

Public Libraries Briefcase

No. 18, April 2008

A publication of the BRASS Business Reference in Public Libraries Committee

Links Updated November 2014

The Business Book Club – Leveraging Brand to Connect to Your Business Community

By David Hanson

Specialty Reference Services Coordinator
Johnson County Library, Overland, KS

If you tell a business owner that you want him or her to read a book because it's a good idea, you may not get too far. Tell a business owner that another local business leader is reading a book to help make his or her business better - now you have a conversation. That is the point of creating a Business Book Club at the public library. It's a chance to leverage the well established library brand of books to connect with your business community. You can make it happen by connecting three key components: partners, convenience, and promotion & replication.

Partners: Helping Create the ROI

Business doesn't necessarily care about what librarians think are good books to read. We are not like our fiction and popular nonfiction counterparts. While this presents a challenge, it also presents an opportunity. You should look for a partner organization that already understands that reading is a vital part of life-long learning and thus the long term success of any business. This is a requirement and the most important piece to the puzzle. Why?

The most important thing to remember when launching a book club aimed at people already operating on a tight schedule with many demands is that there must be value-add for the participants. Think of it as ROI for the participants' time. Unfortunately, the Business Book Club ultimately succeeds or fails based on the perception of this ROI. This perception is greatly enhanced by picking a group of business leaders that meet to not only discuss business books, but also PICK the books for the program as well.

The Johnson County Library ultimately partnered with a business coach, Sally Smith, the Marion Kauffman Foundation and the Small Business Development Center to launch our program. *We currently have four regularly scheduled book clubs – each facilitated by a business leader not a librarian.* We began by creating a Core Group of emerging business leaders associated with the Kauffman Center's Boardroom process. They met and were presented a list of over 35 titles pulled together from a variety of sources including the BusinessWeek long-time best sellers, European business magazines, committee suggestions, and a few others. The Core Group then started selecting books. This wasn't as difficult as it sounds. All it takes is the identification and cultivation of local partners. A few places you might want to start your search:

Chamber of Commerce <http://www.uschamber.com/chambers/directory/default>

SCORE <http://www.score.org/>

Small Business Development Center <http://www.sba.gov/aboutsba/sbaprograms/sbdc/sbdclocator/index.html>

American Association of Community Colleges <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Pages/default.aspx>

Convenience: Think of it as an easy button for books

Time and time again we when ask people what are the main benefits of a library doing this kind of book club – the chorus comes back, “You make it easy.” Convenience is a driving factor of book club success. Making it easy for your group involves three things: books, databases, and space.

It’s a book club so obviously being able to have books and audio versions of your books available (business people really love those) and ready to check out at each monthly meeting is important. The major challenge comes if you have book clubs that don’t meet on site. Work with your partners to ensure delivery of materials. Many libraries use corporate library cards or remote circulation already. Whatever you use, the process should be easy and non-stressful for any participant to get each book. Once they have the book, you can really show them what you can do with databases.

Every month we prepare a list of criticisms and biographies of the books and authors that are selected. This includes a website that links users directly into well-known databases like Gale’s Business and Company Research Center, ProQuest’s ABI/Trade and Industry, EBSCO’s Business Source Premier. There is a wealth of great information to help people understand the selected book, and it’s a great time to show-off the library’s best business resources. Remember, if you don’t have access to some of the databases listed above, you will most likely find a wealth of reviews of most well-known business books in any of the standard general databases.

Don’t forget the convenience of space. Libraries have long been tapped as a place to gather. This is a perfect time for you to show off this capacity to your business community as well. You probably have a meeting or community room that is well-lit, cozy enough for a group, and a chance for you to show the kind of resource available just for the asking.

Promotion & replication: If you tell them, they will come

Promoting your new groups begins with a thank you to the people who helped you start. Everyone likes to receive praise now and again – your Core Group should be no different. Make a web page on your site that has their photos and bios for all to see. When you’re on the desk, make people aware that the books in this program are selected by local business leaders. Partner with your local newspaper’s business section. Do anything to get the word out. Once you’ve got a group or two going, don’t stop.

You’ve gone to all the effort to create a Core Group. You’ve purchased extra books. You’ve talked it up. Repeat! You have the books and all the support materials so launch a second group that follows a month behind the first group. The books get used again. The packages get used again. You’ve developed a reusable resource for the local business community that you can tap again and again.

Finally, the key to replication is developing new facilitators. The best place we’ve found is to find facilitators who belonged to the Core Group and want to give back to the community the benefit they have received.

Conclusion

In summary, a Business Book Club is a great way for libraries to leverage their book brand into a closer relationship with the local business communities. Libraries can showcase their collections, their database resources, and their facilities to a vital part of any community. If you would like to see examples of titles used, resources packets created, and what a core group looks like, please visit www.jacobusiness.net/bookclub.

David Hanson is the specialty reference services coordinator for the Johnson County Library, Overland, KS. He is a member of the BRASS Business Reference in Public Libraries Committee. He can be contacted at handond@jocolibrary.org.