

Local Business Partnerships

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Barnes & Noble Bookstore, at George Mason University

The bookstore at George Mason University has instituted the practice of establishing partnerships with local area businesses. These partnerships are mutually beneficial by exposing students to the services of local vendors and by creating interest in bookstore events. It has also cut down on the cost of expenses such as advertising. For example we have partnered with a pizza shop to provide free slices of pizza to students during the busiest days of buyback. This creates more interest in our buyback and students get free food and coupons for pizza.

The organizations that have benefited from this practice have been George Mason University, Barnes & Noble College Bookstores and various local businesses. George Mason University is a four year state school established in 1957 in Fairfax Virginia. George Mason has three campuses including a Law School and presently enrolls almost 27,000 students with 2900 of those students living on campus. Barnes & Noble was awarded the contract to operate the bookstore in July of 1999. The bookstore itself is located in main student union on campus which also houses several food outlets, a library, meeting rooms and office space.

The challenge the bookstore faced was how to create interest and excitement in all bookstore sponsored events without spending much money if any. We primarily were interested in increasing the number books being bought back at the end of each semester in order to increase the number of used books available to sell. The challenge was how to get more students interested in bookstore events.

The best way to accomplish what we wanted without spending money was to exchange goods and services with local vendors and groups on campus. Each would benefit from what the other had to offer. No additional personnel, equipment, or any other outlay of cash would be necessary. Some of our partnerships did require the approval of the university before proceeding. We asked the university for permission to bring in food vendors to hand out free samples during events as this might cause

problems with dining services. The university agreed as long as the food being handed out was free. Other partnerships included student organizations and departments on campus.

The partnership process for each event started very early to provide ample time to find a vendor or group willing to join forces. For example we started looking for partners to help with buyback at least two months before exams started. Before calling on vendors we had to think what would be the benefit to that vendor to be our partner. What could we offer in exchange for their goods or services? In many cases the benefit to the vendor was simply exposure to the college community of 20,000 plus students as well as faculty and staff.

The benefits of our partnerships have varied from event to event. We partnered with Papa Johns Pizza during buyback to provide free slices of pizza to students as they sold back books during lunch. This greatly increased the number of students coming to sell back books and Papa Johns was able to advertise that they were open late during exams and hand out coupons. The benefit to Papa Johns was they were able to reclaim market share from Dominos. Cost to the bookstore \$0.00. This past fall semester we made a similar agreement with Baja Fresh, a mexican restaurant to bring in free samples during buyback. Without even asking they also gave us 150 \$5 gift cards to use as giveaways to students selling books. We also allowed both Baja Fresh and Papa Johns to hang banners at our buyback location to help advertise. Another example would be the literary festival, Fall for the Book, that the university sponsors every year on campus that is held in the fall just after the start of classes. This event brings in various authors from all over the area to speak and do book signings. The bookstore is also a sponsor of this

event. The director of the festival was interested in better ways to advertise the event to students on campus. We suggested bookmarks. The bookstore attaches bookmarks to every receipt explaining our buyback and refund policies. Every semester we go through an average of 20,000 bookmarks. We suggested they create bookmarks with our refund policy on one side and information about the literary festival on the other including their web address where students could see who was coming to the event. The cost of the bookmarks was far less expensive than other advertising plans they had and the bookstore got free bookmarks. We made a similar arrangement with the homecoming planning committee to help advertise homecoming events in February. They created bookmarks with our refund policy on one side and information about homecoming on the other. During our annual faculty/staff appreciation day in December we had one of the sororities do gift-wrapping for us. We provided the gift-wrap and they provided the labor. The money they collected went to charity. During freshmen move-in weekend in August we had Sears in the bookstore. Not the main store but their parts department. They sell remanufactured goods as well as new items, some discontinued. They sold microwaves, vacuums and mini-fridges as well as other items not normally stocked in a bookstore. In exchange they gave us a TV which we used in a giveaway during buyback. Every partnership has been beneficial to both parties to some degree but most importantly the cost of these partnerships has been little or nothing.