

Does free mean without value? And is free ever worth stealing? The process, outcomes and learnings from a practice as research project encouraging recipients of a free book to value what they received

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Abstract. This paper considers a specific aspect of a practice as research project – *The Kingston University Big Read*. It explores how to achieve optimum attractiveness and perceived value among students and staff for a free book being circulated within a pre-arrival shared reading scheme. After consideration of the academic literature relating to the distribution of free books and titles that are stolen, there follows a detailed examination of marketing practice within the publishing industry relating to the dissemination of free and promotional items through collaborative endeavours. The solutions adopted are described, along with the outcomes perceived within the market, and recommendations made for future such involvements.

Context:

This paper began with an off-the-cuff remark in 1992. The director of a promotional incentive company, used to planning give-aways to attract positive attention towards organisations or brands, revealed that when choosing between several potential items, a useful strategy is to leave one of each in the reception area, and then see which gets stolen first.¹

Books make an effective choice as promotional incentives: they have a clear value, and feel sufficiently solid to be worthy of esteem. Perhaps for similar reasons, they often get stolen. Lacking effective on-product protection, or in-store cameras, many bookshops rely mainly on establishing early eye-contact with customers in order to deter theft. Although the scale of the problem is largely unreported (perhaps to discourage further initiative) books are routinely pilfered.

The Kingston University Big Read saw the creation of a bespoke edition of a single book which was then given to all incoming Kingston students, at all levels of study, with enough additional copies for interested staff and current students to have one too. The concept was to create a community before arrival, giving all new students something in common before they reached Kingston and in the process promoting an effective transition to their new life.

In the context of a free item being made available to a large community, the project was an interesting conundrum. At a time of general austerity, it required the allocation of significant resources – and yet its end product was available free, right across the institution. How could such a product be perceived as having value within a community to whom it was simply given? Was this an effective use of the university's money, particularly when students were being offered much more expensive gifts by other establishments, and academics were finding access to the routine privileges of university life (e.g. financial support for attendance at conferences; sabbaticals) was limited due to cost-cutting? And having made the decision to proceed, how could the engagement of students be promoted, when there are so many competing attractions? Similarly, how could the participation

¹ Sally Butler, KLP Ltd

of staff be encouraged, without attracting resistance to initiatives that threaten to impact on their time or academic freedom, or to themselves select resources on which to base study?

Pre-arrival shared-reading is common in the US, but generally described within organisational marketing information rather than analysed. The Kingston scheme, which embedded research from the outset, has significant implications for the enrolment, engagement and retention of students – as well as across the community – and also has implications for the value, use and abuse of promotional incentives within academic marketing.

Literature review

A review of the relevant academic literature and reports of industry practice offers several pertinent streams.

1. The significant evidence of reading for pleasure as benefitting those involved

The consistent evidence of the beneficial effects of reading for pleasure on those involved has been covered in previous papers associated with this project (Baverstock et al 2016 and 2017) with particular emphasis placed on the summative report of related research from The Reading Agency and BOP Consulting (2015). Of additional significance here is a 2016 report produced by the OECD which drew attention to the issue that although students come to university to 'read' for a degree, the extent to which English students arrive with adequate standards of literacy is questionable. The OECD (Kuczera, 2016) reported that:

'As with graduates, current university students in England have lower levels of literacy and numeracy than do those in many other countries. Around one in ten of all university students in England have numeracy or literacy levels below level 2. Some of these students may drop out or fail to graduate. Others may improve their basic skills during their university studies, and become better-skilled graduates. Some have a non-English mother tongue. But whatever the precise interpretation, the figures indicate a major basic skills challenge among current students, which, given the data on graduates, is often not resolved at the point of graduation.'

2. Literature relating to the benefits of pre-arrival shared reading

The experience of US universities in this area is significant. Pre-arrival shared-reading is widely used in building a community before students arrive at university and associated reports (e.g. Ferguson, 2006; Golden 2012) confirm that students who receive a book are more likely to enrol, feel engaged early, less likely to drop out and feel more connected locally; and that such projects also benefit wider community relationships, particularly when universities involve them, perhaps in sharing or even helping to deliver, associated events.

While there are some reports of such programmes, in general in the US it would seem pre-arrival shared-reading is organised by marketing, community relations and outreach departments rather than submitted to research project level scrutiny. This led to the identification of a research gap, with work to be done on measuring, rather than describing, outcomes.

3. Literature related to book theft from retailers and libraries – what makes a product attractive enough to steal?

It is also relevant to review the project within the wider context of literature relating to corruption. Theft may be regarded as the most basic form of corruption, because it is often the initial tempter, and because once embarked upon it changes the way operatives work and interact. Dr Lorenzo Pasculli, Director of Kingston University's Integrity Research Group, based his observations on the idea of corruption as 'any abuse of power for private gain', according to the broad definition given by the EU Anti-Corruption Report 2014. He commented:

'The most immediate "abuse" of our power is when we can steal something we have control of without having the right of ownership (e.g. embezzlement). While in the law the two offences of corruption and theft are separate, evidence of the theft underpinning subsequent corruption can be found in supporting studies and evidence can be drawn from a variety of different perspectives including socio-criminological and even anthropological. Many instances of theft may also fall within the scope of financial frauds or crimes at large, and there have been studies of each: e.g. electricity theft (Smith, 2004; Joseph, 2010), theft of information and data (Browne, 2014; Ladd, 2012); forgery (Del Piano, 1993). The relationship between corruption and theft has been explored in several recent studies (e.g. Tang and Sutarmo, 2013; Gottschalk, 2010).

There are also daily instances in the press of theft being the start of wider-scale problems, such as the bribes taken by senior management at the port of Mombassa leading to the overall reduction of the city's effectiveness as a trade gateway for much of East Africa (Reuters, 2016).'

It would seem however that whereas theft is a gateway crime for many other forms of activity, the profile of the book thief is slightly different.

4. Literature relating to the theft of books

Turning to studies relating to the theft of books, little information is available from associated retailers. Retailers are understandably reluctant to divulge company-specific data relating to their own organisations and unwilling to discuss shrinkage more generally for fear of being perceived by thieves as soft targets and hence theft increasing, and attracting investor criticism.

But perhaps the main reason books get stolen is that thieves know they can get away with it. After all, security in bookshops tends to be relatively lax and old-fashioned. Many stores don't have CCTV and few have security guards. Often, the only deterrent to crime is a bespectacled waif at the till. (Rhodes, 2016).

Little information is published on shrinkage and it is difficult to compare shrinkage between sectors. It should also be borne in mind that there are many different kinds of shrinkage, for example in the food trade it could be categorised as: waste; damage; out-of-date; theft; in-transit; in-warehouse – and this makes comparison between sectors more difficult.

Retail expert David Keens, formerly CFO of Next plc, now Non-Executive Director of Sainsbury's plc, and Auto Trader Group, provides useful insight into how retailers in the apparel sector deal with theft:

'High end clothing retailers have high gross margins and high price points. The latter means that they can spend more money on individual garment protection by such means as tagging (electronic or otherwise). Lower price point retailers will not spend the same amount as the

cost of tagging on low price/low margin garments as it is prohibitive and therefore use different methods and will accept higher levels of total loss. When it comes down to it, shrinkage is a cost issue not a moral issue and each company will have its own methodology.' (personal conversation, February 2017)

Turning to the book trade, the professional organisation for book retailers, The Booksellers Association, is a member of the British Retail Consortium and as such gets access to wider retail sector surveys, but there is little specific analysis of theft within the book industry. It is difficult to establish whether this is a low-order crime, or simply one that is little investigated and analysed. Philip Downer, formerly Group Chair, Borders bookstore commented:

'Book theft is an interesting topic. Unless there is a title with very broad popular appeal – e.g. *Harry Potter* or *50 Shades* – books tend to be stolen by individuals. This is very different from say, electrical goods where there is a ready market through car boot sales or pubs for clearing stolen goods, or food or basic clothes, where there may be a fundamental need on the part of the thief.

Typically the book thief is a solitary and rather sad character. The book that is stolen the most, over the years, is *The Bible*, and after that the main stolen categories include titles with salacious illustrations as well as titles that might appeal to hard up 'completists', so titles they are missing from a particular series, such as a science fiction series of novels.' (personal conversation, January 2017)

His instincts are confirmed in Jo Lou's analysis of book thieves by purpose (Electriclit, 2017).

The Bookseller Association's last related survey was in 2004; a survey of 24 retailers including three chains. The total cost of crime was estimated overall as around £1.96bn of which a third was the cost of crime prevention and two thirds was stock lost. Although the findings are a confidential survey, with no access now to the wider information behind it, several interesting themes emerged.

Firstly, customer theft is reported to be about the same across all retailers and booksellers (percentages of participating stores reporting it as 41%/42%) but whereas staff theft is considerably higher in bookshops (28% within 'all retail'/50% within 'all booksellers'), burglary is considerably lower (11%/3%) as are other losses from crime within book retailers, such as stealing furniture and financial theft (20%/5%). It may perhaps be concluded that thieves target bookshops only when they want what is sold and that burglars generally don't target bookshops. The tendency of staff to pilfer may be difficult for booksellers to agree upon, but booksellers are often characterised as being keener on selling books than selling in general, and maybe for some the temptation of being surrounded by things they want to own all day may be overwhelming. Philip Downer commented further that 'It can be a problem persuading staff that thieves come into their shops – we are back to the eternal challenge of getting introverted book-loving staff actively involved with customer focus.' Also that given the relatively low price of books 'It can also be a problem persuading the police that the theft of an odd book merits their attention.'

There is also the issue of the number of titles that are available in a bookshop, and how difficult it can be to keep track of what is on sale. A medium sized bookshop may stock as many as 20,000 different items (Baverstock, 1994) which is the same as a small supermarket, but often one or two copies per title, none of which are mechanically protected from theft. Stock management across so

vast an array of products is difficult, and it may be easier to deter theft and absorb associated losses than to try to prevent pilfering completely.

Overall, perhaps it can be concluded that the characteristics of the book thief are different from the thief of other types of product/service, and that the factors that make a book attractive to steal by a booklover are likely to be relevant to a scheme seeking to imbue a free product with a value.

5. Thefts from libraries

Information on what is stolen from academic libraries is slightly more available. Some studies have concentrated on the motivation of the individual (Perez, Cuadrado and Cervea, 2009; Robertson, 2016; Udoudoh, 2012), others on library security (Antwi, 1989; Maidabino and Zainab 2012; Obigwu, 1992; Stedman, 2010). But librarians encounter daily evidence of theft: radio tags torn out and left in the bathrooms and bins. Rather than installing more effective tagging mechanisms, or establishing more routine policing, a common response is to buy more stock. After all, what is stolen is generally what is most used and needed. There remains a suspicion that investigating further would advertise opportunities for crime:

'Most of the related articles aren't readily available and those that are don't give specific figures or percentages. You could conclude from this that there isn't much evidence of theft in libraries and that it isn't therefore a huge problem. But my gut feeling is that it is a really big issue but no one wants to talk about it because it makes them look incompetent and encourages their users to steal even more. Particularly if they find out how prevalent it is.'

(Subject specialist academic librarian, London)

Within universities there has also been a significant change in stocking policy within libraries, which parallels the introduction of student fees and accompanying expectations about how much students can be assumed to spend on resources to support their courses. There has been a shift from libraries expecting students to buy their own textbooks and stocking peripheral reading to support courses, to libraries stocking core texts. Librarians anecdotally report students' comments that an adequate supply of essential resources is essential, given the high fees charged, a view that is also echoed by those who regret underfunding of public libraries (Fenton, 2015).

In the longer term, librarians speculated informally that the regular disappearance of printed resources may prompt a trend towards libraries becoming learning centres rather than learning *resource* centres; locations that offer a supply of learning spaces and PCs with few paper resources, which will make book theft largely irrelevant for much of the stock, although security considerations will obviously remain important for rare and protected items.

6. Practical experience relating to SADRAS at Kingston

The Kingston University Big Read grew out of a SADRAS² research project which sought to support the learning experience of students who had not previously tended to thrive at university; part of Kingston's Access Agreement. The desire to circulate a book without prompting the targeted audience to feel patronised, resentful or over-contacted was prompted by consideration of the

² Student Academic Development Research Associate Scheme

accepted lower number of those who claim free services (e.g. free school meals) to which they are entitled and how participation can be significantly improved if initiatives are made available to the whole community rather than just those officially entitled, due to a stigma being associated with receipt (Observer, 2012). The decision was therefore made to make the book available across the entire community, and reach the populations particularly targeted by default.

Secondly, early consultation with the Kingston Communications Team provided the significant feedback that offering a free item to staff, most notably the university magazine, tended to prompt a response that it had not been asked for, and that it demonstrated a waste of trees, although responsible resourcing in the paper industry today means that suppliers are replanting at a faster rate than simple replacement would require (International Paper, 2017). Asking people to collect a copy, if interested, had emerged as a more positive basis on which to encourage them to read (and resulted in a lower print run and hence costs).

7. Examples from industry, and associated press coverage, of the use of books as promotional incentives

Books make attractive promotional incentives and are in demand as a product which, repeated initiatives within the publishing industry have shown, can drive the customer from consideration to purchase across multiple sectors.

Such initiatives have shown that a book can drive brand awareness and customer loyalty, and their collectability can encourage both sales and repeat purchase. Books have a highly perceived value, and consumer engagement and sign-up means book promotions can drive data-collection, effecting a path to future related initiatives.

The first significant promotion of this sort was the Weetabix 'Choose Your Own Adventure' (CYOA) children's book giveaway in the mid-1980s, in partnership with Bantam, an imprint of Transworld Publishers, and now part of Penguin Random House. This was a bold initiative at the time, and rather like Walker Books' partnership with Sainsbury's a few years later, caused some dissatisfaction amongst retailers who saw it as an erosion of their territory which would lead to the collapse of the full-price market at a time with the Net Book Agreement kept retail prices consistent³ - or fixed as abolitionists claimed. CYOA sold over 250,000 units in the UK up until the late 1990s. It would appear that the free book offer served to enhance the brand and launch a new genre where the narrator controls a narrative with multiple outcomes, prompting many look-alikes (including Jackson and Livingstone's bestselling *Fighting Fantasy*). According to Kieran Fanning, it even drove would-be authors to embark on their own careers (Fanning, 2015).

What makes books attractive as promotional give-aways? They:

- Can provide an interesting narrative; a unique selling proposition and a method of differentiation to an otherwise generic product
- Have strong collectability; each one is different but they can be part of a series making a homogenous offer
- Have a cultural and educational value
- Offer longevity and durability; unlike the disposable plastic toy incentives, books endure

³ No longer defended after 1995

- Have a good safety record – although all safety testing rules still apply, particularly in children’s and novelty books for children under three years of age
- Can reach defined target markets – books can target specific age groups, demographics and interest groups (e.g. the 2010 Galaxy ‘Melt into a good read’ promotion, which associated chocolate with the female read, Brand Republic, 2010)
- Can offer swift fulfilment. Books can generally (although not in all cases) be reprinted to meet increased demand
- Offer effective logistics. Their compact size and shape means they can be bundled with other products (e.g. magazines, cereal packets)
- Can be produced inexpensively – especially in large volumes. Non-colour can be printed in the UK and colour in Europe which means supply-chain efficiencies; speedier than using Far East manufacturers, the former general source of colour printing
- Are strong brand promoters and can complement and enhance the other parties’ brand or licensing portfolio
- Do not carry a VAT which can affect the margin and complicate accounting
- Can be used as an effective data-collection mechanism, to build a consumer database for future marketing campaigns

What are the benefits of involvement in promotional offers to the key stakeholders: publishers; agents and authors?

Owners of intellectual property may question the value of giving away content and the likely associated impact on sales through conventional channels; an issue often raised is whether the give-away will harm author brand or reputation.

The compatibility of the partnership is an important factor in all these scenarios. All elements of the partnership must work together in order to achieve reciprocal gain. For example, it is likely that each party in a collaboration will be looking to extend their audience and their market through association with a product which will, it is anticipated, facilitate access to new consumers, stimulate trial, raise profile and open new sales channels. Parties may also be seeking to deliver a benefit to their loyal customers, or inspire consumers with existing brand loyalties to switch.

In the case of the manufacturers of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), a free book promotion can result in publishers gaining preferential or improved supplier status with certain retailers over their competitors. For media partners, such as magazines, a book promotion on the cover can drive up sales for the specific issues featuring the offer, but also in the longer term increase both visibility and subscriptions.

Publishers look upon such promotional sales as an opportunity to achieve both scale and exposure; offering a sample to potential readers and particularly non-readers, recapturing lapsed readers or light book buyers. The outcome sought is an enhanced offer to consumers which attracts attention within the very competitive premiums market, and hence encourages consumers to engage with the brand and buy more of the same – whether that be books or the partnership product.

For retailers a successful free book promotion can create retail theatre – sometimes enhanced by in-store point of sale (e.g. posters and presentation materials); creating a destination and driving

footfall and point of sale (e.g. posters and presentation materials); creating a destination and driving footfall and point of difference in relation to their competitors.

It is interesting to speculate on the place of the e-book within this mix. It could be argued that the value perception is much lower in an e-book giveaway since significant quantities of content are available free from both mainstream and self-published authors, many seeking to establish themselves as a precursor to being taken up by a mainstream publisher. Publishers have long sought to reinforce the value of e-content, but have met resistance from consumers that e-content should be paid for. The notion that digital means free has however been eroded by newspapers, and other content that readers value, being available only behind paywalls. This has led to publisher resistance to giving away free e-books in their entirety, preferring samplers or bridging/peripheral content to whet the readers' appetite. For example, Kindle's 99p e-book is used as a brand driver and often for a limited period only.

Self-publishing authors have however demonstrated more willingness to give away complete e-books to expand their audience. Justine Solomons of networking hub Byte the Book commented:

'Traditional publishers are often reluctant to give away content as they fear that it might cannibalise sales but this may be due in part to the fact that publishers haven't historically had a close relationship with consumers and aren't used to selling directly to them. This is in contrast to new independent (or self-published) authors who see the value in a direct relationship with their readers and are very much paying head to the adage, 'the best way to sell a book is to write one, then write another one and give the first one away for free'. (personal conversation, February 2017):

Crime-writer Mark Dawson commented at a Byte the Book event on 30th January 2017 that his most valuable asset is his 65,000 email list and he regularly gives away free content as a "list magnet" to encourage new email sign-ups to expand his reader database.

Dawson commented: 'Using a loss leader is a tried and true marketing tactic, and it works very well with books (where there is a very low cost of production). I have given away 100,000s of copies of my books, often in exchange for an email address as potential readers join my list. Using that list I have been able to launch my books into the top 100 best-selling titles on the Amazon store and have generated hundreds of thousands of pounds of income.' (personal conversation, February 2017)

There has also been a shift in recent years away from physical book giveaways on fast-moving consumer goods and news products to digital collecting mechanisms. There are many variations of the associated promotional mechanism. For example, 'cash-back'⁴ and 'mail in rebate' (MIR)⁵,

⁴ Cash back is a pricing mechanism designed to increase sales volumes. The price adjustment is expressed as a money-back, augmented value offer to the consumer at point of purchase.

⁵ Cash back MIR (or Mail in Rebate) is a money-off mechanism dependent on proof of purchase. A MIR entitles the buyer to a rebate by mailing in a coupon, receipt, or barcode.

instant win⁶ and scratch-card, prize drawn⁷, multi-buy⁸; spend and get⁹ coupons and vouchers (e.g. the long-running 2-for-1 ticket offers made available by Merlin entertainment).

The large scale media brand partnerships, where a book or CD was given away free (e.g. books on the side of Cheerio boxes in the 2000s) are rare today. As newspaper sales have declined, so have marketing budgets and digital options are more cost effective. For example, a tri-partite promotion of Penguin Books, The Times and Cafe Nero of 2010 was a give-away of a significant scale – resulting in the reported circulation of over 10 million Penguin books in their retro-striped livery. This involved a re-jacketing using the original and iconic tri-band covers of the 1930s (Penguin, 2017).

An example of a highly successful free book promotion based on digital coupon collection was the McCain Smiles-Ladybird *Treasured Tales* promotion involving an on-pack code redemption mechanism which could be redeemed through a bespoke mini-site. By collecting two unique codes from packaging of oven-ready potatoes, and uploading them to the site, the participant qualified for a choice from six free Ladybird books. The mechanism required return to the website in order to build a collection, and the information gained at entry was highly effective for data capture and repeat marketing. Over 150k units were redeemed and Megan Smith, Special Sales Director of Hachette, who ran the campaign at Penguin, estimated (conversation, February 2017) an associated increased weight of purchase for the products in general. Although the content was generic, this was an opportunity to raise the profile of the Ladybird brand, which is one of the few book brands which has consumer recognition. The promotion won the 2013 IPM¹⁰ Gold Award for on-pack promotion.

A free book can also be a springboard to what may be helpfully termed ‘360 degree promotional campaigns’¹¹ which feature interlocking elements and a variety of desirable outcomes. The Hachette McDonald’s Happy Meal Enid Blyton promotion offers such case study.

McDonald’s wanted to include a book offering in the Happy Meal giveaway programme because of the product’s educational appeal to parents. They formed a partnership with the National Literacy Trust to reinforce their status as reading champions. Hodder & Stoughton, part of the Hachette UK Group and owners of Enid Blyton’s intellectual property, won the pitch to be the publishing partners.

⁵ An ‘instant win’ promotion is one in which winning tickets are randomly and securely distributed in or on promoted products and consumers get their winnings at once or know immediately what they have won and how to claim it without delay or administrative barriers’ For more information see ‘The Committees of Advertising Practice (CAP) <https://www.cap.org.uk/Advice-Training-on-the-rules/Advice-Online-Database/Sales-Promotions-Prize-Draws.aspx#.WJyWYDuLRP>

⁶ The term ‘prize draw’ includes a variety of promotional mechanisms.

⁸ Multibuy promotions require the consumer to purchase two or more articles at a special discount compared to the price when bought separately. Popular mechanisms for multibuy promotions include buy one get one free (often known as BOGOF), and three for two.

⁹ Spend and Get generally means the customer purchases one item, usually at full price, and then receives the opportunity to buy another item(s) at discounted price(s).

¹⁰ IPM, The Institute of Promotional Marketing, the trade body for the promotions industry www.theipm.org.uk

¹¹ Clare Somerville, 2017

Enid Blyton is an evergreen property with cross-generational appeal. She is the world's bestselling (over 500m sold) and most translated children's author (UNESCO, 2015; Translation Excellence, 2017) since her first publication in 1922¹². Hachette's strategy was to reinvigorate the brand, afford it new currency and relevance, and introduce Blyton to a wider readership – especially educators and those who were not habitual frequenters of bookshops or libraries. Consumer insight had reinforced the wholesomeness of the brand and identified the values of safe adventure, freedom and friendship, and McDonald's recognised her value as a gateway to reading. A six-book Secret Seven Happy Reader offer ran for over six weeks in 2014. This was re-purposed content with new illustrative material by high profile artist Tony Ross¹³ whose work had strong recognisability within the market through his illustrations for the best-selling Horrid Henry (Orion's Children's Books) and David Walliams' titles (Harper Collins). The content was re-designed to target the Happy Meal consumer, making sure that the level of text and illustration were appropriate. There was added value through incremental free content and reading tips for parents. All this created an aura of 'bespokeness'. An appreciation of the packaging by unboxer Tracey can be seen on Toy Broadway (YouTube, 2014).

The publisher enjoyed benefits of 'free' heavy-weight marketing including TV advertising, which was fully funded by McDonald's as part of their usual Happy Meal advertising. There was exposure in the digital space through promotion on McDonald's highly-sophisticated *Happy Studio* website, with interactive story-writing features and literacy information for parents, plus exclusive digital story content. In terms of branding, the books carried the three distinctive logos (Enid Blyton, McDonald's and National Literacy Trust) reinforcing the partnership and giving it gravitas and credibility.

Families were drawn into the restaurants through the theatre of point-of-sale material, and this was carried through into the design of the Happy Meal boxes. Once inside the restaurant, they were confronted with 3D displays and library corners where children could borrow books (donated by Hachette to promote other ranges) or take part in storytelling sessions which secured staff engagement and advocacy.

The best 'free' promotions result in sales. This particular promotion had a retail angle. Each Happy Meal box carried a money off-voucher redeemable through WH Smith against an own brand, affordable Blyton book. This mechanism drove footfall but also opened up the world of reading to new audiences who were not habitual book purchasers. There was positive spin-off in the general book trade; the media exposure and high street presence convinced retailers there was an opportunity to promote the Enid Blyton range in store and the publishers observed many instances of the subsequent restocking of her titles.

The promotion was also a success for McDonald's. There was a positive response to the departure from toys to books and this resulted in two further Happy Meal book promotions for Hachette. This time the promotions were pan-European, the books translated into over 40 languages, and a chance to promote other properties within their portfolio. The publisher was also able to share learnings with publishing partners in other territories such as Egmont Germany, who were subsequently able

¹² *Child Whispers*, a collection of poems, published by J. Saville & Co., 1922

¹³ e.g. winner of 2003 Nestlé Smarties Book Prize (Silver Award); 2000 National Art Library Illustration Award; 1999 National Art Library Illustration Award; 1998 National Art Library Illustration Award; 1990 Kate Greenaway Medal; 1986 shortlist Silver Paintbrush Award for the best illustrations by a foreign artist three times

to set up local partnerships with their McDonald's, increasing the international profile of the Enid Blyton brand.

The hypothesis that 'free' can be a sales generator rather than a sales inhibitor is reinforced by Tim Watkins, whose agency The Communications Practice¹⁴ was instrumental in implementing DVD and CD cover mounts which, starting in 2003, represented key television, music and film content owners such as BBC, ITV, C4, Sony and Paramount. This resulted in the distribution of over 100 million units per year and working through major UK tabloids and broadsheets such as *Express Newspapers*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* and The Mirror Group.

'Research showed that rather than having a detrimental effect, retail sales increased due to the promotional support such cover mounts provided. Furthermore, with the reduction of high street retailers such as HMV and Woolworths, cover mounts became an important source of revenue for the content owners, particularly specialist content such as documentaries or back catalogue films as these were not freely available to purchase. Furthermore, many of the newspaper readers were not traditional DVD buyers and the cover mounts were an ideal way to sample or launch new DVD or CD releases.' (personal correspondence with author, January 2017).

There may be geographical market differences however in how consumers react to the concept of 'free' and what represents a value for money or a collectible proposition.

Newspaper promotions in the UK (e.g. books, DVDs, downloads) have generally been "free for every reader", with no monetary contribution required. However, in Europe and in Australia, the same promotional proposition will require readers to pay a nominal amount. For example, in a September 2016 promotion between Penguin and *The Sun*, and marking the centenary of the author's birth, free Roald Dahl books were offered via supermarket redemption partners in the UK and Ireland,¹⁵ but a forthcoming promotion in Australia between News Corp and the Communication Partnership, requires readers to pay \$2.60 (circa £1.50) per book for a collection of 14 titles.

Tim Watkins confirms that this kind of promotion is now mainstream:

'Over the past two years, I have run a series of free book promotions in Australia including Disney, Marvel and Dr Seuss series which have all be successful with a similar price point.' (ibid).

His most successful promotions are when there are 'no strings attached' i.e. a clear and attractive proposition that can be redeemed easily and requires few or no conditions. An increase in requirements, and associated delays, will inversely impact on the promotion's likely success. A free promotion can also build a sense of community. The Penguin Galaxy book promotion of 2010 invited consumers to become part of a club with the lure of 'indulgence' (a core element of Galaxy's brand messaging) through a free book. The giveaway focused on women's commercial fiction (complementing the Galaxy demographic) and worked on a 'book club' collector's model giving consumers the chance to redeem a choice of two books from the list through a winning 'indulgent'

¹⁴ www.the-practice.com

¹⁵ Morrisons in the UK and with the Irish Sun and Easons in Ireland.

code (e.g. 'poetry', 'dream', 'virtue') which directed the consumer to a website (and data collection mechanisms for future marketing).

The partnership was reinforced through alignment with the Galaxy-sponsored *Richard & Judy Book Club* which dominated the high street and the charts at that time, and also sponsorship of the annual book industry awards – the Galaxy National Book Awards. The free books were drawn from bestselling 'chart' or 'heat-seeker' author names of the moment - 'Her Fearful Symmetry' by Audrey Niffenegger, 'Wedding Season' by Katie Fforde, 'The Truth about Melody Browne' by Lisa Jewell, 'The Beach House' by Jane Green and 'Knots & Crosses' by Ian Rankin (presumably based on research that had revealed the popularity of this genre with women). The campaign slogan 'a million books to be won' caused some disaffection with the book trade, but links to authors' websites and an invitation to click through to the Galaxy Facebook page offered further opportunity to pull in an audience and sell more products to them. As the Galaxy *Richard & Judy Book Club* was the main driver of sales volume at the time (*Guardian*, 2004; *Independent*, 2005; *Bookseller*, 2010), this could have assuaged any associated negative feelings towards the promotion.

A powerful force in bringing affordable books to the non-traditional book buyer, The Book People's website proudly pronounces their mission to provide 'hand-picked favourites at unbelievable prices since 1988' with the promise of an 'extensive range of over 100,000 books, gifts, toys and stationery' at average discounts of 75% off RRP. The company reaches its audience, not only through its online and mail order activities, but also through a network of agents who would set up displays of physical samples in workplaces and institutions and then return a week or so later to pick up the order, once the consumers had had time to evaluate the offering and make a considered decision.

Whilst free gifts work as an incentive online, Sarah Walden MD of The Book People sees bulk sales as an inducement to purchase in the physical world, where consumers can handle the product:

'The weight of product is important as a sales driver. It can't be full of air or the perceived value is reduced. Items with an added element such as cuddly toy seem to be most targeted in terms of thefts from distributors' displays' (personal email, January 2017).

Research question

This broad assessment of academic literature and industry practice led to the affirmation of a book as a suitable promotional item for a university and the isolation of an associated research question: How could the book chosen for free circulation to student and staff populations at Kingston University be made both attractive and desirable?

Methodology

The project was developed as practice as research through Kingston University's SADRAS scheme, based within the university's MA Publishing.

SADRAS has its origins in a successful proposal to the Higher Education Academy in 2012 to implement a Student as Partners programme, and is funded through the Access Working Group. The scheme is jointly managed by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP) and the Kingston University Students Union (KUSU).

SADRAS aims to encourage students and staff, in equal partnership, to undertake educational research with the purpose of improving the academic experience of students at the university,

particularly those from under-represented groups. It facilitates, in part, the enactment of the university's *Led by Learning* strategy, by enabling Kingston students to actively contribute to course development as part of a learning community. This is designed to encourage collaboration between students and staff, enabling students to both provide a perspective on how the student experience might be improved but also to undertake paid research in an academic environment.

SADRAS projects are intended to positively target student achievement, progression and retention and to be focused on students who have experienced particular difficulties in adapting to student life, e.g. BME, first generation, mature students and those who are parents and carers.

The research team was recruited by asking for volunteers from within MA Publishing and final year Kingston undergraduates planning to take the course in the year ahead. SADRAS was a close fit for the MA Publishing course's firm ethos that students should be committed to learning about publishing, and finding relevant employment, but also developing a commitment to encourage more people to read and supporting an awareness of the value of books as community builders.

Based on extensive study of the literature, exploration of existing pre-arrival reading schemes in the US and the wider use of books as promotional items within the publishing industry, a variety of practical issues were explored. Operating as practice as research meant implementing plans but at the same time seeking to analyse progress and accumulate learning for future project development.

A book as an effective choice for a university promotional incentive

Based on feedback from extensive research relating to the appeal of books – their attractiveness as promotional incentives and associated industry involvements; their attractiveness for potential theft; the operation of existing pre-arrival schemes in the US; discussions with librarians, booksellers and publishers – it was agreed that a book makes a good choice for a promotional giveaway. It is portable, generally attractive, and can be personalised to match the institution choosing it.

Within the wider context of other items given away by universities to attract attention and affirm the organisational brand, the book is attractive in that it is cost effective (particularly compared with other marketing incentives like hand-held computers and travel passes), likely to be kept and can be shared with others, transporting the university brand to others it would be helpful to influence. It is also particularly suitable for a gift within HE given that students come to university to 'read' for a degree, and so more relevant and prestigious than other promotional items available from incentive companies (e.g. free pens and screen wipes). A book's potential role within an individual's development also links effectively and appropriately with literacy standards, the OECD report quoted earlier having implied that these may be less established than is assumed by the institutions expecting them.

The bespoke book was relatively quick to organise, given that the format already existed and needed only to be adapted. Demand quickly outstripped supply, largely due to stronger uptake from staff than anticipated, and two reprint orders were swiftly achieved. The titles arrived in manageable and square outer packages of 64, supported by a wooden pallet to keep them off the floor, shrink-wrapped in durable plastic, and were relatively easy to store; space was found in Kingston University's warehouse, where the stock could be drawn down as needed. The university's central

delivery services could access from here and implement wider delivery. There was consideration of whether the title should be available as an e-book as well, and likely comparative popularity of the two formats, and this is considered elsewhere (Baverstock, *Bookseller*, 2017).

Feasibility of establishing a working relationship between a publisher and a university

It was consistently found that publishers were keen to work with a university on developing a bespoke item for wide-scale distribution within a non-traditional market. Within publishing houses this counted as a 'special sale' and they were eager to cooperate on the development of the item; all the houses approached had personnel experienced in developing this kind of personalised product. Both publishers eventually worked with (Penguin in 2015 and 2017; Canongate in 2016) reported a subsequent 'halo effect'; a rise in sales of other titles by the same author over the period following *The KU Big Read*. This lateral interest in the writer's wider involvements was also reported by the bookseller who sold a range of Hornby titles at a public event in Kingston 2015 as part of the cultural programme *Kingston Connections*. During subsequent years, Regency Bookshop, the independent bookshop in Surbiton offered local people 10% off the titles from the shortlist, and was very satisfied with the results.

How to add value to a promotional book made available free

There were a number of ways in which *The KU Big Read* team sought to add value to the shared book, in order to encourage market appreciation. Some were thought of by the team, others were acquired and developed through enabling others to take responsibility for sharing the scheme and observing their responses. These included:

Offering a 'real' title, which could also be seen for sale in retail outlets

The starting point here was largely personal; recollections of the first time that fellow pupils (in this case Year 12) were spotted reading a 'real' book, rather than one designated for a long-life within school and hence bound in durable hardback format with a dull cover. The 'A' level candidates were reading a Penguin edition of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy; a copy that could get battered through personal use. Having the same cover as the bookshop edition showed Kingston students that real books had been bought, unlike 'proof copies' or the cheaper editions of books produced for other giveaways, which are branded thematically to highlight the scheme and avoid resale.

Producing a bespoke edition, special to Kingston University

Additional features were added to the basic title produced by the publishers. These included the university logo on the front cover, a foreword from the VC, questions for readers in the back of the book and a paragraph on the back cover about the institution. This was later heard described by a librarian as having a special value as it was a 'limited edition'. It was similarly a librarian who pointed out that no copies were seen lying around on library desks or in the bin – a common fate for marketing information. There was an associated deduction that the book had been valued.



Visibility of price on the cover

Contractual arrangements whereby the book was being sold to Kingston University as a special edition, and was not available for wider resale, meant that the price could not be featured on the back; potentially reducing its perceived value. The appearance of 'not for resale' on the back cover where the price normally sits was however resisted, as it was felt that this would make the book look like a promotional item rather than a purchased one. But while the promotional book could not have a price, it retained a barcode, again making it look like a purchasable item.

Making the mailing package special

In 2015 the book was sent to all arriving students, at their home address in the UK/EU; in 2016 and 2017 to international students as well. Based on direct marketing theory, great care was taken with the mailing package, and this added to the sense of specialness experienced by recipients. The book was mailed in a specially branded polylope (plastic envelope), so the front cover was visible to all through the packaging. Several students commented that arrival of the package when they were not at home had drawn attention within their family, with a few parents unable to resist the temptation and opening the package, without waiting for the official recipient to be there.

The timing of despatch was intended to impact on enrolment; the package was sent as soon as organisational grade offers had been met but before students had necessarily enrolled, hopefully impacting on their decision. The packaging listed the sender and return address as that of the Vice Chancellor; so their first communication from the institution they were planning to join was a direct communication from its head.

The accompanying letter also had an impact. Direct mail practitioners (Bird, 2007) make it clear that the letter is the part of a mailing package most likely to be read. In this case, the author of the KU Big Read was asked to write the letter, and reflections on how they had felt when starting at university (mostly very nervous) were much appreciated by recipients, as was heard repeatedly from the student audiences at Welcome Week events.



'I was impressed at the sense of personal contact it gave, although of course, hundreds of copies were sent out. But a book is a very culturally charged concept, and sharing a work of literature conveys a sense of friendship or intimacy. It was also an unfamiliar strategy, so the initiative had novelty value too.' new first year student who received a copy in the post, 2016

Requiring collection rather than pick up

Requiring staff and students who had not been posted a copy to go and collect one from a series of pre-advertised places rather than simply passively receiving one promoted a tendency for involvement. This was grounded in guidance from the Kingston Communications team that requiring staff to collect a magazine rather than issuing them to each staff member led to fewer complaints about offering people something they did not ask for. Evidence from receptionists and librarians was that as fast as titles were put out, they disappeared. Whereas copies of marketing information left in staff pigeonholes may remain uncollected. Staff response was particularly strong from administrative and professional staff and two reprints were needed as a direct result.

'The reception team were really behind this - great to see their enthusiasm' – anonymous feedback from staff member responding to survey question: 'Where did you hear about *The KU Big Read*?'

The role of the recommender in promoting involvement

Staff on reception and in the libraries consistently reported that if they directed conversation towards the book or associated scheme, whether with a student or member of staff, the first question they received was invariably whether or not they had read the book themselves. Most had, and it was found that the ability to discuss what was on offer (both scheme and book, and irrespective of whether the book had been enjoyed) and to recommend involvement, heightened the positive response to what was being offered. Many potential recipients apparently responded with general surprise that the book was available without charge; being handed a copy with a comment that this was a special gift from the university, generally enhanced the pleasure with which it was received.



‘Getting involved in this project made it clear that receptionists are more than just a uniform.’ Member of the Reception Team.

Available to all

Although the initial research project was to fund exploration of issues particularly affecting students who have not thrived within HE in the past (carers and those leaving care, mature students, those living at home and BAME) offering the free book to all took away any sense of it being a development project for particular market sectors. It was stressed as a whole community initiative to make links between those about to join and those already at Kingston, and across all staff responsibilities, academic, administrative and professional.

‘The KU Big Read has really reached across the institution, joining us all up.’ Matthew Hilton, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Kingston University

Using the book in a variety of unanticipated ways

The book was intended to prompt shared discussion between new students and existing staff/students of the institution they were joining. However, its quick adoption by a number of departments within Kingston for more complex purposes than originally intended added value to what had been created. For example, within student contact, the book was used by a Politics lecturer to create common ground before embarking on a very sensitive module (Genocide) and within the science faculty as the basis of discussions within Interprofessional Education (building links between different disciplines). Within the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education the book was used as the basis of a project to develop empathy within a new cohort of Nursing students; directly addressing governmental concerns about building caring values and practice within future health-care professionals. Colleagues within Human Resources used the book as an incentive at inductions for new staff, and the department of Development, Alumni Relations and Events used the book as an institutional business card when seeking sponsorship and as the basis of fundraising events for alumni. Colleagues in both Estates and Finance used the book for team-building.

‘I found myself talking about the scheme a lot. And that others were really interested, both those from a university and those not. Shared reading seems such a simple thing, but the reality is that it gives people something in common and hence promotes collegiality and empathy.’ Anonymous response from the staff survey

‘That was a blast! How amazing that a book can bring us all together and generate such excitement.’ – Mark Carew, Associate Professor, Physiology and Pharmacology

Selling/giving books to third parties

The prophet is often least accepted at home. It follows that external partners buying into Kingston’s Big Read added to a general perception of the project’s value within the institution.

In 2016 a collaboration was established with Edinburgh Napier University, producing a special edition for them including a letter from their VC and a Napier Big Read logo on the front of the book. Copies of the Kingston edition were sold to the local authority (The Royal Borough of Kingston) and made available through libraries and the local museum, enabling the wider community to participate, and events were organised for book discussion in local libraries. In 2017 copies were sold to the Science Faculty of the University of Wolverhampton and embedded within a core first year module, with an associated assignment.

‘We were delighted to be involved in Kingston University’s Big Read 2016. Free copies of Matt Haig’s book ‘The Humans’ were made available in all public libraries, giving everyone the chance to experience the book for themselves, and try an author they may not have come across before. Additionally a discussion event at Surbiton Library offered visitors the opportunity to explore the themes in the book, highlighting the value of reading as a shared experience. We look forward to working with the University on the Big Read 2017.’ Joanne Moulton, Head of Libraries, Museums and Archives, The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

Along similar lines, the Kingston branch of the University of The Third Age bought copies for distribution to members, and a second author event was organised to which the wider community was welcomed. Giving away books to guests and helpers at three local shelters for refugees and those experiencing homelessness attracted a lot of positive attention within Kingston University, prompting several members of staff to volunteer – and creating opportunities for student placements.

Outcomes

On receiving their book, many students commented on social media that they had received a ‘present’ or ‘gift’ and felt ‘welcomed’, ‘expected’ and ‘less nervous’. This response was tracked. The mailing addresses to which the books were sent came from the application data provided by the students and being based on current information, the level of undeliverables was very low. Also tracked were attendance at book-related events during Welcome Week and early weeks’ teaching. After the project-related events had finished both students and staff were questionnaired about the scheme. Questions were quantitative, offering a sliding scale for the recording of responses, with a number of options for longer comments. Results from this survey were as follows:

86% of student responders and 74% of staff responders felt the scheme was useful

83.4% of student responders were pleased to receive their book

81% of student responders had read the whole book before arrival

84% of student responders and 70% of staff responders thought the book a good choice

73% of students and 60% of staff responders discussed the book, often with multiple categories of individual(s) and the high figures for discussion were evident even among those who did not read the book. Feedback from students was consistently very positive, comments in the post-delivery survey included:

‘I could not believe that my university would send me a book to me in Indonesia. It made me think – I really am going’

‘I felt valued, as I felt it was a personal touch from Kingston University to me.’

‘I was quite impressed at the fact you sent me a book and wanted to involve me in something big. Great way of having things in common with people who are all new to university’

‘I really liked the welcoming nature of it. I thought the idea behind it was wonderful and made me feel better about coming to the university. I became part of the group before the dreaded first day.’

‘I thought it was a great idea that definitely gave me a platform which I could use to engage with fellow students.’

‘It was a nice introduction to the University and made me feel like I was joining a community.’

In the project’s first year (2014-15) there was a significant reduction in Kingston University’s drop-out rate and this trend continued the following year. While this correlates with other university developments, such as the reworking of Welcome Week and the introduction of a personal tutor scheme, *The Kingston University Big Read* was a likely significant variable.

Conclusions

The project team concluded that as a pre-arrival gift, Kingston’s free book had been very well received and appropriate, helping to build a greater connectedness within the universities involved and the wider communities within which it had been distributed.

They concluded that in an environment where there is ongoing access to books, and variable respect for book ownership, a book as a free gift can still be both an attractive and desirable object, and perceived to be of value if you:

- Make it special; a bespoke edition that people are pleased to receive
- Make it available for collection rather than handing it out
- Sell it to other people to establish its value
- Organise associated activities so it becomes part of a wider package

Looking to the future it would also seem likely that as print resources get rarer, and university libraries move to digital resources to make best use of their budgets and avoid theft, a printed book as a gift will become more special and hence valued. A bespoke edition may be even more valued because it is from a limited print run. As *The KU Big Read* enters its fourth year, there is also an additional expectation that building up a series may impact on product value; given that a desire to own a complete series prompts acquisition; whether through purchase, gift – or theft.

'I am a huge supporter of *The KU Big Read*. I think it is beneficial to students as it gives them the opportunity to be part of a shared experience of reading a great book. It also benefits publishers as it is a terrific way of promoting an author's work. It benefits authors for that same reason, and because KU ensures that authors' royalties are paid on all copies distributed. By targeting this generation of readers, who don't always read for pleasure, KU are also helping to encourage literacy amongst a crucial demographic. I think it's one of the best and most innovative ways of promoting reading that I've seen.' David Shelley, CEO, Little Brown Publishing Group

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