

Rakin' in the Clams ...

Or, How to Make Lots of Cash from Renting Best-Sellers

by Rebecca Sue Taylor

Long reserve lists got you down? Tired of patrons complaining about how it takes eight months to get the newest Tom Clancy? Tired of seeing an author hit the bestseller list with a new book before you've even finished up the reserves on her last? Aggravated by readers who bring in the Sunday bestseller list and demand you produce some of "these books right now"!

Well, *so were we!*

Unfortunately, simply buying more copies of the highest demand titles just wasn't in the cards. With downsizing and "no growth" budgets hitting our materials budget harder and harder, every additional copy of a best-seller that we bought meant that some good new cookbook, or home repair title, or even new children's picture book couldn't be added. How do you weigh the demands of a regular and very vocal segment of your patrons against the needs of a less focused and articulate, but far broader, clientele?

Taking some hints from Charlotte and other libraries who have developed Rental Collections, we at first looked at simply purchasing the additional copies we needed and slapping a small daily or weekly Charge! on all bestsellers or on all books with waiting lists longer than ten or so patrons.

Luckily, we feel now, the same local political situation that had our book budget frozen caused us to back off from that seemingly simple solution. With our local governmental officials looking

hard for "revenue positive" ways to fund county services, we librarians, who had been trained in that pre-historic ideal that *free* public libraries are a fundamental bulwark of a democratic society, realized that giving anyone who controlled our purse strings the idea that library books could be harged for was a serious mistake.

Enter The Friends of the New Hanover County Public Library! With a clear charge to *make money* and a constant willingness to help us get more books to more people faster, we asked them to take on the project. With the Friends purchasing the books (with the Collection Development Specialist's guidance), we managed to diffuse the single complaint against the program: "Libraries are supposed to be *free*! You can't Charge! me for the most popular books!" We could honestly answer, "Library books are still very much *free*! We'll be glad to put you on the waiting

list for one of the *free* Library copies. Charge! books are just for those people who don't want to wait their turn for their free library copy."

Again, because this is an additional service, not a replacement of a free service with a fee-based one, we have been very careful *not* to change our buying patterns on bestsellers. We purchase the same number of copies with the "taxpayers" money that we would have before the program began. It has been hard to resist the temptation to purchase *only* rentals of some marginal titles. The best example is the new O.J. Simpson's *I Want to Tell You* which we would have loved *not* to, have spent the taxpayers' money on.

We've also made sure that our inquiring patrons, of whom there have actually been surprisingly few, understood that *all profits* on the rental and subsequent sale of the Charge! books come back to the library in direct donations by the Friends to various portions of our annual materials budget — which doesn't get eaten up in "anticipated revenue" because we never know how much the Friends will be giving us. Ah, the games we do play.

With funding and political concerns ironed out, we began the program with \$1,000 set aside in a separate account by the Friends. Our ordering clerk actually orders the books from Ingram and then forwards the invoice directly to the Friends treasurer for payment. We picked an initial fourteen titles from the Bestseller lists of December 1993 using the length of the library's reserve list as the second deciding factor of titles to order.

How do you weigh the demands of a regular and very vocal segment of your patrons against the needs of a less focused and articulate, but far broader, clientele?

Circulation began December 28, 1993, at our busiest, suburban branch, and the program was an instant and utter hit. Within days we had patrons complimenting us on what a practical and simple solution it was. We overheard people bragging to visiting friends how "our library has bestsellers you don't have to wait for!... and they only cost \$2.00 a week!"

One of the best, if unforeseen, side effects was that people who had simply been putting everything that appeared on the newspaper bestseller list on reserve could now take a look at and read the jacket of the *Charge!* books and decide which ones they really wanted to put on reserve.

Within two months, we added the service to our second largest suburban branch where the reception was, if possible, even more enthusiastic than it had been at the first. Two months after that, we added copies and started to rent them at the Main Library.

We did make a few mistakes. In the beginning, not every title returned our investment. Books have to be *new* to the reserve list to do well. Some of the books we started with had long reserve lists but were no longer very new (ie. *Bridges of Madison County*). Most people who would pay to read the book had already borrowed it or had purchased a copy.

Far fewer people are willing to pay \$2.00 for nonfiction titles than fiction. The biographies we've tried, even ones with reserve lists of people waiting, generally don't do well. We have discovered, however, that the nonfiction titles that do rent have a much longer rental-life than do hot fiction titles. We still regularly rent *Embraced By The Light* [3 copies/96 rentals] and *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* [2/38] a year after we started the program. We have found that the non-fiction titles that have done well are usually "pop" psychology and "pop" self-help titles. *Stop the Insanity* by Susan Powter [3/76] has also held its own. We think true crime may also hold a significant potential, although this year the only title we have tried is *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* [3/76] though it may be the "local color" appeal of this particular crime that has kept it moving steadily.

We also have experimented with a few titles that aren't quite "bestsellers", (ie. *Pretty Boy Floyd* by Larry McMurtry [3/11]) and have discovered that unless there is a fairly long reserve list and lots

of media hype, the people who want to read it are perfectly willing to wait for the free copy.

We also have discovered the length of the book seems to have a significant influence on whether people will pay

We also have discovered the length of the book seems to have a significant influence on whether people will pay \$2.00 for a week's read.

\$2.00 for a week's read. Though Tom Clancy and Steven King maintain long reserve lists for the free library copies, their books rent significantly less often than bestsellers that can easily be read in a week. It is possible that our stiff dollar-a-day overdue fee is part of what scared people away from these books that clearly can't be finished in a week. We do make sure that people know, however, that because we don't allow reserves on the *Charge!* titles, they can keep renting a book over and over for as many weeks as they need to finish it (another advantage over the free library copies that can't be renewed if anyone else is waiting).

All in all, it is hard to say negative things about this program. The complaints have been few; the compliments from our patrons many. It takes very little staff time, and the only investment has been in the processing of the books, a service we could probably get the Friends to pay for, as well. Staff members have been careful to explain the program to anyone checking out books, so we have had very few fines to collect. In a year, we

have purchased 202 books (31 titles) and lost only one in circulation (still overdue after two months). Only one title actually has disappeared, though at times several have disappeared into "in transit" status for more than a week. A long, stern talk with our couriers seemed to solve that problem.

Best and most important of all, the program has shortened the reserve lists on current best-sellers significantly. People wait a month or two instead of four to six months for the most popular titles, and we actually have managed to cleanup the reserve lists on authors like Grisham and Steel before their next books came out. And, patrons no longer snarl that the paperback and the movie will be out before they get their turn at the hardback. A first year profit of \$353.04 hasn't made our Friends unhappy, either.

Charge!

for Bestsellers



No Waiting List

One Week Rental \$2

More copies of the bestsellers you want to read now brought to you by the

Friends of New Hanover County Public Library

1994 Charge!!!

Friends Rental Titles

New Hanover County Public Library
Program begun at Myrtle Grove Branch
12/28/93

Program begun at Plaza East Branch
3/1/94

Program begun at Main Library
5/1/94

Initial Friends investment \$1,000.00

Total titles purchased: 31

Total copies purchased: 202

Total cost of purchase: \$2,846.93

(est. based on 40% discount)

Total circulations, all copies: 2,950 = \$5,900.00

(based on circ records not on actual cash taken in)

Profit for first year: \$3,053.04 (est.)

** This does not include the profit made on discarded books sold at either the May '94 or October '94 booksales.

Copies lost in circulation (never returned): 1

Copies Lost and Paid: 2

Copies unaccounted for: 1

Main copies: 58	Circulations: 805	Avg. Circulation: 13.9
Plaza East: 73	1094	14.9
Myrtle Grove: 70	1054	15.0



Charge!

Title Samples

Accident by Danielle Steel (2/8/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
18	17	23	
19	17	20	
—	17	—	
— (18.5)	18 (17.3)	— (21.5)	18.6
Spent: \$114.96	Made: \$298.00		

Bad Love by Jonathan Kellerman (2/18/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
—	21	18	19.5
Spent: \$27.54	Made: \$78.00		

Body Farm by Patricia Cornwell (9/7/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
17	20	16	17.7
Spent: \$41.40	Made: \$106.00		
	*Still active		

Bridges of Madison County by Robert Waller (12/20/93)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
—	12	12	
—	9 (10.5)	9 (10.5)	10.5
Spent: \$36.00	Made: \$84.00		

Cape Fear Rising by Philip Gerard (*local historical interest) (2/22/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
20	28	30	
16	30	27	
13 (16.3)	13 (23.7)	14 (23.7)	21.2
Spent: \$102.33	Made: \$282.00		
	* Still active		

The Cat Who Came to Breakfast by Lillian Jackson Braun (4/28/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
11	11	11	11
Spent: \$35.91	Made: \$66.00		

The Chamber by John Grisham (5/26/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
21	23	25	
23	27	22	
16	22	20	
13	14	13	
14	15	16	
18 (17.5)	15 (19.3)	21 (19.5)	8.8
Spent: \$269.46	Made: \$676.00		

A Dangerous Fortune by Ken Follett (12/20/93)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
—	8	4	
—	8 (8)	4 (4)	6
Spent: \$72.00	Made: \$84.00		

Daybreak by Belva Plain (4/28/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
13	18	16	
—	16 (17)	12 (14)	15
Spent: \$68.00	Made: \$150.00		

Debt of Honor by Tom Clancy (8/23/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
15	15	12	
13	17	11	
14	16	10	
15 (14.3)	10 (14.5)	11 (11)	13.3
Spent: \$186.48	Made: \$318.00		
	*Still active		

Decider by Dick Francis (12/20/93)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
—	8	4	
—	8	4	
—	6 (7.3)	— (4)	6
Spent: \$69.00	Made: \$60.00		

Disclosure by Michael Crichton (1/10/94)

MAIN (ave)	PlazaE (ave)	MyrGr	(ave)
Average total circs			
14	14	14	
14	14	14	14
Spent: \$86.00	Made: \$168.00		

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— *Don't Miss It!!* —