



# Anatomy of a Bestseller: Case Study of a Wildly Successful Nonprofit Business

**What led this nonprofit from kitchen table to steady income?  
And can you use these enterprising ideas in your own organization?**

**By Susan J. Bliss**

**T**he Friends' book sale was already popular. But when book-sale organizer Barbara Wright added online sales to the event, it became a thriving small business.

The Friends of Hillsboro Public Libraries (Hillsboro, Oregon) signed up with Amazon to create a virtual storefront, called Tanasbooks, in 2003. That first year, Barbara listed 100 books on Amazon Marketplace and held her breath. Ten books sold the first week.

**“This start-up is an inspiration for any nonprofit thinking of starting a small business.”**

Sales of Tanasbooks on Amazon now yield nearly the same dollar volume as the sales on-site at the library. The Friends hold their on-site book sale twice a year, and its scale is grand, requiring two external rented storage sites. Each sale includes 70,000 well categorized books, magazines, CDs, and DVDs.

There's often a line waiting to get in on each day of the 10-day event. Shoppers can pay with cash, check, or credit card, and there's even an on-site ATM (with all profits to the Friends).

“The sale is like a pop-up bookstore,” Barbara says. This is no garage sale!

Proceeds from the combined in-site and online sales have filled the library with new furniture, services, space, and many items that would be only a dream for most libraries.

From the large Friends Event Room (where recitals, movies, and other events are held), to the children's area, to the young-adult space, to \$50,000 a year to buy bestsellers, to the Collaboratory (a center for teaching skills, with library owned equipment), to the “library of things” (a multitude of games, musical instruments, DVD recorders, special cake pans, and more that are free to check out), the Friends have been the trusted go-to buddy for librarians' and locals' wish lists for the library.

## Getting Started

The business grew organically, starting at the typical “kitchen table” level, with donated equipment and volunteer staff. Barbara didn't do it alone: Library director Debbie Brodie had a knack for giving Barbara and her volunteers the things they needed, as well as knowing when to stand back and let Barbara roll with her project.

Debbie contributed in many other subtle but critical ways to the sale's success. Some pieces are obvious: assigning used office equipment to the Friends, carving out new space and opportunities. She also kept a close eye but loose reins on the developing project as it started to pick up speed. Early on, Debbie swapped her own large office with the Friends' workspace (which was actually a closet). Like a craft project, today's large sales were built from dozens of small pieces.

## Steps to a Start-Up

- **Skip** up-front investments on equipment: Use what you already have.
- **Borrow** or share space (the Friends' business began in a closet).
- **Open** a business checking account.
- **Set up** separate accounts and procedures.
- **Ask** lots of questions, and seek answers from everyone you meet.
- **Recruit** volunteers; be creative about finding them.
- **Work through** business and legal issues up front.
- **Learn and refine** problem solving skills.
- **Find** supporters but expect some skeptics.
- **Help** your volunteers, but know when to stand back and let them shine on their own.
- **Learn** to live with some surprises.
- **Welcome** new collaborators: More people mean new ideas.
- **Add** education and seminars as needed.

Was Debbie amazed at how the book sale grew? “Yes,” she says, “but, knowing Barbara, no.” Debbie credits Barbara’s skills in business and marketing for much of this success. Barbara had helped her husband with his software start-up and enjoyed it so much that she then earned her own business degree.

When Barbara took over the book sale, a small volunteer corps was already in place. Barbara expanded it tenfold, signing up for a volunteer matching service and urging library staffers to recruit volunteers from their networks of friends and relatives.

Little by little, the volunteer team multiplied. Now 33 volunteers work each week, most in two to three hour shifts. Several specialize in going through the donated books, pulling the books with the highest resale value, and listing them on the virtual Amazon storefront.

Barbara has been most surprised by “how dedicated people are to volunteering. We have people who are here six days a week.”

Of course, that dedication is catalyzed by Barbara’s own energy. Volunteers see her giving her all and follow suit. She’s hands-on, shelving books and acting as cashier at the sales. From the beginning, she has put in six days a week and has never let up.

Barbara volunteered her own time for decades before the Friends finally started paying her a salary a few years ago. When she eventually leaves her post, the Friends now have a formalized job description, along with salary and benefits, that will help them recruit another dedicated leader.

## Success Factors

The library’s culture has been an important factor in the start-up’s success. It’s an environment of collaboration, creativity, and openness to new ideas. Reaching out to the community is imbedded in its values. The library works in tandem with city leaders, and the city follows most of the recommendations offered by the library board (an advisory board, which is highly regarded in the community).

“I know of other nonprofits where the going isn’t as easy,” Barbara notes. Without a culture of innovation and cooperation, great ideas can die a swift death from lack of imagination and unwillingness to embrace surprises.

Both Debbie Brodie and Barbara Wright have been creative in finding resources and building bonds. They put energy into maintaining working relationships with each other and with city officials. They understand how vital their volunteers are to their success, and they give the volunteers plenty of feedback and recognition for their work. A great believer in lifelong learning, Barbara has encouraged her volunteers to expand their horizons with education and training.

The Friends’ successful start-up is a great example of how doable online sales can be. It’s also an inspiration for any nonprofit thinking of starting a small business. The Friends’ experience shows how a nonprofit with nothing but a good idea and some dedicated people can start from scratch and build a dependable, ongoing stream of unrestricted cash for the organization to use whenever it’s needed. 

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*Susan Bliss, MBA, (pharmwriter100@gmail.com), writes on medical and business topics. She was a member of the Hillsboro Public Library Board for several years, working with both Barbara Wright and Debbie Brodie at the library (hillsboro-oregon.gov/departments/library).*

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