

How to Sell Books on the Internet: Online Book Seller Tells All!

By Carrie Jenott, Director of Fundraising & Partner Programs at Once Sold Tales

"All bookstores that sell used books will be online. You'd be crazy not to."

So claims Jeff Hayes, research director at InfoTrends/CAP Ventures, in a presentation regarding the latest comprehensive study on the Used Book Market sponsored by the Book Industry Study Group (BISG), released September 2005.

What the BISG concluded is that "propelled by e-commerce, the used book market is 'exploding'".

"The rapid growth of the general trade used book market is a direct result of the Internet eliminating much of the friction in the buying and selling process. Used books are now a factor in the business equation for publishers and booksellers."¹

Just how rapid is that growth?

The first market analysis of its kind, this study used exact sales figures of 2003-2004 from big-name players such as Amazon.com, Abebooks, Alibris, and eBay. Consumer research was also conducted with surveys on used book buying trends and sentiment. Most notable of all the study results are those of the 11% increase in the Used Book Market as a whole and specifically the **Online Used Book Market's 33.3% increase in 2004 over the previous year.**² Revenue growth occurring through traditional book markets (brick-and-mortar bookstores and other physical locations) has been insignificant, and according to Hayes, "all that growth is coming from online channels."

What does that mean to Friends of the Library?

If your Friends of the Library group is wondering if they should sell books online, the answer is, most assuredly, YES! However, the means by which you sell the books is not as easy to come up with, as there are a number of different options available, and figuring out which option is best for your organization requires time, dedication, experimentation and research. I will also include a list of links to various resources at the end of this overview, to help you with your research. So, let's get started!

What do you need?

There are two main approaches to selling books and media online:

¹ E-Commerce Spurs Exploding Used-Book Market, Study Reports, March 02, 2006 American Booksellers Association, <http://news.bookweb.org/news/4251.html>

² BISG Used Book Study Preview "Used Book Market Analysis – Initial Preview" http://www.bisg.org/docs/BISG_Used_Book_Study_Preview.pdf

1. [DIY \(Do It Yourself!\)](#)
2. [Outsourcing](#)

DIY

If you're going to sell books online, planning your endeavors out ahead of time will save you a lot of headaches and wasted volunteer time and labor, as well as keeping morale and profits up. Bookselling is a business venture, and the goal of gaining capital is the same, whether you are a "non-profit" or a "for-profit". There are some things you're going to absolutely need before you get started:

- [Books and Media to Sell](#)
- [Willing, Dedicated Volunteers](#)
- [Computer/Internet Savvy](#)
- [Time & Energy](#)
- [Bank Account](#)
- [Computer & Internet connection \(the faster, the better!\)](#)
- [Basic Book Knowledge](#)
- [Start – Up Capital](#)
- [Storage & Working Space](#)
- [Organizational Skills](#)
- [Shelves](#)

Books and Media to Sell

Your books and media have probably been coming in through the generous donations of your supporters and FOL members. However, up until now, you may have turned up your nose at the books that are weeded and discarded from the library. After all, they're used, marked up, have creased corners and perhaps scuffed edges, and didn't look very desirable next to the brand new copy of a Danielle Steel hardcover with crisp dust jacket.

Let me tell you a little secret about online book selling: Ex-Library books are HOT. I'd take the used discards from a library over a load of crispy, new donated books in a heartbeat. Why? Because they haven't flooded the market, the variety of selection can't be beat, and non-fiction tends to sell for higher prices online than the too-popular fiction. Check with your library to see if ex-library weeds and discards are available to you.

Other books that you might not suspect would sell well on the Internet are the older, non-ISBN books. Many older books are out-of-print, and that makes them harder to find, thus driving their value up. They take a little more care in looking up, and are frequently missed by novice Book Scouts for this reason. Non-ISBN books are not as likely to flood the market, and may be just what someone is looking for. When in doubt, don't throw it out!

The online used book market is an unpredictable, strange market, and we've been surprised by what sells and for how much, many a time. I like to refer to the very

worn copy of the 1979 Snowmobile Repair Manual that we sold in June for \$7 – apparently it was just what this customer was looking for! This book would probably not have sold at a Community Book Sale here in our temperate Pacific Northwest, but thanks to instant access to information and a global customer base, it found a home and made our Partner a profit.

Rule #1: Community Book Sales and Internet Book Sales can work together and compliment each other.

Your Danielle Steels, Tom Clancys, Sue Graftons and other very popular books can fetch \$1-2 at your Community Book Sale, but might only fetch \$0.01 on Amazon.com. This is because there are “penny-sellers” online who intend to “take over the world...one penny at a time”.³ But it is not entirely their fault. These books have been reduced to a penny because so many print copies have been run by publishers that they are in overabundance, and as happened in 1929, the bottom fell out of the market.

Depressing as this is, don't despair! Your online book sales will continue to compliment your community book sales, which are so important for outreach, getting affordable books into the hands of your neighbors, and advocating for the library. It can be the beginning of a beautiful friendship when your online sales and your community sales work together to get you the most for your books.

Willing, Dedicated Volunteers

Unless your you set your online bookstore to go on “vacation”, books will be selling 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Most online sales venues require books to be shipped out from your location between 1-2 days after the order is placed and you are notified. That means that you will need to have some really dedicated volunteers who expect to work several times a week to 1. Answer Customer inquiries, 2. Ship all orders, 3. Delete multiple listings (if you lack the software or services to handle it for you), 4. List, price and describe books and media to be uploaded in a specific file format for online sales.

Customer Service

Answering your customer inquiries is very important, because it is not at all uncommon for someone to order a book and then cancel their order the next day, or accidentally have it sent to their old address. Numerous complaints have been made against certain online venues for making it “too easy” to order books, and sometimes one accidental “click” of the mouse can order a book before you knew what hit you.

Rule #2: Check your email *before* you ship!

³ Li, Caroline. “Thrift Books owners have bigger online plans” Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - Thursday July 6, 2006, <http://www.bizjournals.com/entrepreneur/2006/07/06/>

Shipping

Speaking of Shipping, which should *always* be done on a regular basis, you're going to want to streamline your postage system so going to the post office is less of a hassle. Stamps.com, Endicia.com, PitneyBowes.com, and even the USPS.com have ways of printing out the exact postage that you'll need to ship your packages at either Media Mail rate (called "Standard" by online venues, usually cheapest, 4-21 business days until arrival), First Class (qualifies as "Expedited" by online venues, under 13 oz., fast delivery 3-5 days, more expensive) or Priority Mail (called "Expedited" by online venues, over 13 oz., fast delivery of 3-5 days and trackable, as well as costly). Mail rates and options change on May 14th, 2007, so make sure you are up to date on the latest postal developments. A digital postal scale will help you out immensely, since you won't be paying a penny more for sufficient postage for your orders.

Packaging the orders in bubble-lined mailers from shipping supply companies is quite normal and acceptable for shipping books and media. It is more economical and eco-friendly than using cardboard boxes, and will keep the orders safe and sound, but if you're in doubt about the package's security, adding a little extra packing tape around the mailer envelope doesn't hurt. Esupplystore.com has the lowest prices and quality products we've found for any size order online, but we've gone with a local supplier who can get them to us in a day and will match the rates we got at esupplystore.com – with free local shipping! So check around a bit. Don't buy them at Office Depot or other mainstream, non-wholesale office supply store unless it is an emergency – buying wholesale will save you a lot of money over retail rates.

When you're mailing out a lot of different sized books, it is a good idea to have a variety of envelopes on hand; #0 & #1s for the Mass Market Paperbacks and smaller books, #1, #2, #3 for most normal hardcover fiction, #4 & #5 for your larger children's books, and the rare BIG books get #6 or #7. You will get used to the sizes and quickly learn that you never want to run out of #0s - #3s.

If you find that you are selling so many books that you get over 300 orders ever 2-3 days, (in which case you are probably listing over 1000 books online every 2 days) you can qualify for discounted postal rates through the USPS by shipping out your non-expedited orders as "Presorted Media Mail". It will save you money, and though it is a little more work, your packages will get to their destinations a little bit faster and the savings will add up.

Shipping Internationally, you will need to pay more for postage as well as include a Customs Form (cheerfully provided by your local Post Office) on every International Order. You can also use other mailing services like DHL, UPS, FedEx, and others. It is important to keep the shipping rates in mind when you are pricing your books, so you don't actually lose money by selling the books, especially true with International Shipping and reimbursement rates from each online venue.

Ask your local Bulk Mail Specialist at the nearest USPS headquarters how they can help you save on shipping costs when you are mailing packages frequently; key words being "presorting", "media mail", and "bulk discount". Chances are, your local postal worker at the front counter won't have the expertise to help with this more unusual request, and there are a lot of regulations you will need to comply with to

qualify. On a final note about shipping – watch out for Postal Holidays; they tend to sneak up on you.

Computer/Internet Savvy

Probably the most daunting thing about selling online is the “online” part. If you think that “*Googling*” someone could get you arrested, that “*IT*” is a book by Stephen King, that *FTP* is a floral arrangement service, that “*Linux*” is Charlie Brown’s friend, and that *C++* is a horrible grade you didn’t want your mother to find out you got in Algebra, then I think it would be a *bit* wise to ask for help.

Find someone who is comfortable with their PC and manipulating data, using various applications and uploading files of various formats onto the online venues. They don’t even have to know anything about books, so long as you are working with them. There may be some high school students who are eager to make their wealth of cyber-knowledge useful to you, and add to their community service resume for college. Fortunately, if the pickings are slim, there are numerous software applications and services to make this much easier for you, and they are pretty user-friendly as they are all competing for your attention.

Some deciding factors on your choice of software programs or services you decide upon are a number of essential features, including: Inventory Management, E-Commerce Website Management (if you sell through your own website), Customer Feedback tracking, Repricing and Order Fulfillment. If you are lacking any of these features with your allocated resources, then you won’t be maximizing your potential to compete in the online marketplace. Your profits and Return on Investment won’t be as high as they could be.

There are also various ways to approach your sorting/listing of books and media. You could start by being your own Book Scout. This is one way to sift through all your books and determine which ones are expensively priced online and which ones are better off at the Community Book Sale. Or you could upload every book you have to online venues that meet your sales price minimums and every 6 months or so, cull the remainders for your Community Book Sales. Whatever you determine to be the most efficient, there are several things to keep in mind when you sell your books online. First of all, whatever route you go, you should keep your books priced competitively with other like copies. That is, same binding, same edition, same printing, same condition.

Once you’re selling online, you’ll feel more sympathy for the brick-and-mortar bookseller who is struggling to make a profit off of books with a dwindling value. As painful as it is to see many books selling online so cheaply, especially for booksellers, it is vital that you compete at the market level, all feelings aside. I have a couple of examples to drive my point home:

Booksellers lament that they can’t sell books for as much as they used to since the advent of the Internet (mostly Amazon.com). What we are really seeing is how prolific these books are and their worth naturally drops. Even “rare” and “valuable” books, we’re now seeing are not so “rare” and consequently not as valuable. Moreover,

consumers seem to want to get the cheapest possible copies of books online, especially when they are buying *used* books.

Example #1: Once we tried an experiment to test this theory. We listed a second copy of every book we had in our inventory, but priced the second book exactly 10% higher than the original copy. The outcome? Not a single 10% marked up book sold.

The other bane to brick-and-mortar booksellers is “repricing”. Spoken with unmasked animosity, it takes out much of the human element of pricing books and automatically determines the book’s selling price by undercutting the competition, sometimes leading to the “penny book” phenomenon – a race to the bottom. It has earned high-volume booksellers (“mega-sellers”, “book-mills”) a negative image in the minds of bibliophiles, but their cutthroat tactics are dominating the marketplace.⁴ What began as proprietary software and heavily guarded secrets has become a service you can subscribe to or software you can purchase, either with a book listing/inventory solution or a stand-alone repricer program.

How much does it matter that you adjust your prices to stay competitive?

Example #2: When we developed our own repricing software and ran it for the first time, we more than quadrupled our sales in a month. It is *that* essential.

Some online venues have set minimum prices at \$.50 or \$1.00, but low-balling and repricing will continue, just at a higher threshold (most of those higher minimums are eaten by the online venue’s sales commission, anyway).

So how on earth do the mega-sellers make any money? On some books, they will come out ahead on the shipping costs, since the online venues may reimburse them for more than the actual cost of shipping, since they ship at discounted postal rates. They are also working towards repeat business, or redirected sales to their own websites (circumventing the sales commissions that are taken on the other online venues). They are in the business for the money, but remember, you’re selling online for the money, also.

These “penny books” are not worth your time and labor. They are wonderful for your Community Book Sales, and that is the best place for them. If they don’t sell at the Community Book Sales for a season or two, you could consider donating them to a charity or school library, to a senior center or assisted living facility, a hospital, or recycling center (that might even pay you minimally for the fiber content, as Weyerhaeuser does). And, while recycling is not a cheerful occasion, it does help the online used book market overall by reducing the number of available copies and helping the prices to climb and a healthier used book market to emerge.

⁴ Purcell, Shawn. “Defining Mega Listers” IOBA Standard Fall 2006.
[http://www.ioba.org/newsletter/archive/7\(2\)/article3.php](http://www.ioba.org/newsletter/archive/7(2)/article3.php)

Foss, Gwen. “The Bane of the Online Book World: Mega-Listers” IOBA Standard Fall 2006
[http://www.ioba.org/newsletter/archive/7\(2\)/article1.php](http://www.ioba.org/newsletter/archive/7(2)/article1.php)

Time & Energy

If all this is starting to overwhelm you, keep in mind that most of your time will probably be spent listing books for sale on the Internet, and much less of that time will actually be spent shipping. This much said, it is a good idea to have enthusiastic volunteers on board with lots of time available, and the ability to switch out with others when their lives get in the way of maintaining the online book sale.

Train as many people as possible on as much as possible, and some people will find that they enjoy some tasks more than others. Some people enjoy Listing and some enjoy Order Fulfillment and Shipping. You should rotate out the Customer Service emailed replies so that your volunteers don't become jaded or sarcastic. Make sure there are clear returns policies in place to help with consistency. Set up a regular schedule for shifts, if possible, to make sure those orders get to the mail in a timely manner.

Just as important as shipping on time is making sure that your inventory has a constant, fresh supply of books added to it so that your revenue is maintained. If you stop listing books for a time, you will see a direct correlation when your sales begin to drop.

If you are listing books on multiple online venues and don't have the software or services to take care of it for you, you need to very regularly delete ordered books from all the other venues as close to the time they are ordered as possible. This will help to make sure that "double orders" (when one book sells in more than one place at nearly the same time) are minimized. This, like the repricing, is best done with the aid of software.

Keeping your envelopes, postage labels, address labels, paper, packaging tape, and other essential supplies ordered, inventoried, and at sufficient levels takes organization and diligence, too. And, to keep track of things, you will want your treasurer to make sure there are enough funds to keep things running.

Bank Account

With labor being one of the highest costs of the Online Bookselling Industry, FOL certainly have the advantage of generating and keeping a larger percentage of revenue with their volunteer labor. You'll need a bank account to start selling on the online venues, so they can pay you and you can pay them. Some online venues can pay you through Paypal, so setting up an account with Paypal is beneficial as well. Some states will require you to pay sales taxes on the sales you make to customers in your own state.

There is legislation in the works since before April 2000 known as the Streamlined Sales Tax that is attempting to tax all Internet sales from any US state purchased in any US state. Previously, state sales tax only applied to Sellers that had a physical presence in that state. This was not a major issue with catalog orders, but with the popularity of e-commerce, states are now looking at these out-of-state Sellers as sources for additional revenue for them, physical presence or not. Whether or not they

will decide that 501(c) (3) non-profits are exempt from the Streamlined Sales Tax or not is beyond my ability to determine from these disorganized laws, and your current state laws govern whether or not you are required to pay state sales taxes on your ongoing in-state sales.

The Streamlined Sales Tax Governing Board is hoping people will “volunteer” to pay the interstate taxes with a veiled threat of a year of amnesty against paying potential back taxes on previous sales, but I can’t imagine any online companies are falling over each other to put their share of the profits in the government’s hands over a law that hasn’t been made yet. “Certainly at Amazon, we have no plans to volunteer,” said Rich Prem, spokesperson for Amazon.com’s tax policies in 2005.⁵ However, in 2007 the Streamlined Sales Tax law was passed here in Washington state, where Amazon.com is based. The law goes into effect in June 2008, and I expect there will be some policy and procedure changes within Amazon.com, and a window of opportunity opens for the 3rd party Marketplace bookseller.

The helpful thing that may come of all this is that online venues may decide to automatically add sales tax to all the items sold from 3rd party sellers, which would make all of our jobs much easier and much less to worry about (and report!). However, the SST may make e-commerce slightly less appealing for consumers who purchase online to avoid the added cost of state sales taxes, since, as we’ve seen, consumers want to pay as little as they possibly can. I recommend that you find out what your state requires of you, so it doesn’t come as a surprise, and you can also figure sales tax into your pricing scheme.

If you intend to sell books on international online venues outside of the US, you might want to open a bank account in that country to facilitate payment for those sales.

Computer & Internet Connection

You will want to have a workstation and Internet access in the place where you are processing the books as much as possible, to save time and energy. A fast Internet connection will help the processing, emailing, printing postage, ordering supplies, etc, go much faster, and you’ll waste less time waiting for the speed of light to catch up with you. However, it doesn’t take a T-1 line and a Pentium 4 to sell books online – your average PC with better than dial-up will probably do the trick. One computer for “Listing”, one for “Shipping” and one more for “Customer Service” will likely be all you need, unless you decide to have more than one person “listing” at once.

Basic Book Knowledge

Knowing the parts of each book and being able to describe their condition accurately can make the difference between getting a sale or collecting dust on the shelf. Chances are, you probably already *love* books, but whether you *know* books can be a different matter. Your local, loveable used booksellers will probably be happy to

⁵ Tanner, Robert. “States expand push for sales taxes on Internet purchases” The Associated Press, August 31, 2005.

http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/techpolicy/2005-08-31-internet-taxes_x.htm

discuss their wide knowledge in all printed matter, and will enjoy knowing that someone else in the world is interested in the subject. Librarians are also, as always, a valuable source of information.

You can also look up some good book term glossaries⁶ and become familiar with their terminology. But another factor to consider is that, unless you are strictly dealing with antique book collectors and dealers, most of your customers will be ordinary people who won't know what "folio", "colophon", "panels" or "yapped edges" are. To see the difference, pick up a few printed used book catalogues from dealers and read their descriptions, and compare to the descriptions you see on Amazon.com. You'll find that the basic parts of a book, such as "Dust Jacket", "Spine", "Cover", "Corners", "Edges", "Endpage", "Pages", "Binding", and the like are the main aspects of the book that the general public is familiar with and wants to know the condition of. If you do come across some collectibles or antiques, you will want to use more specialized terms to describe the book for the "bibliomaniacs" out there.

Start Up Capital

There may be costs involved to get started, depending upon what resources you already have. For certain, you will need to pay the online venues to get started selling on most sites. You may need to purchase equipment, such as PCs, shelves, envelopes, crates, rolling book carts, stamps, barcode scanners, desks and chairs. You may need to rent a facility, pay for utilities, and establish the Internet connection.

Insuring your books (and equipment) is something to consider as well. Having petty cash to reimburse for office-type supplies, emergency stamps and envelopes, and fuel may be a consideration. All these factors are affected by what you are starting out with, and what your members feel are necessary expenses. You will also need to keep enough money in your bank account to issue the inevitable refunds, if they don't come out of your pending payments.

To save you money, look in classified ads or shop at surplus stores and thrift stores for your equipment. Often, you can find free desks, office chairs, and sometimes even shelving (beware cheap shelving!! You will want it to be very sturdy!). You don't need the latest computer system to get good mileage out of your computing power. I certainly wouldn't take out a loan to cover any of these expenses.

eBay may also have the cheap peripherals that you need at auction, as well as envelopes, labels, etc. to get you started. Lastly, feel free to ask for donations, since you are a non-profit organization driven by volunteer labor. You may find some businesses who can supply some of your needs for the tax write-off they can get. Or present your case to the local community service organizations or the library, which may be able to help fund or supply you with necessities, or even provide you with surplus materials.

Storage and Working Space

⁶ <http://www.ioba.org/terms.html>; <http://www.ioba.org/desc.html>;

As you might have guessed, keeping track of where the books are is very important when it comes to order fulfillment. While there are an untold multitude of basement booksellers, you want to keep in mind that ample working space with good lighting in a comfortable environment will help keep your volunteers happy and avoid burnout.

First, you'll need a dry, secure (hopefully nearby) location to store the books as they come in. If you live in a damp climate, heated facilities are recommended. A place to process the books with your PC with enough elbowroom to work should ideally be located near the shelves where your inventory awaits order fulfillment. I would recommend shipping the books out in a separate room from where the listing occurs, so that the tasks don't interfere with each other and also so that they can be performed concurrently. Customer Service can be performed "anywhere", but often people will ask questions about the books on your shelves, so you might want to be nearby so that you can check on them and reply in a timely manner.

You will want lots of room for good, sturdy shelves, with enough space between them to fetch books, but close enough to maximize on space. Also, you will make yourself crazy if the books that are destined for Community Book Sales are stored near the books waiting to be processed for Online Sales – keep them away from each other to avoid confusion and duplication of work.

If you have enough space, you will want your spatial workflow to be linear, so that books coming in flow right through all the processes, pause momentarily on the shelves, and then flow right out the door to the USPS. This will maximize on your space and efficiency, and help keep people from bumping into each other.

It is also noteworthy to keep safety standards in mind. The boxes of books your volunteers are lifting should be small and light enough not to cause injury. Rolling carts, and hand trucks are very helpful. Don't stack partially filled cardboard boxes – they tend to squish and topple. Don't stack them too high. I like to keep plenty of extra, good cardboard boxes and milk crates around, as they come in handy quite often. The USPS will also let you borrow their plastic tubs, which are great for sorting the packages.

Also of note is to keep water (moisture, humidity, flood) and fire hazards, smoke, food and beverages, and pets far away from the books, as they tend to affect books badly, and some of your customers may have allergy concerns.

Organizational Skills & Shelves

When you're selling books online, there are a lot of different things to keep track of. Thankfully, we have our PCs to help us immensely. Your online venues will help you keep track of your orders, but keeping track of the order fulfillment is largely up to you.

I would create a dedicated email address for all your online sales and customer service, so you can keep track of what you said to whom, and how issues get resolved

and when. Don't give out this email or post it publicly so that you will receive as little spam and phishes as possible.

Your treasurer will be essential in helping to track the profits and expenses. Creating a method of cataloging and organizing your books will be necessary for swift and successful order fulfillment. Don't try to use the Dewey Decimal System. Sorting them would make you insane.⁷ I would limit the actual sorting to "Mass Market Paperbacks", "Normal Books", "Oversize" and "Antique/Rare" so that your shelving scheme is more tailored to the sizes and needs of the books, but do the sorting before the processing so that their "SKU" numbers are not all over the place.

A "SKU" or "Stock Keeping Unit" (pronounced "skew") is an "identifier that is used by merchants to permit the systematic tracking of products and services offered to customers"⁸ and the easiest way to use it is incrementally (1, 2, 3...) and this may be combined alphabetically (A1, A2, A3...) so that you have shelf units with a Letter Code, and the number next to the letter helps you find where that book is on the shelf. Multiple copies of the exact same book in the exact same condition, being processed at the same time may be listed under one SKU (such as 10 new copies of "The Hunt for Red October" can all be "Q42" on shelf "Q" and book number "42", or whatever) and as orders come in for individual copies, you just take the extra ones and work backwards.

You will want to identify the SKUs on the books, and the cheapest and quickest way to do that is by preprinting and using very small labels and sticking them on the spines of the books. Make the printing large enough to be easily read. When performing order fulfillment, you make your "pick list" of books to mail and go down your shelves with your list on your clipboard, and you can just find the SKU, verify the correct title, and keeping the books in order as you pick them, send it to the correct customer with the correct shipping method. It will help your volunteers to have a flow chart of operations so they know what is going on and where they fit into the process.

Shelving is part and parcel with the Organizational Skills. Take a preliminary look at your working & storage space, and map out where you want things to go. Count on needing extra storage and shelf space. Your books should stay up for sale for at least 6 months before you retire them, so you will want to give them some room. Also, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of good shelving. Not only is cheap shelving hazardous, but who would want to sort out the mess if a shelf collapsed and try to keep shipping out orders?

Decommissioned library shelves or a knowledgeable carpenter with woodworking skills and time to donate can save you a lot of money over buying prefabricated ones

⁷ The reason you wouldn't want to sort by Dewey is because cataloguing by subject matter and author or title is wasted work, considering that your customers are not actually physically browsing your shelves. Moreover, unless you expect to invest in an expensive database, the online venues you're selling on will not have the Dewey Decimals attached to the listing of the books, and to correctly catalogue them would take that much extra work for less efficient results. Keep it simple for sanity's sake.

⁸ Wikipedia, "Stock Keeping Unit," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stock_Keeping_Unit

brand new. If you're in earthquake prone zones, or California, you probably already know to reinforce the shelves to minimize shifting and tipping. If you keep the books well consolidated on the shelves, packed snugly next to each other, you reduce the chances of a book slipping behind another one or having a row slide onto the floor or between the shelves.

Be consistent with your SKU method, and make sure numbers are not duplicated or they may not be able to be uploaded onto your online venue's database. And if the lighting is not adequate in the shadows that are created by the shelves, you can use LED headlamps for searching for the SKUs and will save you more money than the electrician will if they install more lighting. Whatever means you use to provide sufficient lighting, make sure it does not cause a fire or other health risk.

A final word on Do-It-Yourself Online Bookselling

Since you are working with volunteers, you might want to post a task schedule and have people sign up for shifts, with available replacements in case someone can't come in that day, and have contact information handy. I can't imagine the potential morale issues that could crop up if someone isn't perceived as pulling their weight or doesn't show up for shifts and contact others, since employee conduct is something that is scrutinized in a more detached manner and is generally agreed upon from the outset. Perhaps having a few guidelines set up would be wise.

One could easily get caught up in the online sales and forget about the cause behind the sales (volunteerism suddenly becomes slave-driving and guilt-tripping), so find ways to keep things fun and still have time to get involved in the programs and advocacy that you're hoping to fund. The work of online bookselling can be somewhat monotonous and not very glorious, so be forewarned. On the other hand, if you find books too fascinating and interesting to enter the data quickly or ship them off to customers, you might want to do the Customer Service for a while, since it is a natural tendency of bibliophiles to be distracted by books.

Finally, as a great method of keeping spirits high, post your monthly sales profits on the wall where everyone can see them, so you can see what your efforts are producing and how it is paying off. Tell the public, too, so that they will support you by donating higher quality books and through buying books from you online. You can point your patrons to your online stores, and their purchases will be just as good as attending your Community Book Sales.

Outsourcing

If you've gotten this far and your head is swimming and you'd rather just let someone else manage your online bookselling while you spend your time doing the "fun stuff" that Friends of the Library do, there are resources for you. Some booksellers will offer you a price based on weight or per box, and will pay you up front. This is good for quick cash, but you won't get as much for your books as you might through online book sales (unless they're only paperback romances – take any offer you can get on those!).

Selling books through consignment sales enables booksellers to work on your behalf, and they'll want to sell these books for as much as they can since they will profit from higher sales as well. In addition to the high-volume services that work with FOL, there are probably many local online booksellers⁹ that will be able to work with you on a more flexible basis and are likely to give you a higher percentage for your books since their overhead costs are less. They also tend to be "book people", not just "business people", and can offer valuable insight into the online book sales industry and how you can make the most of it. You will not need to get locked into an exclusive, binding contract, since so many options abound and competition for your books and business is fierce.

It pays to be wise in all your business dealings, and this applies more and more to used books and the Internet. Researching your options is well worth your time, and the due diligence you put into looking into these options will pay off in profits and convenience. Here are some things to look for:

- [Sales percentage division](#)
- [Shipping costs \(if applicable\)](#)
- [Other costs](#)
- [Ownership of Inventory](#)
- [Length of time the inventory is up for sale](#)
- [Descriptions of books](#)
- [Sorted or Unsorted items accepted](#)
- [Acceptance or rejection of non-ISBN books](#)

Sales Percentage Division

The percentage of sales you'll receive from your books can vary wildly with each outsourced bookseller you find. There are booksellers who will take your books off your hands and offer you nothing in return, and others who will offer you 50% or higher for the books that sell online. Their rate of sales success is dramatically affected by the techniques and technologies employed.

Minimum pricing schemes also affect how much of a ROI you'll receive. Remember, your books are not only an investment from your Friends group, but also an investment from the community that donated them to you, and an investment from the library you are supporting. I've heard of some book donors that were disturbed to see their donations either given away for free, recycled or thrown away; they won't want to donate books again if they feel their efforts were wasted.

One third of one cent doesn't amount to much, and if most of your books will be sold as "penny books", you have better options available to you, enabling you to be a better steward of your resources. Inquire as to what their lowest price thresholds are,

⁹ Look at Biblio.com's list of local online booksellers:
http://www.biblio.com/pages/usa_map.html

IOBA's (Independent Online Booksellers Association) list:
<http://www.ioba.org/membersearch.html>

and if they have a minimum return they offer you per sale. Most online consignment booksellers also receive a shipping reimbursement from online venues that does not figure in to your percentage of sales, but may provide the bookseller with profit. Make sure you are absolutely clear about the percentage of sales you'll receive ("net" vs. "gross" and so on) and what the terms are.

Shipping costs

If you are working with a local bookseller, chances are there won't be any shipping costs at all, but it never hurts to be exact on what they expect from the business relationship. If you are shipping the books elsewhere, all other high-volume sellers that I've researched will require the shipping costs to come out of your sales percentage. They usually will pay for shipping up front, and reimburse themselves out of your sales percentage, so those numbers will vary according to how much you are shipping and to where, as well as how much your books eventually sell for. You eventually will pay for the shipping if the costs come out of your sales, so you will want to check on that. Be prepared to shrink-wrap or freight box and palletize your shipments if you are shipping large quantities of books.

Other costs

Here, again, the little guy tends to have an advantage over high-volume sellers. I've seen ambiguous terms such as "handling" costs, "disposal fees", "listing fees" and other costs of doing business that don't always seem to add up. You should know that the commission fee for Amazon.com and other online venues is about 15%, and sometimes there is a small monthly charge. I've seen "30%" quoted in literature that would suggest that online venue fees are higher than they are, and somewhere the bookseller is throwing in numbers that I can't seem to trace.

Handling costs and disposal fees seem rather arbitrary and would seem to further eat away at your profits. Some of these costs are usually seen as normal business expenses in the rest of the business world, and these figures are normally factored in when vendors price their items or determine sales commissions. It may be enlightening to ask what the bottom line for your percentage of sales will be once all the fees are subtracted – that will give you a more accurate picture for your ROI (Return On Investment). Savvy business people are not shy about asking for the particulars, and neither should you be.

Ownership of Inventory

When you are selling anything on consignment through another company, you'll typically retain all ownership of the items on consignment, and have the legal right and recourse to reclaim them if so desired. This should also apply to the books that you sell through other companies, and you can make sure that this avenue of recourse is available if you should determine that you want to do something else with these books. With all the competition for your books, don't let someone sell you short by saying that your books aren't worth something.

Ownership of the books also will affect who is liable for their security and condition, how much listing effort and sales exposure they will receive, and also how much say you have over their method of disposal, should they prove not to be viable for online sales. If your inventory is lost in a fire, but the ownership of the books was transferred to the bookseller, then you have no recourse. Your books should be fully insured against loss and damages, and retaining ownership until sale or mutually approved disposal method is preferred.

Length of Time your books are up for sale

This factor will drastically affect the amount of money you get back for your books. Older, more expensive and rare books naturally take longer to sell, but they are worth it when they do. I was recently advised by a major inventory software developer/retailer that my books shouldn't be online for more than 45 days. That is not our experience, and we make necessary adjustments on a flexible basis so that we can get the most of our sales.

The company you go through should not prematurely rotate your investment off the shelves and into recycling without providing some assurance to you that the maximum effort was made to derive sales from these books. Certain books will sell better at certain times of the year, particularly true with seasonal books and textbooks. A year or more of online sales availability is a good standard for many books.

Descriptions of books

Here is, perhaps, the most drastic difference between high-volume sellers and small, independent booksellers. **Descriptions.** The importance of a thorough description becomes apparent when you read the boiler-plate descriptions of high-volume booksellers that are "much ado about nothing". Using non-qualifying terms such as "*May* contain some highlighting or marking" or "*Might* have some library marks" are as good as saying "*We may not* have looked at the book before we put it up for sale". Banter about 24-hour shipping cycles, high customer ratings, and other "benefits" really tell you nothing about the condition of the book. Most sellers will ship the book out to you quickly, and you can see their customer's feedback on many venues – avoiding thorough descriptions in the seller's comments is a neon sign saying "We don't have time to describe our books' conditions".

A good, thorough, and honest book description can get you better sales and higher prices on your books, as a rule. If you are selling books yourself, and your books are being repriced and described, then your sales are going to exceed the high-volume bookseller's sales by ratio simply because they can't afford to take that much time and man-power to process them with that much attention.

Accurate descriptions are absolutely necessary to antique and collectibles, and additional details will frequently be demanded by customers buying more expensive books. You can ask the company how they go about describing their books, their methodology, and their criteria. Moreover, you can look online for yourself and see what they say about their books. Online purchasing creates an uncertainty factor that

isn't present when you buy a book at your local bookstore, and the importance of reducing that fear of the unknown is very important.

Along the line of book descriptions are photos of the books. Many smaller booksellers know the value of a good photo (or several), and take pains in making sure the condition of the book is documented. These photos are different than the stock photos provided by publishers and used by high-volume booksellers and online venues such as Amazon.com. The difference that photos make is seen clearly on eBay, where a picture is truly worth a thousand words.

Sorted or Unsorted Items Accepted

Anyone who follows online book sale trends will see which books are worth more than others and can probably tell you off the cuff which ones they'd rather avoid. The amount of labor you wish to put into sorting the books before you send them off with someone else may determine which entity you decide to do business with. Some booksellers will take anything and everything, and some are very picky. You'll want to find out what they want.

Non-ISBN books

Another sorting factor to keep in mind is the older books without ISBNs (and sometimes even just the ones without barcoded ISBNs) are frequently less desirable for high-volume sellers because they cannot enter the book information as quickly and automatically. Some booksellers do not sell these older books at all. Don't tell them I said so, but it is definitely to their loss.

Older, non-ISBN books can sell quite well online and for higher prices because they haven't flooded out the market and may be difficult to obtain if they are out of print. Those older books you've been tossing at the end of the Community Book Sales could potentially be worth a lot online, though your experienced (though not necessarily the novice with the palm-pilot) Book Scout should catch things like that anyhow. If the bookseller doesn't sell non-ISBNs, you should consider trying someone who will, so you don't miss out on those potential profits.

Bottom Line

Whatever you decide to do, selling your books online will definitely benefit your Friends of the Library and library. When you are measuring the success of your online bookselling efforts, here are some key questions for your group to discuss:

1. How has online bookselling helped my Friends of the Library group?
2. Has it been cost, labor, and time effective?
3. How has it helped us connect with the community?
4. How has it provided additional services and resources for our library through more funds?
5. How has it helped us accomplish our goals and projects?
6. How has it established our community & global presence online?
7. How does it reaffirm our values and identity?

8. How does it help us be better stewards of our time and resources?
9. How has it aided and abetted our advocacy efforts?

I'm sure you can think of others that will apply to your individual FOL and situation. Taking time to analyze your efforts and doing number crunching is important to making critical decisions about your online book selling operations and will shape the course of your future actions. I think you will find it to be a lucrative venture, well worth your time and efforts, and you'll be able to adapt and enhance your online bookselling as Information Technologies continue to advance.

Jeff Bezos (Amazon.com CEO) was no fool when he opened up his company to 3rd party sellers - I've heard that the 3rd party sellers account for 30-40% of Amazon.com's book sales, and I believe it!

Additional Resources

- **Book Scouting Programs**
 - www.scoutpal.com
 - www.bookscoutPRO.com
 - www.bookhero.com
 - www.mediascouter.com
 - www.neatoscan.com
 - www.asellertool.com

- **Inventory/Selling Programs**
 - www.monsoonworks.com
 - www.booktrakker.com
 - www.pragersoftware.com
 - www.spaceware.com
 - www.bookrouter.com
 - www.mailextractor.com
 - www.bibliopolis.com (Book Hound)
 - www.sellermagic.com
 - www.booksku.com
 - www.readerware.com
 - www.bookrepricer.com
 - <http://www.doolicity.com>
 - www.sellerengine.com
 - www.bibliophile-cataloguer.com
 - www.theartofbooks.com
 - www.fillz.com
 - www.amazon.com/gp/seller/sell-your-stuff.html

- **Online venues** – Don't forget to Delete listings on other websites when something sells, if you list on multiple websites!
 - www.amazon.com
 - www.abebooks.com
 - www.alibris.com
 - www.half.com

- www.ebay.com
- www.biblio.com
- www.a1books.com
- www.BarnesandNoble.com
- www.choosebooks.com
- www.librarybooksales.com
- www.TomFolio.com
- www.textbookX.com
- www.usedbookcentral.com
- www.valorebooks.com
- www.antiqubook.com
- www.bibliopoly.com
- www.biblion.com
- www.booksellersolutions.com
- www.chrislands.com

- **Shipping Supply Links**
 - www.uline.com
 - www.esupplystore.com
 - www.papermart.com
 - www.starboxes.com
 - www.fast-pack.com
 - www.packagingprice.com
 - www.lintonlabels.com
 - www.Royalmailers.com
 - www.Centralpack.com
 - www.shippingsupply.com
 - www.bubblefast.com

- **Postage Suppliers**
 - www.usps.com
 - www.stamps.com
 - www.endicia.com
 - www.pitneybowes.com

- **Postal Couriers**
 - www.usps.com
 - www.dhl.com
 - www.ups.com
 - www.fedex.com

- **Book Sale Ads**
 - www.booksalefinder.com
 - www.booksalescout.com
 - www.craigslist.org

- **Book Search Websites**
 - www.Bookfinder.com
 - www.bookfinder4u.com

- www.addALL.com
- www.searchenginez.com/secondhandbooksearch.html
- www.booksprice.com
- www.fetchbook.info
- www.loc.gov

- **Bookselling Associations**
 - www.abaa.org
 - www.ioba.org
 - www.ilab.org

- **Other Info**
 - www.bisq.org
 - www.weberbooks.com
 - www.ioba.org/links.html
 - www.oncesoldtales.com

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Carrie Jenott is the Director of Development at Once Sold Tales, overseeing their Client Relations, Fundraising & Partner Programs. Once Sold Tales has been selling books online since 2002 and works with Libraries, Friends of the Library, and other organizations to help them generate revenue streams through online book sales. An avid bibliophile and info junkie, Carrie Jenott can be contacted for more information about online bookselling at carriej@oncesoldtales.com and 206-280-6312 or 253-833-1911. For more information about Once Sold Tales and our online sales Partner Programs, visit our website at www.oncesoldtales.com.