to arrive before the actual visit. The teacher mails us the money, sometimes before, sometimes after. It depends upon timing.

We've had a number of schools place a second (and sometimes third!) order after the Skype event because after talking with Suzanne, the students who for some reason or another missed the first order, get really excited about her books and want one of their own.

It's a work-in-progress, but the first six Skype visits yielded a sale of over 300 books. The effort on our part includes updating the flyer and preparing the shipments. Overall, this has been a great experience for our small store. It's an excellent way to connect with readers outside of our own community and introduce them to books and authors we love. I think allowing children to interact with some of their favorite authors really gets them excited about reading and learning. Skype is a great technology that I think not enough authors and booksellers are utilizing.

SELFORS: Look, I'm not the first writer to offer Skype book sales. But the point of this article is to illustrate a tangible way for authors and booksellers to help each other increase sales. I would hope that after reading this article, every independent bookstore owner makes a phone call to one local children's author and says, "Hey, let's create a partnership." Or vice versa. And once that partnership is established, calls another author, then another. It's doable and the results are measureable. Everyone benefits—students, teachers, librarians, authors and booksellers. What could be better than that?

Suzanne Selfors is the author of many books, including *The Imaginary Veterinary Series* and *The Smells Like Dog* series (Little, Brown). You can find her at suzanneselfors.com. Suzanne Droppert owns Liberty Bay Books in the picturesque town of Poulsbo, Wa. You can visit her store at libertybaybooks.com.