

BookSmarts

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NBCtextbooks.com Makes After-Hours Ordering Easy



KATHY BYRNE, TEXTBOOK COORDINATOR for Gettysburg College Bookstore in Gettysburg, Pa., is a happy woman. NBCtextbooks.com, the wholesale customer-specific Web portal that Nebraska Book Company (NBC) launched in December 2003, has made her life much easier. Thanks to the new site, she is no longer bound by “regular business hours” when placing orders. This is especially helpful during book rush – a time when, as any bookstore manager knows, there is no such thing as “regular business hours.”

“I can hop online and check inventory availability whenever I want,” Byrne says. “I can go home after a long day at the store, have a nice dinner, then access NBC’s textbook inventory from my home computer and decide what to order for the coming days. I can even get some work done on the weekends, when I have a little more peace and quiet, which is something we don’t get a lot of around here.”

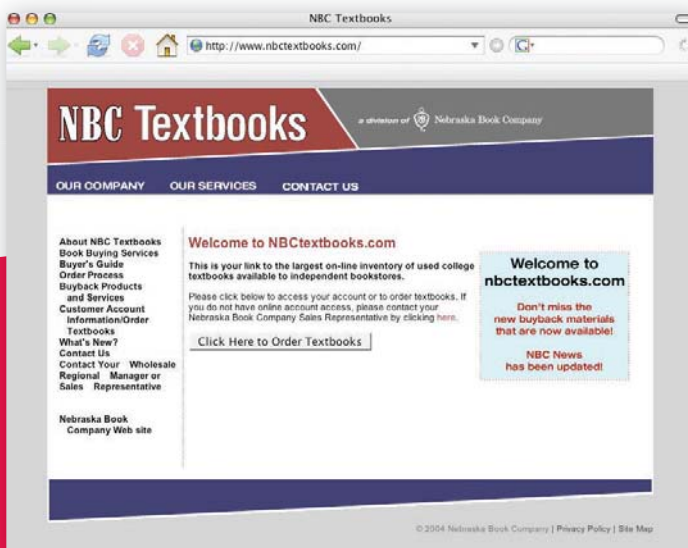
According to Jerry Hiller, National Sales Manager for NBC Textbooks, LLC, NBC’s wholesale textbook

division, “NBCtextbooks.com was launched in response to customer demand.” He explains, “We’ve always offered a variety of methods by which customers could place orders: telephone, fax and EasyLink, for example. The new online ordering capability is just another way for our customers to get their orders placed – with the added advantage of their being able to do so at their convenience.”

Hiller continues, “The new site has been extremely well received.” He points to some telling statistics: “We’ve received an average of 2,600 online orders per month since the site’s launch 17 months ago. We’ve seen an increase of 150% when comparing orders placed in January 2004 and January 2005, and a 268% increase in books sold over the same timeframe.”

The site’s functionality isn’t limited to simply placing orders, though that is its primary purpose. In fact, NBCtextbooks.com also serves as a promotional resource for bookstore managers, providing downloadable marketing

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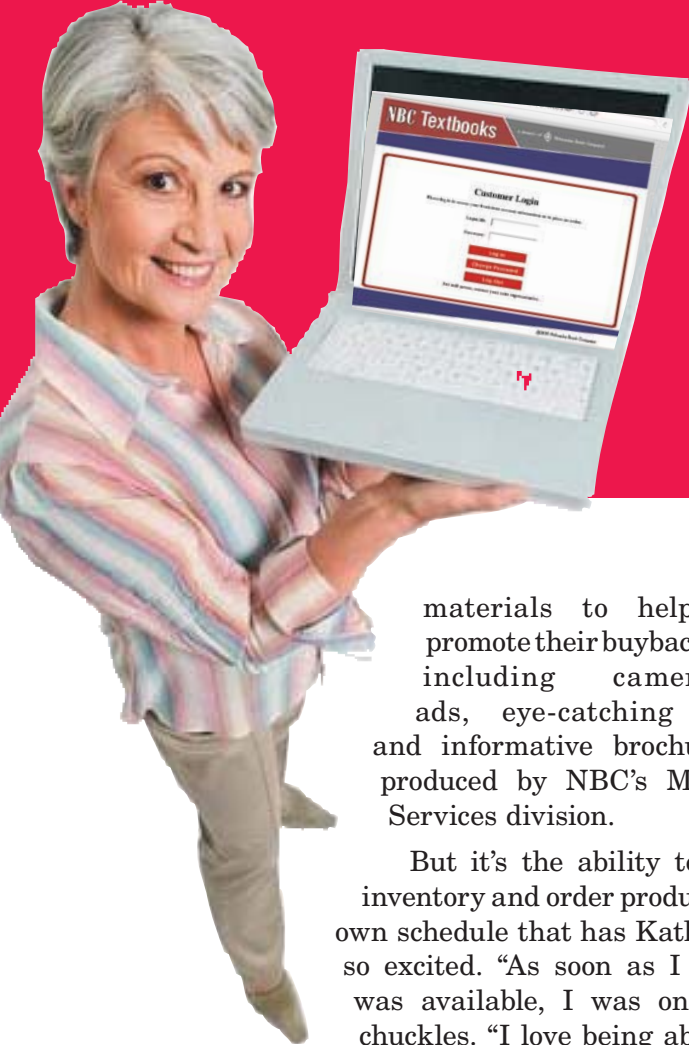


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- Kathy Byrne, Textbook Coordinator
Gettysburg College Bookstore

nbctextbooks.com



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- Jerry Hiller, NBC

materials to help stores promote their buyback efforts, including camera-ready ads, eye-catching posters and informative brochures, all produced by NBC’s Marketing Services division.

But it’s the ability to browse inventory and order product on her own schedule that has Kathy Byrne so excited. “As soon as I heard it was available, I was on it,” she chuckles. “I love being able to see my invoices right away. It really gives me added peace of mind.”

There is virtually no lag in order fulfillment, either. According to Hiller, “When an order is placed online, it’s just as if it were created in our order-entry department.” He continues, “We try very hard to ship orders the same day they’re placed, depending, of course, on the time of day at which the order was made.”

Security and system availability are prime concerns of anyone transacting business online. Both these have been addressed by NBC. “We thoroughly tested the site at length and have experienced very good uptime,” Hiller says. “And, since no credit card information is used on the site, security is very good, too.” In fact, to prevent materials from being inadvertently ordered and shipped to the wrong store, each customer must enter a secure password before placing an order.

Though understandably excited about the new site, Hiller goes out of his way to point out that NBC’s phone-order system is also very efficient and reliable. “We typically have enough people on staff that our customers are rarely on hold and can get their phone orders placed right away, too.” The advantage of the Web portal, according to both Hiller and Byrne, is simply its around-the-clock functionality. In addition, Hiller notes, “Some people like to chat with phone representatives one-on-one; some people would rather

not. It’s a personal thing, and now we offer an order-placement method for everyone.”

Ultimately, as the site was created in response to customer demand, it will also see continual improvement in accordance with customers’ suggestions. “We’re not just going to sit back and say it’s a done deal,” Hiller states. “We’ll consider just about anything we can do to improve our customers’ experience online.” He sums up, “After all, I believe we have been successful in this business for the better part of a century because we’ve listened to our customers.”



10 Tips on How to Better Your Bookstore’s Web Site

In our last issue, we spoke with NBC Director of Sales and Marketing Kevin Gish on how to make your store’s Web site more profitable. Following up, *Booksmarts* asked Kevin to give us his top ten ways to make your store’s Web site better overall.

- 1.** Always be sure to provide up-to-date information regarding store hours, contact numbers and other general information.
- 2.** Feature your newest products. This should be a no-brainer. This also helps to keep your site fresh (see # 7).
- 3.** Consider including pages for general campus information, such as event calendars and notice boards. These can help make your site a real online destination for students.
- 4.** Extend product descriptions. People love to research products online. Make sure you give them enough information on the materials they’ll be buying from you.

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Advice from a Bookstore Manager on Competing with Online Vendors

JERRY DIFFELL, THE MANAGER OF TECH BOOKSTORE in Blacksburg, Va., knows how to compete successfully in a challenging retail environment. After all, he's been at this for a long time, starting out as a student employee way back in 1970.

Over the course of his 35 years in the industry, Diffell has seen many technological innovations that have had an impact on the way he does business, from the advent of the fax machine and computerized point-of-sale systems to the past decade's most disruptive phenomenon, the rapid global acceptance of the Internet as a method of commerce.

While many in his position are wringing their hands and cursing this trend, Diffell has been quietly getting down to business, doing what he does best: selling books, accessories and Virginia Tech-branded merchandise to countless satisfied customers.

According to Diffell, "There are two types of customers. There's the guy who knows what he wants and jumps online to look for it, and there's the customer for whom shopping is a social experience. This is the person you've got to target." To do so successfully, a bookstore must follow three basic rules: provide a pleasant shopping experience, offer the lowest possible prices and provide a deep and broad inventory.

A Pleasant Shopping Experience

"Customer service is crucial," Diffell states. "I instill this in my employees from day one." He continues, "We also make sure that lines move quickly, especially during rush and football weekends. The last thing a customer wants to do is stand in line after browsing for 45 minutes." Diffell also makes sure that the store is nicely merchandised and that his broad inventory is easily accessible. "One of the main differences between in-store and online shopping is the tactile

nature of the former. You can't flip through a book to see if it's overly underlined or feel the soft nap of a sweatshirt online. This is the one advantage we'll never lose to e-commerce."

Low Prices

As with any retail competition, price is an obvious issue. When dealing with massive online retailers such as Amazon.com, bookstore managers have to make sure they're aggressive with regard to pricepoints, which is why Diffell discounts his new textbooks 10% across the board. "We're very competitive with Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com as far as pricing is concerned. And when you factor in shipping costs, we're sometimes cheaper," he says.

According to Diffell, "Our biggest problem is the introduction of customer-to-customer selling through sites such as eCampus.com and Half.com. With these, any student with a computer is suddenly your competitor." In answering this new threat, Diffell has adopted an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" attitude. "We sell used textbooks over the Web, too," he says. "In fact, we've got virtual storefronts on Amazon.com, eCampus.com and Half.com." He explains, "I figure you've got to replace revenue with revenue any way you can."

The Right Inventory

The presence of fierce Internet-based competition has really separated the wheat from the chaff as far as inventory management is concerned. "You must offer a deep and broad inventory. If you don't have a particular book in stock, and a student comes looking for it, you'll lose that customer – probably for his or her entire stay at the university."

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- Jerry Diffell, Manager, Virginia Tech Bookstore





10 Tips on How to Better Your Bookstore's Web Site Cont'd

5. Make sure your product images are high quality. Just as you would in your store, make sure your products are displayed in such a way that their unique features are apparent to the visitor. Multiple shots from multiple angles can help, if necessary.

6. Make sure your site is easy to navigate. Organize your products into logical categories. Make sure your site is fully searchable.

7. Change your site's look and feel periodically. Just as you'd freshen up the look of your brick-and-mortar store, so, too, should you keep your online store looking new and exciting.

8. Run Web-only specials advertised in mass e-mails. These will help generate traffic and increase sales. In addition, they can be easily tracked, giving you a good idea of your return on investment.

9. Run online surveys and contests. These, too, will attract visitors, increasing the likelihood that they'll loiter online long enough to purchase something. They can even turn your Web site into a regular online destination.

10. Use Web cams. These inexpensive, fun gadgets can be used to show various scenes around campus: building construction, gardens, etc. – any sort of long-term work-in-progress. They're a great way to build return traffic.

This is by no means a complete list of suggestions, but it should serve as a useful refresher and/or primer for bookstore managers who want their virtual storefronts to be as inviting as their brick-and-mortar counterparts.

Diffell continues, "But you can't get lazy. You can't be over-inventoried and have too much capital tied up in stuff that isn't selling." He concludes, "It's a fine line to walk, but if you figure it out and keep on top of it, you'll end up doing okay."

Diffell has also created niche segments, such as printer accessories. "We've got the largest selection of print cartridges in town – a whole wall of them, in fact," he says. "Every student has a printer, in addition to just about every non-student. It just makes sense to carry merchandise like this." He also offers what he calls "the total Virginia Tech souvenir experience," selling numerous sweatshirts, caps, mugs, stickers, figurines and just about anything else Hokie-related.

Conclusions

"Ultimately, people are going to shop online – there's nothing you can do to stop that," Diffell says. "What you have to do is give those people who may be considering a brick-and-mortar alternative to online shopping a reason to get off the couch and come into your store."

"The most important thing to me is trust," Diffell states. "I want students to know that when they come into my store, I'm going to sell them that book at the lowest price I can, and when they come to sell it back, I'm going to give them as much money for it as I can. If I'm successful in establishing this trust, I'll create a long-term relationship with a repeat customer – something that every retailer aspires to." Diffell sees proof of this every football weekend. "We have alumni come in here all the time that I used to serve as students. They come back because they know they'll get what they want at a fair price and have a nice time getting it. It's that simple."

We Want Your Business–Not Your Customers

- We believe the student is your customer.
- We believe the bookstore is our customer.
- We believe in integrity in business dealings.
- We believe college bookstores should be independent.
- We believe in providing solutions to keep your business independent.



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