Genesis

In the beginning there was Textbook Reservation. It was good, or so we were told. It was something at least, and something is often better than nothing. Everyone in the bookstore industry is familiar with textbook reservation programs, so the summary of our version will be succinct. Here are the salient points though:

- It was expensive - deceptively expensive. More details on that later.
- It was a dinosaur and ignored the impact of new competitors in the online marketplace.
- It was a lot of work. And none of that work showed up “in the product.” It was unseen, behind the scenes work. The customer just saw a box, which often had the incorrect or incomplete items anyway.
- The students hated working it. They were good about not showing that to the customer. Although it probably did show just a little bit, particularly since the entire period was marked by intense stress.
- It funneled people away from the store. At least for us, we didn’t have the space and facilities to distribute inside the store.
- Back to it being an antiquated dinosaur, it attempted to compete against online competitors at their strength, online order fulfillment.
- It had a ton of moving parts. Printing pick lists, manually picking the order, processing and packing the order, cataloging order/name/student ID, moving the thousands of packages to a separate location for distribution, training another set of students to distribute boxes to thousands of customers in a small window. The list goes on and on, but it’s a truism that more moving parts = more mistakes.

As exciting and appealing as all that sounds we found the primary problems to be related to cost and customer service.
So how much did it cost?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textbook Reservation</th>
<th>Tabling(orientation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trade (Labor)</td>
<td>$576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text (Labor)</td>
<td>$576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelf building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>$784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashiers</td>
<td>$320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelf replacement</td>
<td>$9600(over 5 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>$3808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>$2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehouse</td>
<td>$1792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashiers</td>
<td>$3584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>$672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashiers</td>
<td>$3416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3500 boxes</td>
<td>$2625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$22089</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wow! That’s twenty two thousand dollars a year just to handle several thousand orders five or six superfluous times. But at least it resulted in better customer service right?

Customer Service

No, and that was the next major problem with textbook reservation, customer service. Here’s a common description of a customer’s experience:

“I just finished moving into the dorms, I was sweaty. I came to the store. The people told me I could pick up my books, but not at the store. I went searching for the place to pick up, but it wasn’t that easy to find. When I found it there was a huge line. After I got through the line and got my books not all the books were in my box. I asked them why, they told me not all the books are always in by the first day of class. I’d have to come back to the store later to get the missing book.”

Many customers left dissatisfied. Strangely, we found that it was when the system broke down entirely that customers had the best experience. It was when a student’s order wasn’t even in the system, or something similarly disastrous that a student worker had to accompany the customer back to the store and walk him (and probably also his family) through the process of getting his books at the store. In other words, personalized service with a human touch provided the best experience.

In essence, textbook reservation only shined when it was so bad in isolated cases that we had to abandon it entirely. Textbook reservation didn’t work, and probably never did. Truly, the only reason it even appeared to wear the mask of success for many years was the university bookstore’s stranglehold on the market.
The Smart Start program

So we clearly wanted to move away from textbook reservation. But what is the alternative?

**Smart Start.** In short, scrap the textbook reservation program and focus on what we do best, and what Amazon et al. cannot touch – quality, personalized, customer service that puts a face on not just the store but the university.

Bring the students in to the store. Make it a festive, welcoming environment. Make the first thing they see another student. Make the experience about students helping students. Focus on that aspect of the process because that was the one shining part of textbook reservation – when a student worker had to guide a new student out of the abyss created by textbook reservation.

**How it works**

Smart Start is a highly publicized event that coincides with freshmen move in. Instead of encouraging incoming students to reserve their books online, we encourage them to come into the store and see us and our wide range of products at our best. We make this event festive and special and not just about books. Frankly, students can usually buy their books cheaper and often faster elsewhere. But as other industries have shown us, cost concern is not the sole concern.

Key points to the program:

- Create a uniform look for marketing. Make it special. It can’t look like every other day of the year.
- Personalize. Make our student workers the stars. Remember, “For students, by students.” Have plenty of workers in the store to aid the incoming students. Have the right people (outgoing, customer service oriented). Train them to connect to customers on a personal level. It’s not as hard as it seems, they’re all students after all.
- Food, music, festivity. It has to be fun! Incoming students aren’t yet cynical and broken by the world, so they still like fun things.
- Vendor fair. Vendors from outside the university love to gain access to incoming customers too. Let them pay for it. Depending on the businesses and vendors chosen it will add to the festive atmosphere.
In our inaugural year (2012) the vice chancellor had rave reviews for the program.

- We made more money! Compared to the year before (2011) the store brought in **20% more revenue** (textbooks and other products combined), even factoring in reservation orders as “sales” for the previous year.
- We also spent less.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Smart Start</th>
<th>Assist Weekend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>$2856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>$1344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehouse</td>
<td>$1344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashiers</td>
<td>$1580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimate</td>
<td>$3500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store system</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ service</td>
<td>$2700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>$384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prizes</td>
<td>$2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td><strong>$13108-15808</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- We wasted less cardboard.
- No waiting in long lines for customers.
- According to feedback, incoming students and their families were happy.
- Our own student workers were glad to avoid the backbreaking and seemingly futile work of textbook reservation.
- There were no mistakes in packing orders. Because we didn’t pack orders.
Innovation?

One might get the impression that the big idea here is characterized more by what we aren’t doing as opposed to what we are doing. Even at face value, that impression would be incorrect. The Smart Start program has many unique, worthwhile qualities that 1) can be reproduced elsewhere and 2) are better suited to current market forces.

But there’s a twist, a hidden reveal here.

The innovation isn’t in the program itself. The innovation goes back to the genesis of the program.

The innovation lies in the fact that the program is entirely student driven.

It was a student worker, tired of the ossified, inefficient textbook reservation program who conceived of Smart Start. It wasn’t fatigued, out of touch career staffers wearing suits and brainstorming in a boardroom (we’d really like you to think we wear suits and have a boardroom).

Students pushed the idea. Students told us what was wrong with textbook reservation. Students gave us a superior alternative. And we listened.

Sure, I’m not giving us old folks enough credit here. We did help flesh out the idea and fill in the many logistical details and accoutrements that make a successful program. But if we didn’t listen to the students, the people who are on the ground, the people who are both our customers and our workforce, we wouldn’t have a Smart Start program. Where would we be? We might still be losing money and angering customers with the textbook reservation program. And though we may not really be stereotypically fatigued, out of touch bureaucrats, neither do we have our finger on the pulse of what’s happening the way our students do.

We let the inmates run the asylum. And it was liberating. It was good. It was refreshing and necessary and in the near future it might be the only option.
“For students, by students.” In the past this might have been a PR maneuver - pure lip service. Today it is an economic necessity. The textbook industry is changing rapidly. As smart as we think we are, as smart as we might be, we cannot stay ahead of that change without transitioning to a student-centric philosophy. We cannot survive without enlisting them and utilizing them as a resource. Like many great resources, they were under our nose the entire time.

That is the innovation. An acceptance of what we don’t know, of what we cannot do. We don’t know what the student experience is in an industry that barely resembles the one we entered. We can’t get into the head of this modern customer, one presented with a staggering number of options brought about by new technology.

So curiously, it turned out that nothing was better than something. Which isn’t very inspirational is it? A clarion call it certainly isn’t. But there it is - nothing turned out to be better than something. This is not entirely true of course. It’s really just a reach for narrative symmetry. In actuality we replaced something with a leaner, more elegant alternative, not just a bucket load of nothing.

But there’s an element of truth in it. We did less. We listened more, to the people that matter most. In the big picture, the students always mattered most. And they always will.

Unless you’re in the SEC, then the football team probably matters most.
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Store Located in the Memorial Union on the UC Davis Campus

Enter to Win
FREE TEXTBOOKS
Bring this card on day of the event as entry into drawing

How To Read Book Info Cards:

1. BOOK COUNT: Number of titles available for the course
2. SECTION: Section of the course
3. INSTRUCTION: Instruction present in the course
5. NEW PRICING: Price of new book
6. RENTAL PRICING: Price of rental book

SMART START HOW TO QUICK GUIDE TO BUYING TEXTBOOKS

A helpful Stores employee is standing by to assist you!

WANT TO BUY USED? Look for these stickers.
WANT TO RENT? Look for these tags.
WANT TO GO DIGITAL? Look for this card.

1. Grab a basket and head downstairs to the textbook floor.
2. Look at the course material info cards on the shelf to see what's required and what's optional.
3. Choose between available new, used, rental, and digital materials.
4. If you want to buy new/used: Check out as usual, the clerk will ring up your purchase.
5. If you want to rent: Show the clerk your student ID. Your rental books will be due back the last day of finals.
6. If you want to go digital: Check out as usual and make sure you keep both the card & your receipt. You'll need both to access the content.

*Strictly for student ID holders only.
Dear Chris,

Get a Smart Start to fall quarter with UC Davis Stores' complimentary textbook shopping assistance program. Our independently run, non-profit student store at the Memorial Union is hosting the second annual Smart Start event over move-in weekend, September 21–22. Stop by anytime 8:30 a.m.–6 p.m. on Saturday or Sunday to get one-on-one help finding all your required course materials.

Our experienced student staff will walk you through our competitively priced new, used, rental, and digital textbook options. As veteran Aggies, they can also answer questions about the campus and student life. Join us this move-in weekend for a casual, fun, and helpful start to your university experience!

For more info visit ucdavisstores.com/smartstart
Our Move-In Weekend event is a complimentary personal shopping experience designed to guide students through the ins and outs of buying or renting textbooks. Get one-on-one help from our experienced student staff, find the lowest priced options for books, and support your own independently run non-profit bookstore. Join us for a Smart Start to your college career!

For more information visit ucdavisstores.com/smartstart