

Eating and Reading in the Library

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Most teachers and librarians are aware by now of what has been accomplished by the book "superstores" like Barnes and Noble, Borders and Crown: By either forging partnerships with chains like Starbucks Coffee or creating an indigenous cafe of their own, they have made their bookstores "user-friendly". Their visitor/customer can now enjoy a coffee (or an espresso) with a scone while sitting in a comfortable chair and browsing through books and magazines.

Has this marketing strategy worked? When we interviewed the manager of a Barnes and Noble in Pasadena, he explained that their alignment with Starbucks Coffee, without question, has been good for business. By bringing in business that might have gone down the street, it immediately broadens the customer base.

An interview with one of the managers at the Borders store on Oahu, Hawaii, offered an identical response. Their patronage is large on weekends — they offer live entertainment in the cafe, all within earshot of the customers who shop until 11 p.m. This closing time has now become commonplace for such stores — an hour that was previously unrecognized in the bookstore trade and left to bars, video stores and 7-Elevens. Needless to say, if the customer base had not grown, they would still be closing at 6 p.m.

To further entice customers inside, many of the stores have placed their chairs near to or in front of display windows. In other words, instead of using that space to display books, they are now advertising their customers and the pleasures of reading. Each preoccupied reader becomes a living endorsement for the book, the store and reading.

One must concede that for as long as most of us can remember, libraries and schools have frowned (to put it mildly) upon books and food coming into close proximity to each other, never mind in contact with each other. So how have these bookstores

assessed the damage done to their wares by an eating/sipping clientele. Very few books are ever damaged, they report. And the few casualties are more than offset by the increased number of sales resulting from the arrangement. People come in just to check a reference, and leave with several books and magazines they had not intended to purchase. It is generally conceded by both bookstore staff and librarians that more than half the "sales" in bookstores and libraries are a result of "impulse" shopping.

The "superstores" have made their environment non-threatening and inviting. It took hundreds of years, but finally they recognized that many, if not most, human beings like to nibble and sip while reading. And no one harasses the customer about taking too long to choose a book or finishing his or her coffee. It is nothing to find customers sitting for more than an hour, reading the Sunday newspaper, and never once being disturbed by a clerk. While often it is husband and wife who are sharing the table and papers, just as often it is individuals who we suspect might be seeking a quiet oasis away from the noise of home.

If our goal is to encourage children to use the school library more and to read more, then why not follow this example? We know that children read more when they have a quiet, comfortable place to read, and many school libraries have succeeded in making their sites pleasing and comfortable. So why not go the next step? We suggest not simply allowing the children to eat and drink in the library, but actually encouraging it. Not only should children be able to bring their own food and drink, schools should provide it — even if it has to be from a vending machine distributing natural fruit drinks and fresh fruit.

Taking this approach would have several powerful benefits:

- *It will certainly bring children into the library.*
- *It will tell them how much we value reading.*
- *If we provide high quality food (not junk food), we can even contribute to*

their well-being and energy level, which will make them easier to teach.

We anticipate the following objections:

1. *Won't students make a mess? They will probably make a bigger mess than adults at Barnes and Noble, but probably more so in the beginning than after they get used to it. There should be no problem in organizing student clean-up committees once they see the advantage to having a "humanizing" atmosphere in the library. And, like the bookstores, few books will be damaged in the process.*
2. *Where will we get the money? Compared to what we now spend on technology and testing, the money for a few snacks is a pittance, and most vending companies would jump at the opportunity.*
3. *If we feed them at school, won't their parents take unfair advantage and not feed them at home? Our only response to this objection is: If we serve coffee and snacks at the PTA meeting, won't parents take advantage of this and not eat at home? Along the same lines, most educators recognize the marked difference in the atmosphere of an afternoon inservice when "munchies" have been provided, as opposed to when nothing is offered. You can cut the hostility with a knife!*

And with snacks available in the library, who knows? It might even lure teachers and administrators onto the premises more often. Nothing but good can come of students and teachers meeting in such a relaxed atmosphere. If the food and drink are good enough, one might even find a teacher doing some planning or research in the school library — a bit like those bookstore customers sitting in the window — role modeling.

We seldom have difficulty in luring the best students into the library. They know it is friend, not foe. The average and reluctant students, on the other hand, need to be enticed. Increasing the workload seldom, if ever, works for them. If it is true that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar, then perhaps... EL