



Creating Clubs which Connect with Children: The BookBusters Experience

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Overview

Our challenge was to develop a reading programme which would engage the busy and savvy city child. We agreed with the objectives of national summer reading programmes that seven and eight year olds were the ideal age for developing and extending literacy. But we felt the programme needed to be expanded past six weeks as many of our children leave the city for the summer holidays.

The solution lay in creating an individual programme targeted at a specific Wellington youth audience that could be sustained throughout a calendar year. We decided to pilot BookBusters 728 as a holiday club for one year. Special events and activities were available exclusively for club members in the holidays. Behind-the-scenes tours at Te Papa, Whitcoulls and the Central Library were a hit. Another really popular session was a presentation by an artist on our staff who went to Antarctica with Margaret Mahy when she was writing *The Riddle of the Frozen Phantom*.

After the pilot we were still not convinced that children were continuing to read and enjoy books in term time. We wanted to seed lifelong *regular* use of our libraries. When we surveyed members and their parents at the end of the pilot we had strong support for change to a monthly format.

The club ethos has been the biggest success and continues to provide many opportunities to connect children to books, libraries and reading. And the programme has been so successful that we have just launched two new sites. Membership has been building steadily across all five clubs.

The results have at times been surprising. For example, parents praise us for making reading an acceptable experience for boys. They told us "*BookBusters is a very good third party (apart from home/school) to encourage boys to participate in the discovery of books/reading*" and "*It encourages kids to read through meeting other readers / making it cool.*" And the accolades from members were mostly in the form of "*You're one of the coolest clubs in the world!*" The BookBusters 728 brand and characters were designed to reflect the vibrancy of both the programme and Wellington children themselves. They feature on all marketing collateral and are unique to this programme. Children identify with the characters and they have become the club mascots.

What the clubs look like in 2005

What is BookBusters 728?

BookBusters 728 is a free, non-competitive and fun monthly club for seven and eight year olds of all reading abilities. The focus of the one-hour meeting is on sharing reading experiences and learning about books & authors. We know the children also like to have fun and make friends at BookBusters 728. So the meetings often include fun book-related activities like quizzes, movie tie-in themes or a special guest like local author Fleur Beale. Children receive certificates after attending 6 and 12 monthly club meetings and heaps of praise whenever they participate in sharing books at the meeting. There's the chance to win spot prizes throughout the year and in December we hold a big graduation party. All those who have turned nine during the year receive a special BookBusters 728 graduation certificate.

How do we enrol children?

- Must be a member of Wellington City Libraries and have parent's permission to join.
- Age limits: Children can join in January of the calendar year they turn 7 and stay until December of the calendar year they turn 9.
- When enrolled we present the child with starter library bag including library card sticker set, notebook, booklists, BookBuster 728 club schedule for their site and BookBusters 728 guidelines.



The Sticker sets...which can be attached to library cards

How are the clubs managed?

- Chief BookBusters (the on-site CYS staff who run the meetings) are responsible for organising the content of their monthly club programme and compiling booklists and regular newsletters to their members. The onus is on each site to provide their BookBuster 728 programme within branch budgets as 'business-as-usual' e.g. printing and postage of newsletters.
- CYS specialists provide advice and support to Chief BookBusters, and co-ordinate promotional materials and advertising via the marketing team. They also forward any suitable materials for spot prizes.
- We try to tap into our in-house talent where possible and share this around the network e.g. a team member with particular skills who has developed a programme at their site can be invited in as a special guest to another BookBuster 728 club.
- Chief BookBusters meet quarterly to share ideas and they all contribute to compiling booklists and website content.

What do Chief BookBusters do?

- Encourage every child to talk about books by asking friendly, open and encouraging questions at the monthly club meetings.

- Gently persuade reluctant readers by talking about a variety of books at different levels and promoting booklists.
- Encourage good readers to extend their reading by offering new and challenging titles.

How did we come up with the characters?

An independent local designer was contracted to come up with our concept characters. We were presented with three separate sets of characters which were all fantastic. But we selected the manga-style cartoon characters as they had 'action' and 'vibrant' written all over them. We felt they represented perfectly the fast-paced life of Wellington children and had plenty of street appeal. The characters names are Tane (age 8 ½), Aimee (age 7 ¼) and Lil-E (their younger sister). Between the pilot programme and the launch of monthly clubs we changed the background on marketing materials from blue to a more vibrant yellow. But the characters themselves look set to continue with the programme.



BookBusters 728 mascots: Tane, Aimee and Lil'E

Testing the waters – The pilot programme

The major success of the BookBusters 728 pilot was the development of a club-style ethos. We received nothing but praise from both children and their parents. Children loved the organised events but especially enjoyed reading and talking about books with others. A quote from one enthusiastic BookBuster told us: *“There are quite a lot of good things about being a BookBuster like you get to read and I love reading!!!!”*

Children were incredibly supportive of each other and thrived in the non-competitive environment. Parents loved the fact their children were getting encouragement, advice and developing their reading skills. One of our goals was to target reluctant readers but we didn't advertise this. However, this objective was met with many boys in particular getting hooked on reading for the first time and trying new or different books.

Quotes from parents:

- *(Son's name) has started a reading log from BookBusters which he continues. A great invention – especially for boys.*
- *This programme was a great boost to my son's reading. Already a proficient reader, it encouraged him to read more and to read more widely.*
- *(Son's name) has enjoyed discussing books with the librarian which he would not do to such a great degree with his parents. He is now increasingly confident and competent in using the library.*
- *“It has been very worthwhile in giving (son's name) who is a keen reader anyhow, a focus for his holiday reading. He's also enjoyed the social aspect of coming together with other young readers.”*

As this was a pilot we knew some aspects of the programme would require trial and error. The strict record keeping and check-in process was necessary for evaluation purposes but proved difficult to manage and unpopular with both children and parents. The timing of the programme also clashed with other holiday programmes, many children were out of town during events, or involved in residential holiday programmes. We also found encouragement to read was not sustained in term time.

When evaluating the programme upon completion we discovered:

- 100% of parents supported some sort of reading programme continuing
- 77% of parents supported keeping the median age of BookBusters at 7 & 8
- 50% of parents supported a change to a monthly meeting
- Children said 'reading' was what they like best about BookBusters 728. They also reported having fun, learning something new and coming to the library more often were things they enjoyed about the programme.

We feel the BookBusters 728 programme is aligned to our strategic outcomes and targets the needs of a niche customer group in a new and exciting format. It encourages regular library use and reading for enjoyment at the peak age for developing these instincts. We therefore recommended to our leadership team that members of BookBusters 728 meet monthly at the original three BookBusters 728 sites. With the new look programme we hoped to capture the interest of those who were involved in the pilot. We could also continue to improve upon its successful formula.

The evolution of monthly clubs

Customers made the transition to monthly clubs easily. Attendance numbers went up by 30% at Kilbirnie and Tawa, and by 50% at our Central Library. Although we have yet to conduct another paper survey, verbal feedback from parents has remained positive. Observation of BookBusters in action shows children are continuing to enjoy the reading and library experience.

The BookBusters 728 characters in particular are hooking the target market and the supporting marketing collateral is very popular. As BookBusters 728 has evolved it has moved on from an entertainment and activity based programme to a more intimate book discussion group. This is closer to our original concept, where the focus is strongly on seven and eight year olds sharing positive reading experiences.

Any internal administration difficulties we encountered were minor and the chief BookBusters continue to make improvements. It is important we continue to make each programme relevant to its own community within the overall programme guidelines.

Demand has never outgrown any site due to a natural attrition rate. Children travel from a range of suburbs to participate in BookBusters 728, so we do not feel it is necessary to hold clubs at every library site in our network. There was a risk we would actually reduce the vibrancy and numbers in the programme by spreading it across the city. This would also stretch our own resources. We would rather see it do really well at selected sites. We launched BookBusters 728 at two additional sites in February 2005. Johnsonville and Cummings Park were chosen because of the large numbers of young families and primary schools in the area. Advertorials in local papers were particularly successful in promotion of the new sites and also attracted new seven year olds at the original sites. There were initially set-up costs involved, and when launching at new sites additional marketing collateral is required. However, we are confident for the foreseeable future that the programme is fully sustainable at five sites on 'business-as-usual' budgets. There is no limit on the number of children who can enrol in the programme (provided they meet the criteria). However, once numbers exceed a manageable level at a particular site we have agreed to investigate opening new clubs.

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Or check Wellington City Libraries Kidz Zone at www.wcl.govt.nz for more details.