



OUTSIDE
THE *Vines*

INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND THE POTTING BENCH

Comic Relief for Every Customer

By Ana Olvera

For your customers to get involved in a new hobby or interest, it can be intimidating. Taking that first step and going to their local resource or garden center can sometimes be the hardest part.

Laughing Ogre Comics, in Columbus, Ohio, is frequently reaching out to its community to break down any reservations potential customers may have.

The comics store sees a regular influx of business, owner Gib Bickel says. Wednesday is the biggest day of the week for the store, followed by Saturday. So Laughing Ogre frequently hosts events and author signings to get new customers through its doors.

"Our focus has been to have reasons for [new] customers to come in," Bickel says. "If we can get them to start coming in quarterly, we can have them then become regular customers."

Building Your Customer Base

National comics store events help the store reach a wider audience, Bickel says. National Free Comic Book Day, celebrated throughout the country annually on the first Saturday in May, is the store's biggest day of the year. Laughing Ogre's Halloween ComicFest celebration, usually hosted just before or after Halloween, features a local kids band and costume players. The event lets children wear their Halloween costumes one extra time while getting both parents and children interested in comics.

On top of frequently hosting signing days with authors, the store also hosts Mini Indie Ogre Con, its own weekend-long convention. The store brings in comic creators in waves, hosting authors for a few hours throughout the day. The mini convention features about 40 authors throughout the weekend. The events are of mutual benefit, Bickel says.

"Everybody that we promote promotes the fact that they're here," he says. "In the industry, anything that helps an individual or creator helps us. Any time a creator makes a comic, it makes a chance for someone to come into the store and become a customer."

Bickel says he recognizes some people probably don't seek out comic book stores, so he continually looks for opportunities to reach out to Laughing Ogre's Columbus community.

With some other specialty stores like hardware stores, "you're compelled to seek it out when you need it," Bickel says. "People don't realize they need comic books. Our thing

is just to make people remember comic books and the Laughing Ogre."

Upcoming promotions to introduce more people in the community to the store include partnering with local businesses and organizations. The comics store is planning on having a photo contest to raise money for a local no-kill cat shelter. The store will invite customers to bring in photos of their cat to be shared on Laughing Ogre's Facebook page. Each "like" on a photo will equal a dollar donation to the cat shelter. The entry with the most likes will get a portrait drawn by a comic illustrator.

Bickel says the store will also partner with a local dentist office to have a costumed superhero pass out comics during its free dentistry day.

"We have a lot of people that are getting into comics here every year," Bickel says. "We have a very strong independent comics community."

Understanding Your Customers

Part of building that community is getting to know who each of Laughing Ogre's customers is.

"We try really hard to learn as many names when people come in," Bickel says. "If we don't know them and they go straight to the New This Week section, we greet them and talk to them. You have to make them think, 'Do I want to buy [comics] from Amazon or here from Lauren or Mike?'"

Knowing your customer base and keeping an eye on trends can help businesses take advantage of opportunities to reach new

demographics. Bickel says he's noticed a change in Laughing Ogre's customer base as well as within the comics industry.

"It used to be we had males of a certain age, but in the last two to three years our general clientele has diversified a lot," Bickel says. "Probably 75 percent of our new customers have been female. A lot of that has probably come from new movies and comics."

A lot of times an individual book or movie will get them into the comics industry, Bickel says.

"There's a lot of comic books that are by female authors and feature lots of strong women," he says. "I think it's one of the reasons why we have such a strong female audience now."

Bickel says manga (Japanese) comics are the most popular with the store's younger female customers. Being aware of this niche in his customer base, Bickel says staff always approaches customers walking through the manga section to let them know the store can order a comic for them if it isn't available in store.

He says starting dialogue with new customers can help them feel more comfortable to ask a question if they're not familiar with comics.

"A lot of times they're coming in with a stereotype in mind or that 'The Big Bang Theory' stereotype that we're anti-social," Bickel says. "We've been here for 22 years. Most of the community knows that we are an exception to that old rule." **LGR**

