



# Book club without borders

**A**s commodities go, paperback books don't have much of a shelf life. You may not like the pun, but it's hard to disagree with the sentiment. Sure, a paperback is fun while it lasts, but unless you plan to read it over and over again, what do you do with it once you're through? If you're really lucky, you might get a few cents in trade at a used bookstore. More often than not, however, even the best books are going to wind up ferreted away in a box or collecting dust on a shelf.

Tired of this losing proposition? Then two Berry alums and a faculty member in the Campbell School of Business have a deal for you: [www.PaperBackSwap.com](http://www.PaperBackSwap.com).

Launched in September 2004, PaperBackSwap.com is essentially a local book club taken to the extreme. After just a year of operation, the Web site already offers members a choice of more than 200,000 different titles, each available for nothing more than the cost of postage. What's the catch? As users in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Guam will attest, there isn't one.

"It is what it is, and people find that it's just too hard to believe," said Richard Pickering (84C), a successful entrepreneur since his college days who teamed up with then-student Bobby Swarthout (04C) and Associate Professor of Marketing and Law Dr. Jeff Langenderfer to create what amounts to a giant cyber-library. "They can't believe that it's as good as it is and that you can actually get this tremendous value."

## "Aim High"

It all started in a lecture hall. On campus at the invitation of the business faculty to talk to students about entrepreneurial management, Richard challenged his audience to "aim high and try to do something big. If you're going to do something, don't aim low because it's too easy to achieve your goals that way."

As someone who launched his first

**"This has never been done before."**

successful business when he was only a sophomore at Berry, Richard knew first-hand the potential pitfalls facing the would-be entrepreneurs he was addressing. With that thought in mind, he offered to sit down and discuss any ideas individual students might have for a potential business venture. A number of students took him up on his offer, but after narrowing the initial list down to five finalists, Richard settled on a computer science major named Bobby, recognizing in him the kind of "drive, determination and enthusiasm" necessary to be a successful entrepreneur.

## Failure Breeds Success

Bobby didn't bring any business experience to the table, but he did have a big idea – an online textbook swap similar to the one he had launched at Berry. With Richard on board, he now had the support necessary to see his idea through to fruition – even if some saw him as less of an entrepreneur and more of Ahab chasing the white whale.

"I had a lot of people telling me that I was nuts," Bobby recalled. "I turned down job offers my senior year while other computer science majors didn't even have offers."

As it turned out, Bobby's decision to pursue his dream was the right one, even if there

were some kinks to work out first. The biggest turned out to be the focus of the service, which had to be shifted after the entrepreneurs discovered that students at many larger universities would rather have money in hand than save via the Internet.

"What we did not expect was that a lot of students just don't care whether or not they get 80 percent of the value of a book as opposed to 20 percent," Richard said. "They walk into the bookstore, and they get 20 cents on the dollar. But they don't care because it's cash in their pocket."

It was a costly lesson in terms of both time and money, but Bobby and Richard were undaunted. College students weren't interested in the kind of service they were offering, but someone else might be. It was Richard who eventually hit on the idea of targeting paperback readers, realizing, "Everybody likes paperback books, and it's a commodity that basically is worthless after you finish reading it. There is not an easy way to exchange them unless you take them to a used bookstore, and then again, it's the exact same thing as when the students were taking their books to the college bookstore."

The difference, of course, was that adult readers would be much more interested in maximizing their investment.

## A Third Musketeer

As the wheels started turning on PaperBackSwap.com, Richard decided to expand the team and the Berry connection – this time with a faculty member. In the end, Jeff Langenderfer turned out to be the perfect fit.

"I bring a little bit of a different perspective because I have less business experience but considerably more theoretical background," Jeff stated. "Richard, of course, is the business expert; Bobby has got the programming expertise and a lot of vision, so we each bring a little something different to the party."

by Rick Woodall

Together, the three entrepreneurs meticulously planned their venture, mapping out on whiteboards every conceivable eventuality. All the while, they were mindful of one simple fact: "This has never been done before."

## The Secret is Simplicity

PaperBackSwap.com is as simple as it is ingenious. To become an active member, all someone has to do is list nine or more books that they are willing to trade at the time they register. A member receives three credits just for signing up and one additional credit each time they mail out one of their titles to another member. One credit equals one book, so the more books they make available to others, the more they can get in return.

"You're trading something that's on your shelf probably collecting dust, which essentially has no value to you, for something that will give you hours of pleasure," Jeff said. "You trade a non-valuable thing from your perspective for a valuable thing; what possibly could be more attractive?"

Or easy? Once a member has agreed to trade one of his or her books, all that's left to do is print the ready-made wrapper (complete with the recipient's address) on two sheets of paper, cover the book, slap on the postage (the U.S. Postal Service charges \$1.42 per pound for media mail) and send it off.

"The wrapper is a big part of it, because that means you don't have to go to the post office if you have stamps," Bobby explained. "You pop it in your mail box, and you're done."

When members aren't walking to or from their mail boxes, many are communicating with each other through the host of interactive features Bobby has programmed into the site. The result, Richard said, is a network of "friends across the United States that will probably never, ever meet in person."



From left, Bobby Swarthout (04C), Dr. Jeff Langenderfer and Richard Pickering (84C) have seen their online book club, [www.PaperBackSwap.com](http://www.PaperBackSwap.com), take the Internet by storm since its launch in September 2004.

## What's Next?

Though they are reluctant to discuss future plans for the site, the men behind PaperBackSwap.com obviously see great potential in their endeavor. A third Berry alumnus, Zach Huston (04C), recently joined the venture to assist Bobby with site maintenance, and other changes are likely in the works.

At the time this story was written, an annual fee for members was being

considered, but the amount being discussed was so low (\$10 to \$20) that users likely will recoup their investment almost immediately. Beyond that, no one will say. One thing is certain, however: Bobby is confident enough in the viability of the site that he recently turned down a six-figure offer from a major software company.

"I'm not worried about getting a job," he said. "I'm having too much fun growing this business." ■

