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Making Books Affordable

Country music star Dolly Parton is a woman of many accomplishments: actress, musician, entrepreneur, and philanthropist. At heart, however, Dolly is a poet. Her lyrics are recognized across America and beyond, including such favorites as “I Will Always Love You,” “9 to 5,” and “Jolene.” As might be expected, Dolly Parton is also a voracious reader, with an extensive book collection. As a child growing up in Appalachia, however, Dolly experienced book hunger first-hand.

In an interview with the *Boston Globe*, the singer-songwriter described the role of books in her own childhood. “We weren’t allowed to bring schoolbooks home, not even for homework, because all of us kids—there were

12 of us—would tear them up, chew them up, get food on them. Daddy couldn't afford to replace the schoolbooks if we ruined them." Although her father could not read or write, Dolly's mother taught her to read from the one book the family owned. "My mother's Bible was the book that was always there. We knew better than to mess with that." Dolly's own childhood experience motivated her to found the Imagination Library as a way to ensure that all children could experience the joy of book ownership.

The Imagination Library

Like Dolly herself, the philanthropic project had humble beginnings. At Christmastime in 1995, the Dollywood Foundation mailed its first shipment of books to the children of Sevier County, Tennessee. Today, the Dolly Parton Imagination Library delivers new books by mail to one million children each month, in the United States and Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. The organization has delivered more than 100 million books.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library works to ensure that all young children can enjoy a home environment rich in books, regardless of family income. With the help of community partners and local fundraising, the organization mails a new book each month to every participating child, ages zero to five. Importantly, there is absolutely no

cost to the parents to participate in the Imagination Library. Nor do parents have to make a special effort to go out and obtain the books. They simply appear in the mailbox on a regular basis. Parents have to give permission, provide their address, and give the ages of their children.

The first book every child receives is *The Little Engine that Could*, and the last is *Kindergarten, Here I Come!* The titles in between vary each year. A panel selects a list of lovely, delightful picture books appropriate for each year of the child's life. By age five, a participating child will have up to sixty books of her own. Families with more than one child will have an even larger variety of titles, since portions of the book list change each year.

Ensuring access to books is not only about improving educational outcomes and enhancing future job prospects. Stories also inspire, and may help an impoverished reader to envision optimistic narratives for his or her own life. Dolly often says that her favorite book as a child was Watty Piper's *The Little Engine that Could*. "I think that little book had a big impact on me, on my big dreams. I still have that philosophy. I am a little engine that did." Reading and owning books allows people to see themselves as educated, intelligent, and capable of life-long learning. "If you can read you can educate yourself," Dolly told the *Boston Globe*. If you can't go to school or don't want to, you

can still go buy a book about any subject you want and educate yourself.” Although others often describe the Imagination Library as a literacy charity, the organization does not see itself that way. Its mission statement expresses a broader ambition: “to inspire children to dream more, learn more, care more, be more.” Books are simply the vehicle for this effort to lift people up.

Related to this emphasis on dignity, the Imagination Library has never required families to state or prove that they qualify as low-income. From the beginning, the program was open to all children in the community, whether their families were rich or poor. C.E.O. David Dotson explains, “We are a universal program. Everyone in the community has to be eligible.” It was important to Dolly to avoid stigmatizing children by singling them out as poor and therefore deserving of charity. “Being labeled as poor means being labeled as not as intelligent, not as ambitious, a victim in some way, all those stereotypes,” Dotson explains.

Dotson often refers to this as the question of, “What are the terms of the transaction? When we give the books, what do we want the kids to feel and not feel?” The Imagination Library strives to ensure that the book program makes participating children feel special, to uplift them rather than to shame them. Although many smaller book

charities rely on second-hand books or “remaindered” books, Imagination Library has always insisted on new books, hand-selected for high quality by a panel of experts. Each book is presented as a personal gift from Dolly Parton, addressed to the children by name and delivered to their home mailbox.

Social Class and Access to Books

My own children—little girls ages eight, four, and two—have a home library embarrassing in its riches. Our friends and relatives can afford to purchase a twenty-dollar book as a gift on a special occasion or even “just because.” They do so on the understanding that our family’s more basic needs—for food, clothing, housing, and health care—are already securely met. In one week, my daughters received books as gifts from their grandparents, babysitter, and pediatrician. The same week, they also brought home used books from the daycare sharing shelf and the Little Free Library on our block. My daughters are fortunate to be growing up an environment of “book abundance,” both in our home and in the larger community in which we live.

Other communities, however, are marked by “book scarcity.” Professors Susan B. Neuman and Donna Celano inventoried books across four Philadelphia neighborhoods

for their influential study titled “Access to Print in Low-Income and Middle-Income Communities.” They found that poor neighborhoods had few stores selling books, and these were mostly cheap coloring books. “In these low-income neighborhoods, children would find it difficult, if not impossible, to purchase a book of any quality in local stores; in the middle-income neighborhoods, children would find it hard to escape them.” Although children in the poor neighborhoods depended more heavily on public institutions for access to books, their libraries had shorter hours, lower-quality books, and more dilapidated facilities.

David Dotson, the Dollywood Foundation’s president, emphasizes economic realities as the primary reason many children’s homes have no books. “Cost is the number one issue, from our experience.” For families with significant disposable income, books seem very affordable. It is possible to buy a Kindle for less than fifty dollars, and to add a wide selection of e-books for just ten dollars per month. Yet at least 40 percent of American children live in households that do not earn enough to easily cover basic needs. Says Dotson, “Books are expensive, and the cost is prohibitive, because it seems and feels like a luxury when you’re worried about food and utilities and car payment and being laid off.” For these families, books can be too valuable even to borrow, because par-

ents cannot afford to replace lost books or pay late fees. In my hometown of Indianapolis, for instance, a seven-year-old who is two weeks late in returning ten picture books would owe fourteen dollars in library fines.

First Book

Other organizations have also set their sights on the problem of book affordability. First Book, based in Washington, D.C., has a staff of seventy-five people, delivering low-cost new books to a national network of more than 170,000 classrooms and nonprofit organizations serving children from low-income families. The organization's mission is overcoming what its website flags as "the number one barrier to book ownership—affordability."

Rather than mailing books directly to homes, First Book follows a business-to-business model, partnering with other organizations serving children from low-income households. Even when family budgets may be too tight, schools, classrooms, and community organizations often do have some resources they can spend on book purchasing. These may include federal Title I funds, program budgets, the proceeds from a fundraiser, or a teacher's personal money. First Book helps stretch those resources further, by offering books to eligible purchasers at up to 90 percent off normal retail prices.

First Book began by tackling the logistical challenges of warehousing, shipping, and online ordering to make better use of leftover books donated by publishers. This system enabled member organizations to select exactly the titles they wanted, while paying just for shipping and handling. Thus, a classroom can obtain books at just the right reading level, on themes related to a particular topic, and can give every child a copy of the same book when appropriate. More recently, the group introduced the First Book Marketplace, which sells new books at a 50–90 percent discount. This online bookstore is accessible only to teachers and organizations serving low-income children. A hardback copy of the Caldecott Honor book *The Adventures of Beekle: An Unimaginary Friend*, which normally sells for \$17.99, costs just \$6.20 for First Book members. Many books sell for \$2 or less. Even at these low prices, publishers earn a profit on Marketplace sales. Most recently, First Book has introduced a digital lending program as well, in which qualified children can borrow e-books for up to two months at a time, at no cost to the child or to the partner organization.

Driving Down Costs

Though First Book and Imagination Library have very different delivery models, they leverage many of the same

cost-cutting strategies. These include contracting directly with publishers for custom print runs, ordering in high volume with no returns, relying on paperback copies, and delivering these in bundles through the postal system. These lessons can be useful for other organizations seeking to follow in their footsteps. Imagination Library's model works best for younger children who are not yet in school. First Book's model works best for older children who may be more selective in what they want to read.

Perhaps most important, both organizations contract directly with book publishers. Imagination Library has its book orders custom printed—either domestically or in Asia—and trucked to Knoxville, Tennessee. The books are then bulk mailed by a partner company. First Book also relies on the postal system to fulfill online orders. Neither organization pays book wholesalers, brokers, or retailers. This allows publishers to offer a lower price per book, while still realizing a profit.

Both organizations are also in a unique position to guarantee publishers a very high volume of sales. Imagination Library works with only eight different titles per month, for a total of around seventy-five titles per year. By limiting its selection, the organization is able to purchase up to 300,000 copies of each title. Because printers

charge much less on a per-book basis for large orders, the publisher can lower the price for a high-volume buyer and still make a good profit. First Book delivers around twenty million books to three million students each year.

Apart from volume, both organizations also offer publishers another attractive term: no returns. A typical bookstore might agree to accept one hundred copies, but it reserves the right to return any copies that do not sell. This makes printing books a somewhat risky business; a publisher that prints too many copies could lose money on that title. With Imagination Library and First Book, there are no “remainders” to deal with. Imagination Library knows exactly how many copies it needs, because it pushes specific books to a known quantity of readers. Although consumer choice is very important to First Book, the organization is committed to moving all the books it receives. Perl explains: “We purchase the books on a non-refundable basis. We emphasize to publishers, we want them to profit from working with us, even if it is a slim margin.”

Imagination Library purchases exclusively from one publisher. This allows the organization to negotiate even lower prices and to consolidate shipping expenses. President David Dotson explains, “Penguin gives us great prices and logistical flexibility. We are able to customize

the books, manipulate the book format that makes it most affordable to mail.” There are also organizational efficiencies to working exclusively with one publishing partner. “If you have a problem, you have one dedicated team that can solve any problem. With five publishers, you would have more problems.” First Book works with a diverse group of publishers, however, to maintain much more diverse offerings of more than five thousand different titles at a time.

As might be expected, both organizations also save money by purchasing most of their books in paperback. Children’s books generally sell better in hardcover, which is preferred by gift givers and by libraries. Paperback copies, however, are less expensive both to print and to mail. A publisher that might otherwise be selling a particular title only in hardcover may agree to produce a special run of paperback copies for a charitable distributor. This reduces publishers’ concerns that low-cost copies will find their way to the second-hand market and drive down sales revenue.

One strategy neither organization uses is relying exclusively on donated books. Although book publishers can earn a tax deduction for donating excess copies, First Book and the Imagination Library see advantages to purchasing exactly the books they want. Dotson explains,

“Consistency, dependability, quality—we could not reliably achieve that if we were relying upon charitable generosity. We didn’t want to use remaindered books that no one else in the country bought. We wanted to build a business model that made it affordable and replicable and increased the quality and ensured the reliability and developed the relationship that allowed for customizing it.” Although First Book continues to accept remainders, the organization moves a much higher volume of books through the sale of new copies.

Organizations like First Book and Imagination Library are reinventing the traditional book supply chain. Rather than relying on for-profit bookstores as an intermediary, both have innovated alternative, more cost-effective systems to deliver books to children from low-income backgrounds. In the Imagination Library model, just \$120 in local fundraising enables children to receive sixty books, while Dolly Parton’s foundation covers organizational overhead. Both organizations manage to source and deliver books at a 50–90 percent markdown from typical prices. Through a combination of charitable dollars and cost savings, innovative nonprofits are bringing books to millions of American children who otherwise could not afford them.