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## E-BUSINESS

### Public Libraries Use Internet to Sell Old Books, Help Budgets




By Peter Schworm  
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**A volunteer for the Friends of the Northborough Free Library, Patty Elliot has earned \$100 a month for the past year and a half through online sales, money that the library uses to buy new books. "Little by little I learned what sells and what won't," she said. "For most things, there's a buyer out there. It's just like a yard sale, only a lot bigger."**

A treasure trove for keen-eyed collectors and bargain-hunting bibliophiles, the public library book sale has long been a reader's mecca.


Sure, shoppers usually have to sift through some scraps: the 1960s-era encyclopedia set, old college textbooks, and inspirational self-help tracts. But often a bonanza awaits: a first edition by a favorite author, that elusive 1963 National Geographic or Hardy Boys No. 32, or just a buck-a-bag full of pulp fiction.

While public libraries are not putting away the card tables and the milk carton tills, they are increasingly eyeing the e-commerce  used-book market to help nourish lean budgets. In a virtual world that thrives on competition, scarcity, and zealous idiosyncrasy, books that would sell for practically nothing at the library's tag sale can fetch anything from \$15 to \$500 online.

#### Little by Little

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"Little by little I learned what sells and what won't," she said. "For most things, there's a buyer out there. It's just like a yard sale, only a lot bigger."

Online buyers have a bottomless appetite for all sorts of used books, particularly texts on offbeat topics like witchcraft and beekeeping that barely merit a glance at the library book sale, said Judy Haran, who last year raised \$5,000 for the Friends of the Holden library by selling donated books on [eBay](http://www.eBay.com) (Nasdaq: EBAY) .

"These are books that would sell for \$1 at the book sale, maybe. Online, the average is \$15 to \$20," Haran said. "There's a market for everything. We're not even scratching the

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surface."

### **Nonprofit Auctions**

Since January, the Friends of the Boston Public Library has raised \$10,000 selling 6,000 books online; libraries in Marblehead and Athol have also made the digital leap; and the Worcester Public Library has started putting some of its promising castoffs up for bid online. Nationally, eBay reports that a growing number of libraries and other nonprofit groups are drawn to the auction site's vast audience and market-driven prices; and Abebooks, a large online marketplace for used books, reports a tenfold surge in public library clients over the last three years.


"It's been a real boon to libraries' bottom line," said Abebooks' Marci Crossan. "They come for the extra revenue, the convenience, and even a bit of adventure, I think."

Just a glance at a few lucrative online sales shows why some libraries are bucking the traditional 50-cent paperbacks and \$1 hardcovers. An audiobook collection by self-styled investment guru Wade Cook reaped \$300, and a limited edition of Voltaire's "Candide" \$75. A two-volume Depression-era set of home economics books went for \$160, and a math book by Isaac Asimov, \$300.

Carla Hayden, president of the American Library Association, said the online interest is a natural response to widespread financial pressures.

"Libraries all over the country are facing some pretty difficult fiscal times, and they are getting creative," Hayden said. "After watching book dealers grab all the bargains, librarians are saying, 'Hey, we can get full value for those materials by casting a wider net.'"

### **Plug a Budget Hole**

Last year, the public library in Georgetown, Texas, auctioned 300 items on eBay to help plug a budget hole, and in September, Kirkland, a suburb of Seattle, moved its annual library sale of some 80,000 books to [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) (Nasdaq: AMZN) , citing expediency and extra cash as motivators.

The payoff can be handsome. On Abebooks, the average book sells for \$24, Crossan said. "The Internet has revolutionized how the used-book market works," Crossan said, "and a lot of grass-roots organizations like libraries, thrift stores, and charities are taking advantage."

On a hunch, Haran posted a seven-volume set on the canning industry on the site. It netted the Holden library \$35. One online Cambridge buyer recently paid \$250, sight unseen, for a few boxes of books that went unsold at Holden's fall sale. It just goes to show, she said, that one reader's trash is another's treasure.

"Miserable, horrible stuff," she said. "Hundreds of people had already looked over these and left them behind. But I never ask why people want certain things. I don't want to give them a chance to change their mind."

### **Changes and Tradeoffs**

As with most technological change, book-lovers say, there are tradeoffs. Some observers view the online development with mixed emotions, saying it could further the homogenization of the book industry and harm the longstanding community tradition of the local book sale.

If the Internet makes it easier for customers to find that elusive copy, it lacks the charm and immediacy of finding a hidden jewel in a bin of dog-eared paperbacks.

"It does take some of the mystery out of it," said Worcester's head librarian, Penelope Johnson.

Steve Tseki, who sells donated books online for the Abbot Public Library in Marblehead, worries that if book donors realize the potential value of certain editions, they might not be so eager to part with them. And many collectors are dismayed to see their once-fertile ground picked clean.

"The whole idea of the library book sale is: You're looking for that one great bargain," said Brattle Book Shop proprietor Ken Gloss, adding that the practice could reduce sales' popularity and reduce libraries' public exposure. "That's what keeps people coming. If libraries do too good a job picking out the best stuff, it could dim people's enthusiasm."

New Hampshire book dealer Frank Bequaert agrees, saying that taking the most valuable books from the sale -- a process dealers deride as "creaming" -- can backfire by driving dealers away.

### **Making Up for Lost Quaintness**

But Susan Tallman, director of Ritter Memorial Library in Lunenburg, where volunteers have dabbled in online sales, said she is tired of losing the profits from valuable books when tight budgets force libraries to "hustle more than ever for alternative funds."

And if a donated first-edition copy of Thomas Pynchon's "V" can bring in \$500, the money makes up for the lost quaintness.

"It's not convenience that does it, it's the huge difference in price," said Bonnie Strong, director of the Marblehead library. "You never know, a ratty old cardboard box and there's a gem in there."

Not that the emerging trend is all about self-interest. Many online sellers say they take great pleasure in seeing a rare or specialized book wind up in the right hands, with someone who wants the book for personal reasons, not as a way to turn a profit.

Haran recalls selling a book about a World War II Army regiment for \$110 to one of its former soldiers. It was where the book was meant to be, she said.

"You have a book, and you find its home, where it belongs, and you send it there," she said. "It's almost like returning a lost pet." **ECT**

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