

# Everything I Know I Learned in My Bookstore

by Chuck Robinson of Village Books in Bellingham, WA

Being designated as a "General Philosopher" and just beginning my twenty-fifth year in the business, it seemed that the time was right to wax philosophical. So with apologies to Robert Fulghum (who, during his ministerial days, spent some time in Bellingham) I offer you ten of the "truths" I've come to through my experiences. Now, my "truths" may not necessarily be your "truths" but I hope you'll find them worth considering and weighing against your own experience.

1) Bookselling is not a good way to get rich but, if you can make it, it's a great way to earn a living. This is a phrase we heard early and often as we explored the possibility of opening a bookstore. The fact is we have not become rich—at least by U.S. standards—though we do have enough to meet our needs. We have, however, become wealthy in nearly all other respects. We have an abundance of fine friends, have traveled and met innumerable interesting people and have had an amazing relationship with the world of authors, books and booksellers. I still offer this advice to anyone entering this business.

2) There is never, never, never a lack of new things to learn. As a teacher (years ago, obviously) I was often amazed by other teacher's lack of interest in learning new methods or engaging with new ideas. As a bookseller no day has gone by without my learning something new. I taught booksellers' schools for more than ten years—not to teach others as much as to learn more. I often slap myself on the front of the head when I hear another bookseller offer an idea that I find brilliant and wonder why I never thought of it—it's why I have a flat forehead. I encourage every bookseller to get together—as often as possible—with other booksellers and other retailers. You, too, may develop a flat forehead.

3) The purpose of business is to create customers. Many folks tell you that the purpose of business is to make a profit (see the next "truth") but management guru Peter Drucker says the purpose of business is to create customers. Meaning, of course, to satisfy other's needs. Creating customers means solving their problems and bringing them back so you can help them solve their next problem.

4) Profit is what gives one permission to do business in the future. Peter Drucker is also the source of this "truth." Profits are, obviously, necessary. They are, in fact, what allows us to continue doing what we're doing. Profit—as any bookseller should know—is not the reason we do what we do. Your reasons may be much different than mine but I invite you to examine your reasons.

5) Customer share is much more important than market share. Many businesses—and business books—talk about capturing a greater market share. I've come to believe that capturing a greater share of each customer's business is a much smarter move. Surveys conducted before the launch of Book Sense reminded us that even the best independent bookstore customers were only buying 4 of every 10 books from independent stores. Where are your best customers buying most of their books? And, how could you get them to buy more of them from you?

6) Turns beats discount, hands down. As booksellers many of us have spent our time barking up the wrong tree—the discount tree versus the turns tree. Don't get me wrong, discount is very important but the number of times you can turn your inventory is much more important. Good turns will free up more money to buy more books to sell more books to buy more books to sell more books...well, you get the picture. How do you get better turns? Buy wisely, return wisely and sell, sell, sell.

7) The people that work for you are not your biggest problem, they're your greatest asset. I can't believe the number of times I've heard small business owners say that their biggest problem was the people that work for them. In my mind these folks just don't get it. I'm sure this has become many folks "truth." I'd encourage you not to let it become yours. Will people disappoint you? Certainly! Will you become discouraged at someone's lack of productivity? Of course you will. But remember that others help you multiply what you can do in your business. People are truly our greatest assets. Treat them as such and they'll become that.

8) Be nice to folks on your way up. You'll see them again on your way down. How many times have you had a "new" sales rep only to realize the person had previously called on you for a different publisher? And how many of your sales reps went on to become regional managers, national sales managers, editors, publishers or presidents of companies? Likewise, can you think of a kid who sat around reading books in your store who is now your best customer or perhaps an author of books you sell or maybe even your banker? It seems we should always be nice to people but sometimes it has some very practical rewards.

9) The more you give, the more you'll get. Nearly every major religion or philosophy has some tenet that suggests that giving will be rewarded. It has become one of my truths as well. I've seen it in personal relationships, with customers and certainly with community as we've given time, energy and money to various causes. Though many consider giving an altruistic activity, it has its direct benefits. I invite you to consider more ways that you can give.

10) Bookselling is not a good way to get rich but, if you can make it, it's a great way to earn a living. I know, I already said this but it's so true it bears repeating. It's a good life and though it might not make you rich, practiced well, it will make you wealthy.

*Chuck Robinson is co-owner, with his wife Dee, of Village Books in Bellingham, a store that celebrated its 24th anniversary in June, 2004. Chuck is a former board member and president of PNBA and of ABA.*