

Embedded in Your Community

By Carla Cohen of Politics and Prose Bookstore and Coffeehouse

[Politics and Prose](#) is very lucky. We are located in an affluent section of an affluent metropolitan area, a place where most people have graduate degrees. That doesn't mean we are immune from economic downturns or unaffected by the changing technology, which competes for attention. Of course, we are.

But we have tried, at every twist and turn of the economy and every change in how people buy and read their books, to anticipate those changes and compete.

And we have embedded ourselves in the community. We are a destination.

There is no other supporting retail in our part of the city. We knew when we opened our doors that we would have to create a buzz and that is a primary way we market the store.

People are looking for community. They do it online to be sure, but they are also looking for personal relationships. Bookstores can provide a chance to meet other people with similar interests. It's a safe and inexpensive way to meet up.

These are ideas that have worked for us. A variant might work for you:

Author Talks

We have author talks every night and twice on Saturday and Sunday. We know we are fortunate that more authors live in or near Washington than any place in the U.S. except New York City, and we open ourselves up for famous and not famous. A weekend might include (as a recent November weekend did) a first-time novelist on tour from a small publisher, a professor from a local university, a journalist from the *Washington Post*, and a husband/wife team who have put together a book of photography.

Community Meetings

We invited the community to watch the presidential debates with us, and fostered discussion afterwards. We will throw a party on Inauguration Day.

We have a Climate Action Project, which meets every three weeks to work on local legislation and collaborate with other groups.

Book Fairs



We have a book fair or two every weekend in the autumn, and many in the spring, sponsored by a local school or religious institution. We give 20 percent of the proceeds from the sales of people who indicate they are supporting the school, church, or synagogue.

Book Groups

We sponsor a dozen book groups in the store, and we support about one hundred through the neighborhood. All of the participants get 20 percent off the book group selection. We may have as many as 50 book clubs that order books from us.

Membership Program

We borrowed the idea from the Smithsonian. We have a membership program, \$20/year, \$45/three years. Each household is eligible for a 20 percent discount for the books on our very own bestseller list; 20 percent off the books whose authors are speaking during that month; and 20 percent off the books in the holiday catalogue. Members receive a printed calendar and the holiday catalogue in the mail. P&P has 7,500 members.

E-mail

A weekly e-mail goes to 15,000 people announcing what's on that week and providing recommendations for books and music.

Trips

We have an annual trip to Mexico and a bus trip from the store to Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright's famous house in Pennsylvania. We have sponsored trips to other places as well -- Philadelphia, the Hudson River Valley, and the Wyeth Museum and Winterthur (duPont mansion) and are planning to make them annual or semi-annual. There is always a wonderful group of people that go from the bookstore and that's the point, each person knows he/she will be part of a nice group.

Classes

We hold poetry classes and classes in 19th-century British novels and Irish literature. We usually charge \$15 to \$20/session for each class and we split the amount between teacher and bookstore. We would and could hold many more if we had more space.