

## Party Games

by Susan Scott of Secret Garden Bookshop in Seattle, WA

Over a cup of coffee in November, Christy McDanold and I were having a few laughs about the challenges of holiday customer service. As we chatted, we realized we could turn some of our war stories into an amusing exercise that might end up benefitting all of us, and, we hoped, our customers.

Before our December staff meeting, we came up with “classic customer profiles,” and put them on slips of paper. Some examples: “Shopping for grandson, 5 years old; don’t know what he likes.” “For my grandmother; no sex, no swearing; smart.” “For a teen-age boy. He hates books.” These aren’t just cliches - they’re real customer requests, and any old timer will recognize them! With Christy & I acting as “the” customer, we had each bookseller draw a slip - one at a time, so the whole staff could benefit from each person’s selections. The ground rules were simple - they could do anything they’d do with or for a real customer, such as ask for more information (“Is he a good reader?”), consult each other (“what was that book last year about inventions?”), the computer (do we have it??), or the distributor’s data base (useful for elusive titles). We told them to work fairly quickly - as they would on a busy December shopping day. Each person chose 3 or 4 books.

Among the results:

- Everybody was introduced to new books for every single kind of customer.
- Each bookseller had an opportunity to remember how good they were!
- We noticed that everyone tended to abandon their customer instead of inviting them along on the hunt; although this was partly in the interest of speed, we reminded booksellers that most customers like to take part in the selection.
- We discovered we were out of train books! (Along with a few other key titles - it was very useful for discovering what was missing.)

We decided there were many variations to the idea - we could have worked on each profile as a team, for example. We could have had the booksellers themselves recall challenging requests and how they’d met them. And, the staff is looking forward to putting Christy and me to the test at a future meeting.

This was especially useful for our newest, youngest staffers, but it helped everybody. Nearly the entire staff works part-time, so there are a lot of us, and it was a great opportunity to share our knowledge - as well as kick off the holiday season, when all those little slips of paper turn into real customers!

*Susan Scott is the manager of the Secret Garden Bookshop in Seattle, where she once helped three grandmothers of 5 year-old boys they didn’t know very well, in a row, one December morning.*