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Simone Wallace  
Sisterhood Bookstore  
1351 Westwood Boulevard  
Los Angeles, California 90024

Dear Simone,

I'm sorry not to be able to attend the meeting on Sunday, July 4, but wanted to offer some of my ideas regarding Sisterhood's business troubles. Please understand I am working without specific knowledge of the root of those troubles, so my suggestions may or not be useful.

The first priority is to make certain that you've correctly identified the nature of the business problem. It is a problem of insufficient capital (are there improvements needed that would help the business but which there is no money to afford?) Is it a problem of fiscal management (of budgeting, reinvestment of profits, etc.) Is it a problem of sales (as in, not enough of them?) Finally, is it a problem of burnout (you've been doing this for 20+ years, and the financial rewards no longer seem sufficient?) There's no point in tackling the wrong problem, so it's very important to be clear about this.

My comments from this point on are based on the assumption that the problem Sisterhood faces is a sales problem; I assume that because you would probably not call together a community meeting to address the other problems.

Some of the factors I would identify as contributing to the problem are:

– Rising competition from chain bookstores which are able to offer discounted prices and have multiple locations in malls and other frequently-trafficked areas. This situation is, of course, not unique to Sisterhood, but is faced by most if not all owners of independent bookstores.

– Dwindling commitment to feminism, both among the "old guard" who launched the Second Wave and among young women whose take on feminism may be different than the image portrayed by the bookstore. Many women in their twenties and early thirties are downright phobic about anything that smacks of '70s feminism.

– The increase of traffic and stress in Los Angeles makes people less willing to drive to other areas of the city to shop. People are choosing accessibility and convenience above all other considerations.

In the short term, Sisterhood needs to shore up its existing customer base with strategies to increase customer loyalty and improve convenience. Some of these might include:

– A series of mail campaigns to various stakeholders that addresses the problems faced by Sisterhood and appeals to recipients to keep L.A.'s premiere feminist bookstore

alive. People need to be educated that it matters **where** they buy their books. If you have relationships with really well-known writers you might include their testimonials as well. Letters could be targeted to 1) long-term customers; 2) women's studies professors, creative writing teachers, and all feminist instructors who are in a position to encourage their students to purchase books, 3) women professionals and business owners who might be willing to display information encouraging their customers to shop at Sisterhood.

- A quarterly newsletter put out by the bookstore to keep regular customers informed about events and new books and, most importantly, to keep reminding them about the bookstore.

- Would it be possible to create some kind of "frequent buyers club," and offer discounts to those people who shop most regularly or spend significant amounts at your store? You might also think about offering a 5 or 10% discount to members of selected feminist organizations in the community.

- Would it be possible to introduce a mail order service? I frequently buy books elsewhere just because I cannot bear driving across town from Silverlake. If I could call Sisterhood and have the book UPS'd to me, I would buy more books from you.

Longer term strategies can address the expansion into new customer markets and might include consideration of the following:

Location - Is the south-of-Wilshire Westwood location best situated to serve your customers? Should you contemplate a move or is it possible to develop smaller satellite locations, or a kind of traveling bookmobile to be present at significant community events?

Image - Does the name and presentation of the bookstore appeal to a younger generation? (Think of the difference, just in name, between "Sisterhood" and "Girl Bar" and you begin to understand the generation gap.) Would a new name, new logo, or redesign of the physical space help to pull in new customers?

Product - Should the inventory be expanded or changed in some way to attract new markets? (Computer stuff, CD-ROMs, more gay materials? These decisions obviously depend on what new markets you decide to target.)

Other business activity - Some bookstores here and elsewhere seem to be thriving by incorporating a coffee house/juice bar/or cafe-type atmosphere. Thus the bookstore becomes a kind of gathering place, or scene. Local examples include Big & Tall Books on Beverly (people come for the coffee and the bands, but find themselves browsing and buying books as well) and the pairing of Starbucks Coffee with Barnes & Noble in Pasadena.

Even the small, short-term strategies (and certainly the longer-term ones) will require some investment of time and money (this is where other problems such as lack of capital and/or burnout might surface.) Can Sisterhood make this additional investment?

I hope these ideas will help to provoke discussion with the group on Sunday. If I can answer questions or provide additional help, please let me know.

Best,

Terry