

Clifford Moves Online: The History and Future of Scholastic Reading Club

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Abstract

Scholastic Canada has been running Reading Club in Canadian schools for half a century. Until 1998, teachers were only able to place student orders by mail or over the phone. Then, the first Canadian Reading Club website was created with a web form for teachers to submit orders online. The online form marked the start of a major change that has been brewing for Reading Club over the last two decades, but it wouldn't be until 2016 that this simple form would be replaced by a fully-functioning e-commerce website. As Scholastic Canada moves Reading Club online, the company must maintain its valued relationship with teachers and protect its unique place in Canadian classrooms, while at the same time seeking out opportunities to grow in its new digital context. This report looks at the history of Scholastic Incorporated to illustrate how the company founded its vital relationship with schools and teachers and built its successful distribution networks. The report then focuses in on Scholastic Canada's Reading Club division, delving into the changes that are rapidly occurring as the clubs are moved online.

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Introduction

Today, Scholastic Inc. is one of the largest publishers and distributors of children's books in the world, worth \$1.6 billion USD.¹ But ninety-seven years ago Scholastic was a small company producing a four-page classroom magazine. The magazine was created by M.R. Robinson in his mother's sewing room.² By 1940, Robinson had went on to launch the first Scholastic Book Clubs in American schools, and in 1957, Scholastic Canada became the company's first international subsidiary.³ In Canada, the book clubs came to be known as Scholastic Canada Reading Club.

Over the course of a century, Scholastic has built a household brand, and its Reading Club has played a starring role in that achievement. Scholastic's book clubs are in ninety percent of Pre-K to Middle School classrooms in Canada.⁴ Yet, as successful as the clubs are, their popularity cannot be sustained unless Reading Club continues to adapt to changing technologies and methods of communicating with consumers.

In the words of the President of Scholastic Inc., Richard Robinson, "The world has changed immensely since Scholastic was established in 1920, and yet the customers we serve still have the same needs: quality, affordable books and entertaining, educational materials and media."⁵

During my time as an intern with Scholastic Canada in the Reading Club department, it became clear to me that while Scholastic's consumers may still have the "same needs," the means of fulfilling these needs must continually change to meet demand and remain relevant. When Scholastic first set roots in Canada, the home computer had not yet been invented, let alone the internet. The rise of the internet (and soon after, e-commerce) meant big changes for Reading Club. While interning, I had the chance to witness many of these changes first-hand, including the maintenance of a new Reading Club Online (RCO) website, the launch of the French RCO, and the hosting of Canadian Teacher Advisor Boards (first conducted in the United States in 1923) in Canada and over Facebook for the first time. These transitions have been an enormous endeavor on the part of the Canadian Reading Club staff. Challenges have arisen both in the implementation of these projects, and in the attempt to move a long-established consumer base to a new online medium.

The future success of the Scholastic Reading Club is important to the Canadian children's publishing industry as a whole. Scholastic Reading Club plays a major role in getting Canadian content into Canadian classrooms. While Scholastic Canada publishes over one-hundred Canadian titles each year, Scholastic Reading Club also distributes titles from many other Canadian publishers including Groundwood Books, Owlkids Books, Orca Book Publishers, Kids Can Press, Harpercollins Canada and Penguin Random House Canada. Furthermore, Scholastic employs 8400 people around the world, 800 of whom work in Canada.⁶

1 Bloomberg, "Company Overview of Scholastic Corporation," Bloomberg, accessed September 3, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/snapshot.asp?privcapId=37870>

2 Scholastic, "90 Years: Timeline," Scholastic, accessed September 4, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.com/90years/timeline.htm>

3 Ibid.

4 Scholastic Canada, "60 Years," Scholastic Canada, accessed September 3, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.ca/60years/>

5 Scholastic, "90 Years: Our Story: From Western Pennsylvania to the World," Scholastic, accessed September 4, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.com/90years/ourStory3.htm>

6 Scholastic Canada, "About Scholastic."

This report focuses primarily on Scholastic Canada, except when discussing the history or mission of the brand as a whole. It begins with a history of Scholastic, illustrating the company's mission and showing how quickly Scholastic grew throughout the twentieth century. It then depicts how Reading Club has traditionally operated through the creation of targeted paper flyers and through reaching the young end-consumers by building relationships with teachers. The final section looks at how Reading Club is continuing to evolve in the twenty-first century as Scholastic moves into the digital age, the challenges the clubs are facing, and where they might go from here.

With the prevalence of online retailers comes the growing expectation on the part of consumers that it should be easy to find and purchase products over the internet. The transition of Reading Club onto a digital platform could help fulfill this expectation and ensure the continued success of Scholastic's uniquely school-based clubs. At the same time, Scholastic must retain the relationships it has built with teachers across the country, many of whom have been placing orders with Reading Club for decades.

Chapter 1: About Scholastic Corporation

1.1 A History of Scholastic

Maurice Robinson's Classroom Magazine

As is the case with many publishing houses, Scholastic came from humble beginnings. The company was started when Maurice Robinson decided to create a classroom magazine for high-school students.⁷ *The Western Pennsylvania Scholastic* was launched in 1920, a four-page classroom magazine published out of Robinson's mother's sewing room.⁸ It sold for five cents a copy.⁹

The Western Pennsylvania Scholastic was created to fill a hole in the school market. While at a post-grad job at the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, Robinson had stumbled across some statistics suggesting Pennsylvania high schools would be flooded with an increasing student body over the coming decade, and he saw an opportunity for a classroom magazine.¹⁰

The magazine grew quickly in readership and size. After the first issue launched in October of 1920, *The Western Pennsylvania Scholastic* doubled to eight pages. Within two years, it was twenty-four pages and issued bi-weekly.¹¹ In 1922 the magazine became known simply as the *Scholastic*, published under The Scholastic Publishing Company, Inc.¹² Having tripled the retail price, the publication aimed to be "The National High School Bi-Weekly."¹³

It was around this time that Robinson began reaching out to teachers for support. He created an advisory board of high school teachers, administrators, and staff to help gain insight on student interests, increase subscriptions and sell advertising.¹⁴ With the aid of these teachers, the *Scholastic* reached a circulation of 33,000 by 1925, and a year later the company published its first book.¹⁵ In 1932, Scholastic bought-out competitor American Education Press and became Scholastic Corporation.¹⁶

Scholastic Canada

By the 1950s the company was determined to expand its reach outside of the United States and Scholastic Canada became the first international branch in 1957.¹⁷ The year 2017 marks Scholastic Canada's 60th anniversary as well as Canada's 150th birthday. Today, Scholastic Canada is one of the

7 Scholastic, "90 Years: Our Story: From Western Pennsylvania to the World," Scholastic, accessed September 4, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.com/90years/ourStory3.htm>

8 Ibid.

9 FundingUniverse, "Scholastic Corporation History," Funding Universe, accessed September 4, 2017, <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/scholastic-corporation-history/>

10 Ibid.

11 Scholastic, "90 Years: Our Story: From Western Pennsylvania to the World."

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 FundingUniverse, "Scholastic Corporation History."

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Scholastic, "90 Years: Timeline."

top players in getting children's books into the Canadian trade market, and is the largest operator of school-based book clubs and fairs in the country.¹⁸

Book Publishing

The 1960s saw immense growth for the book publishing division. At this time Scholastic came out with its first leveled readers, each book created for a specific reading level in order to help children develop literacy skills.¹⁹ In 1963, Norman Bridwell's *Clifford the Big Red Dog* came on the scene and Clifford continues to be one of Scholastic's most recognizable and beloved characters.²⁰

In Canada, the mid-1960s was when Scholastic began publishing Canadian authors as well as educational resources.²¹ Since 1965, Scholastic Canada has published 500 Canadian authors and illustrators of all ages, with the youngest author being fourteen and the oldest ninety-one.²²

Multimedia

Unlike Scholastic Canada, Scholastic Inc. in the U.S. (with far greater resources and a larger market at its disposal) has been quick to experiment with new technology. The 1970s saw Scholastic's expansion into audiovisual technologies and in 1978 Scholastic Productions (now Scholastic Media) was founded so the publisher could create television series, films, and more to accompany the most popular children's stories.²³ This would eventually lead to book series like Clifford and The Magic School Bus having their own animated television shows. Though not much is written about it, Scholastic also experimented with an online social networking site for teachers as early as 1993.²⁴

Scholastic Today

As the turn of the century approached, bestselling Canadian author Robert Munsch joined the Scholastic family. Scholastic Canada has since published forty-four Munsch titles.²⁵ By this time, book publishing had reached sixty-six percent of Scholastic Corporation's revenue, meaning sales of Scholastic titles had surpassed the income from the classroom magazines.²⁶

Today, Scholastic's mission is to support global literacy by producing quality children's books and educational materials and distributing them around the world. Scholastic's brand is built around the idea that the key to literacy is in each child finding the right book to connect with (usually a book that he or she has picked out independently). Scholastic's mission has also guided Scholastic's Open a World of Possible campaign, as can be seen in the campaign statement:

Scholastic's mission is built on that special moment a child finds the right book to read.

18 Scholastic, "Form 10-K Annual Report."

19 FundingUniverse, "Scholastic Corporation History."

20 Scholastic, "90 Years: Timeline."

21 Ibid.

22 Scholastic Canada, "60 Years."

23 FundingUniverse, "Scholastic Corporation History."

24 Ibid.

25 Scholastic Canada, "60 Years."

26 FundingUniverse, "Scholastic Corporation History."

When once-upon-a-time becomes the only time that matters, and a child who reads becomes a child who loves to read — for a lifetime. We are dedicated to helping every child make that precious, transformative moment his or her very own — again and again.²⁷

Scholastic Corporation now publishes and distributes children’s books worldwide, operating in thirteen countries, and distributing books to 165 countries in 45 languages.²⁸ In the United States, where Scholastic began, the company is now responsible for the sale of approximately fifty percent of all children’s books purchased.²⁹

1.2 Building Distribution Networks

So Scholastic grew from a small classroom-based magazine into an international book publisher. Equally important, though, is how the company created its own revenue streams along the way.

Book Clubs

Scholastic began diversifying its distribution channels as early as the 1940s when the company forged a new partnership with Pocket Books and launched a school-based book club. Working with teachers, Scholastic created flyers advertising its books and distributed them directly to students through schools. The first Scholastic Reading Club was known as Teen Age Book Club (TAB for short) and the goal of this club was to sell affordable paperbacks to middle-grade students.³⁰ Today there are multiple clubs, with five in Canada each targeting different age ranges. The development of these clubs will be further covered in the next section.

Book Fairs

In 1981, the publisher gained another foothold in the school market by acquiring a company known as California School Book Fairs.³¹ Book Fairs became a new division of Scholastic Corporation and the direct to consumer distribution channel would be run in schools across the U.S. with help from parents and teachers. Up until this point, Scholastic had been both publishing and distributing children’s books for 60 years. With Book Fairs, the company began retailing books through what were effectively pop-up bookstores. The Book Fairs division exceeded expectations in the U.S. and proved to be very popular in Canada as well. and the new book fairs operation was exceeding expectations. Today, 11,000 book fairs are held across Canada annually.³²

Retail Space

Scholastic made further inroads into the retail space in 2001 with the brick and mortar Scholastic store. Located at Scholastic’s New York headquarters, the 6,200-square-foot space in Soho would

27 Scholastic, “World of Possible,” Scholastic. accessed September 3, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.com/worldofpossible/>

28 Scholastic Canada, “About Scholastic,” Scholastic Canada, accessed September 3, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.ca/aboutscholastic/index.php>

29 Scholastic, “Our Businesses,” Scholastic. accessed September 3, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/our-businesses.htm>

30 Funding Universe, “Scholastic Corporation History.”

31 Ibid.

32 Scholastic Canada, “60 Years.”

become both a bookstore and a play-space for children.³³ Since its initial conception as a classroom magazine, the company had grown to be a multinational distributor, publisher, and sales channel.

Online

Throughout the 2000s, Scholastic Corporation's online presence would also grow as it launched blogs and web forums through Scholastic Community, encouraging kids to have a digital conversation about the books they like to read and to share their own writing. Scholastic Inc. created pages across social media platforms, and today, according to the 2016 Scholastic Form 10-K Annual Report, "The Company's website, [scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com), is a leading site for teachers, classrooms and parents and an award-winning destination for children."³⁴

1.3 Corporate Structure Today

Scholastic's activities cover the entire spectrum of conceiving, creating, distributing and directly selling books and magazines into the school and trade markets. All of these operations are organized within the company into three main categories: Children's Book Publishing and Distribution, Education, and International.³⁵ Here, this report will discuss the Corporation's general structure and operations, after which the discussion will focus more closely on Reading Club and the Canadian market.

Publishing

The publishing arm encompasses well over a dozen trade imprints. Among these imprints are Scholastic Press, Scholastic Paperbacks, Chicken House®, and The Blue Sky Press®. Scholastic Canada Ltd is named as the publisher within all titles published by the Canadian branch. Scholastic Canada plays a very important role in the Canadian publishing industry, publishing new books every year with Canadian authors and illustrators. It is currently the only major publisher of children's books in Canada able to publish simultaneously in both official languages.³⁶

Scholastic Canada also negotiates licenses to publish reprints (Scholastic editions) of books by other publishers and sell them into the school market. In addition, the company purchases completed books from other presses and distributes these through Scholastic sales channels.³⁷

Retail

Scholastic Corporation has two successful retail/distribution channels at its disposal: Scholastic book clubs and book fairs, both of which have a large foothold in the school-based book market. The book clubs produce a series of monthly flyers full of titles targeted at specific grades. Teachers can distribute these flyers to children in their classrooms and students can select books for

³³ Scholastic, "90 Years: Timeline."

³⁴ Scholastic, "Form 10-K Annual Report,"

³⁵ Bloomberg, "Company Overview of Scholastic Corporation."

³⁶ Scholastic Canada, "Our Businesses: Children's Books," Scholastic Canada. accessed September 3, 2017, http://www.scholastic.ca/aboutscholastic/businesses_kidsbooks.php

³⁷ Scholastic, "Form 10-K Annual Report," Scholastic Investor, last modified July 2016, accessed September 3, 2017, <http://investor.scholastic.com/secfiling.cfm?filingID=866729-16-30>

themselves. Alternatively, the book fairs create a pop-up Scholastic store in a school's library, and students are given a break from class to attend and shop for new books.³⁸ The fairs have been popular with elementary schools. In Canada, there are now eleven book fair branches located across the country.³⁹

By allowing Scholastic to see exactly what books kids are picking out for themselves, the book clubs and fairs give the publishing arm a first-hand look at what's hot and what's not—where there are holes in the market, and where it is flooded. Fifty percent of children's book sales in the U.S. carry the red Scholastic logo on the front cover, which gives the company a lot of leverage when negotiating the rights to publish a Scholastic edition of another publisher's title. Despite the convenience and profitability of its own sales channels, Scholastic also ensures its books are available through other major retailers such as Indigo and Amazon.

From the consumer perspective, the appeal of the clubs and fairs is in the autonomy students are given to choose their own books, something frequently supported by the annual Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report. The most recent report from Canada found that “Ninety-four percent of children agree that their favourite books are the ones they picked out themselves, and almost all children (92%) agree that they are more likely to finish a book they picked out.”⁴⁰

The children's book market has long been complicated by the fact the customer is not often the end consumer. Frequently, an adult picks out and purchases a children's book, but a child is the one that will read it. By creating retail spaces inside classrooms and school libraries, Scholastic can instead sell children's books directly to the end consumer and arguably gain a better sense of what young readers want.

Still, Scholastic has been criticized in the past for its tactics of marketing directly to children.⁴¹ Scholastic's advertising strategy is especially problematic in Canada as Quebec has laws against directing advertisements at children under the age of thirteen.⁴² For this reason, Scholastic Canada's Club de lecture student flyers are instead translated as feuillet des parents (parent flyers).

Education

The Education division at Scholastic is responsible for publishing education-specific fiction and nonfiction books and educational materials and resources, including custom curriculum guides, teaching guides, and digital reference materials for teachers.⁴³ The Education Segment also produces thirty classroom magazines that circulate to 14 million subscribers.⁴⁴ Online, Scholastic runs several education-focused blogs that cover lesson ideas, classroom strategies, advice for school administrators, current events and issues affecting education, and the latest classroom tools and

38 Scholastic Canada, “Why Host a Fair?” Scholastic Canada, accessed September 3, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.ca/bookfairs/whyhostabookfair.php>

39 Scholastic Canada, “About Scholastic.”

40 Scholastic Canada, “Kids and Family Reading Report™ Canadian Edition: Key Findings,” Scholastic Canada, accessed September 3, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.ca/readingreport/key-findings.php>

41 Barbara F. Meltz, “Taking consumerism out of school book fairs,” *The Boston Globe*, November 20, 2006, http://archive.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2006/11/20/taking_consumerism_out_of_school_book_fairs/

42 Office de la protection du consommateur, “Advertising Directed at Children under 13 Years of Age: Guide to the Application of Sections 248 and 249 Consumer Protection Act,” Québec Portal - Services Québec, accessed September 3, 2017, http://m.opc.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/media/documents/consommateur/sujet/publicite-pratique-illegale/EN_Guide_publicite_moins_de_13_ans_vf.pdf

43 Bloomberg, “Company Overview of Scholastic Corporation.”

44 Scholastic, “Our Businesses.”

technologies. These blogs include *Edu@Scholastic*, *Top Teaching*, *Edu Pulse*, *This Week in Education*, and *Tech Tools*.⁴⁵

International

The International division has successfully sold translation rights for Scholastic Inc. titles around the world, and Scholastic books can be found in 45 different languages as a result.⁴⁶ In addition to books, Scholastic International sells educational materials, digital classroom resources, and other products to libraries, bookstores, and distributors abroad.⁴⁷ Scholastic has reached every Arabic-speaking country with its My Arabic Library (a joint effort with the U.S. Department of State).⁴⁸ The publisher has also distributed 2.3 million books in Afghanistan through its My Afghan Library, in partnership with the Afghan Ministry of Education and the State Department.⁴⁹

Many of the company's subsidiaries in thirteen countries have original publishing programs, create books for both trade and educational channels, and produce classroom magazines and educational resources that are read digitally and in print.⁵⁰

Challenges

All in all, the diversity of Scholastic's operations and the geographical reach of the corporation make it difficult to maintain brand consistency across all branches. With the major changes that Scholastic is facing due to the rise of e-commerce, each subsidiary of the company has to adapt in its own way. Thus, the experience a consumer has interacting with Scholastic (signing up for a club, viewing product, or placing an order, for example) can vary from country to country. Furthermore, the adoption of digital platforms has been uneven across the board. In the case of Scholastic Canada, Reading Club has had a simple website that allows teachers to place orders online since 1998, but Reading Club Online only became a full e-commerce site in August of 2016.

Still, across all branches one thing remains consistent: Scholastic lives in schools—always has. The classroom is where club flyers are distributed, books are selected, orders are placed, book boxes are delivered, and books are read and shared. The school library is where the book fairs appear like magic, where kids pick out and purchase their own books and take them home the very same day. It is important to understand how Scholastic built these school-based revenue channels through its relationship with teachers in order to fully grasp what a defining change Scholastic's move online could mean.

45 Scholastic, "Scholastic Blogs," Scholastic, accessed September 3, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.com/blogs/>

46 Bloomberg, "Company Overview of Scholastic Corporation."

47 Scholastic, "Form 10-K Annual Report,"

48 Scholastic, "Our Businesses."

49 Ibid.

50 Scholastic, "Form 10-K Annual Report."

Chapter 2: Scholastic Reading Club

2.1 The Development of Scholastic Clubs

Every month Scholastic Canada creates bright, eye-catching flyers advertising children's books and sends these flyers out to teachers who have registered to participate in (what is now called) Scholastic Reading Club. Once they have received the flyers, teachers distribute them to their students, who then have the opportunity to share the flyers with their parents and pick out the books they would like to order. With Reading Club participation in ninety percent of Canadian schools, Scholastic's book clubs have become a common experience for children growing up in the Canadian education system.⁵¹

Teen Age Book Club (TAB)

The first Scholastic Reading Club came about in partnership with Pocket Books in 1948 and was known as Teen Age Book Club (TAB). Book clubs were nothing new at the time. Rather, they were a continuing phenomenon that had spread across the U.S. and Canada in the nineteenth century. Two decades prior to Scholastic's first book club, both the Book of the Month Club and the Literary Guild had begun mailing out books and gaining thousands of members.⁵² On the other side of the border, Canadians signed up for the Readers' Club of Canada.⁵³ The only significant thing Scholastic was doing differently was running the book clubs through schools and soliciting the aid of teachers. But, as they say: location, location, location. Scholastic's school-based clubs turned out to be a brilliant move. And, as the company founder had discovered in the 1920s, making friends with teachers was incredibly good for business.

A year before TAB began, Scholastic had run a remarkably similar program to the book clubs called the "Scholastic Bookshop."⁵⁴ In its first year of operation, Scholastic Bookshop sold 300,000 books, but it was not without help.⁵⁵ From the very beginning, Scholastic's relationship with teachers has been pivotal to the company's success, and the first year's Scholastic Bookshop sales were made possible through the active participation of 7000 teachers across the United States.⁵⁶

TAB was equally successful, and this led to more Scholastic book clubs. Initially, this was done by splitting TAB into two different age groups (Junior and Senior) just as Scholastic had done with the high-school magazines a decade prior.⁵⁷ Then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, elementary school children were given the opportunity to participate in Scholastic clubs as well with the introduction of three new early-reader clubs: Arrow, Lucky and SeeSaw, all of which are still active today.⁵⁸

Over the following decades, Scholastic's book clubs continued to stand the test of time, proving to be a lucrative retail and distribution model. The company would expand this division to have as

51 Scholastic Canada, "60 Years."

52 Daniel M.G. Raff, "The Book-of-the-Month Club as a New Enterprise," *The Emergence of Routines: Entrepreneurship, Organization, and Business History* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2016), DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198787761.003.0002.

53 Nick Mount, *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*, (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2017), 186.

54 Nathaniel Wardwell, "Monopolizing Reading: An Analysis of Scholastic Book Clubs' Place in American Education and Commerce" (honors thesis, Brown University, 2014), https://brown.digication.com/nathaniel_wardwell_american_studies_capstone/Honors_Thesis/edit

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 FundingUniverse, "Scholastic Corporation History."

many as eleven clubs covering preschool through middle school. By the 1990s the book clubs were Scholastic's largest distribution channel; roughly fifty percent of the company's U.S. domestic publishing revenue was made through clubs at this time, a sum nearing half a million.⁵⁹

Teacher Participation

The real advantage of Scholastic's book clubs is their classroom setting. Because the mission of Scholastic's clubs so closely aligns with the goals of teachers and parents—mainly, to get kids reading—the clubs can rely on teachers to act as brand ambassadors, working not only to recruit new customers, but to actively distribute club flyers, encourage orders, and collect payment. Teachers even take on the responsibility of unpacking delivered boxes and distributing books to their students in what is often referred to as a “book-box moment” (that elusive opportunity to make a book the most exciting part of a child's day).

Originally, physical copies of flyers were mailed out to member teachers, who then distributed these to students to bring home to parents. Parents and students could place orders together, and teachers would collect and mail payments to Scholastic along with student orders. Finally, Scholastic would ship a box of books directly to the teacher's classroom, rather than packing and shipping each book individually to student homes.

Clubs Today

Of course, along with advancing technology, methods of communication, marketing tactics, and a forever shifting book market, Reading Club has had to change dramatically—especially over the past two decades. Each international branch has had to develop differently according to a variety of factors including the education system, language, literacy rate, marketing legislation, publishing landscape, and accessibility of digital technology in each country. In order to discuss how Scholastic book clubs operate today, it is necessary to refer to a specific subsidiary of Scholastic.

For the most part, the ubiquity of access to computers and the internet has meant that mail is no longer the most efficient way for teachers to place orders. In some cases, digital club flyers are now preferred as a way of engaging students as well as saving trees and dollars. But even the basic operations, such as how flyers are delivered and orders received, are not the same from branch to branch. Frequently, even the terminology differs. In the U.S. (despite an attempt at rebranding in 2013)⁶⁰ the individual age-based clubs still gather under the umbrella of “Scholastic Book Clubs.” But in Canada, these clubs are fondly known as “Reading Club,” and it is the Canadian clubs I will discuss from this point forward.

2.2 Canada's Clubs Today

Let's walk through how Scholastic Reading Club works today. The process begins when a teacher decides to create an account by calling the Scholastic Customer Service team. The teacher receives an account number and gains access to the Reading Club Online (RCO) website. At this point, they

⁵⁹ Nathaniel Wardwell, “Monopolizing Reading: An Analysis of Scholastic Book Clubs' Place in American Education and Commerce.”

⁶⁰ Children's Book Council, “Scholastic Announces Major Redesign of Iconic School Book Club Flyers,” Children's Book Council, August 5, 2013, <http://www.cbcbooks.org/scholastic-announces-major-redesign-of-iconic-school-book-club-flyers/#.WbSSLB197rc>

are registered to begin receiving Scholastic catalogues, which include the club flyers for students as well as special teacher offers (a smaller catalogue for teachers with deals on large book orders as well as classroom furniture and resources).

Clubs and Flyers

Much the way Scholastic found success in designing different school magazines to target different grade levels, the book clubs were also divided based on student age. There are seven different club flyers each catering to a specific age group as well as a monthly specialty flyer. The clubs these flyers belong to are:

Elf: Grades Pre-K to K (also referred to as Early Childhood)

SeeSaw: Grades K to 1

Lucky: Grades 2 to 3

Arrow: Grades 4 to 5

Middle School: Grades 6 to 8

Club de lecture: French books for grades K to 8

Elf and SeeSaw contain picture books for reading with family and independently. The goal of these two early-reader clubs is to create a foundational love of reading and to build students' confidence in their own reading abilities. Lucky is intended to help kids transition to larger, more complex texts, and thus advertises a variety of both picture books and early chapter books.

Until recently, Scholastic Canada continued to offer printed teen flyers, but they became online-only in 2016. Still, popular YA fiction finds itself in the Middle School flyers, accompanied by appropriate content warnings. Both Arrow and Middle School focus on retaining the appeal of reading with pre-teen students. These upper-grade clubs offer best-sellers, award winners, classroom classics, and Canadian YA.

Club de lecture is unique to Canada, though the U.S. offers the Spanish-language Club Leo. Club de lecture is designed for both native French speakers and French immersion students. The flyers include a wide range of original French and translated stories from picture books to novels. A small in-house translation team works tirelessly to translate hundreds of books into French for Club de lecture students, teachers, and parents to enjoy. These same translators also work on all other Reading Club materials, including the translation of the entire RCO website for its bilingual launch in 2017. As mentioned in the previous section, while all other club flyers are referred to as "student flyers" the Club de lecture flyers are called "Feuillet des parents" due to Quebec's legislation that prevents organizations from advertising to children.

Scholastic's special offer flyers change each month. Rather than targeting a specific age level, these flyers are built around a theme. Some of these themes include Back-to-School Basics, Hands-On Science Math & More!, We Need Diverse Books, and various holiday specials. Special offer flyers are an opportunity for Scholastic to fill subject-matter gaps identified in the age-based clubs.

The content of all club flyers is compiled by a team of editors. These same editors read through each new book that has been proposed for a club. For every title, any potentially concerning, mature, or difficult content is noted in a file. Mature titles are accompanied in the flyers with content warnings so parents and teachers can make educated decisions about what books their children and students

read. Scholastic's in-house design team is then responsible for creating those memorable bright-coloured catalogues. These flyers are still printed and sent to teachers through the mail, though PDFs are always available to browse online.

The Ordering Process

A teacher will receive specific club catalogues and the correct number of flyers for their class size based on their account information. Teachers then distribute the flyers to students, set a due date, and may set aside time for the class to look through the flyers before tucking them in backpacks to send home to parents.

Once all orders and payments have been collected from students, teachers have four options for how they would like to place the order. They can order by mail, phone, fax, or sign into their RCO account to place an order online. The website will soon allow teachers to collect parent orders and payments online and still place the whole classroom order at once. This makes book distribution easier because all books arrive in the classroom together.

Customer Rewards

Scholastic has a robust reward system for participating teachers. Bonus Bank Rewards allow teachers to purchase supplies for their school or more books for their classroom library. Various promotions and coupons are also sent to teachers on a regular basis and coupon codes can be applied online or by phone to get discounts and free shipping.

Of course, the online ordering process is still very new. While Canadian teachers have been able to place orders by filling in a basic web form since 1998, the new website, which mimics the American Book Clubs website and much more closely resembles a typical 2017 online-shopping experience, has only been around for a year. This means that one of the largest publishers and distributors of children's books in Canada is now in the process of converting their entire consumer base over to a new digital platform.

Chapter 3: Moving Online

3.1 The Rise of the E-Commerce Website

The Early Days

In 1994, *Money* magazine published an article discussing the new popularity of shopping from home, whether over the phone or internet. The following excerpt, later quoted in *Time* magazine, sought to explain how such companies worked and illustrates just how new the experience really is:

For ordering, many of the "computer stores" offer shoppers an 800 telephone number to call. Others are set up so a shopper can click on a box next to the desired gift, type in payment information and the shipping address and then hit a "Submit Order" button. Some companies even let shoppers pick out the wrapping paper via computer.⁶¹

Today, it is easy to forget that there was a time when online shopping needed explanation, that is unless you are one of the many companies still trying to catch up to the technology. While Scholastic Inc. in the U.S. became one of the early pioneers of blogs and social networking, having created the Scholastic Network (an online community for teachers) in 1993, Scholastic Canada remained further back in the adoption curve.⁶² And, after all, publishers have been notoriously slow to move from paper to screen. On her blog, literary agent Rachelle Gardner discusses the "glacial pace" of the publishing industry: "Publishing has a long history and tradition behind it, as well as systems, practices and manufacturing realities that originated in the last century and are slow to change."⁶³

Consumer Expectations

Many publishers—including Scholastic Canada—have a lot of catching up to do. In 2017, consumers not only assume a company will have a website, they expect that website to meet a variety of criteria. Rebecca Blakiston's book titled *Usability Testing: A Practical Guide for Librarians* (2014) outlines succinctly many of these expectations:

User expectations continue to rise as the web becomes an increasingly essential part of daily life... Most information you digest is electronic and you expect a website you visit to be useful, credible, and easy to use. You expect to find answers to your questions quickly, and to be able to complete tasks seamlessly.⁶⁴

Ironically, Blakiston's physical book targeting librarians argues its readers consume most information electronically and then proceeds to provide instructions on paper illustrating how to improve a user's experience in a digital environment.

61 Brad Tuttle, "8 Amazing Things People Said When Online Shopping Was Born 20 Years Ago," *Time*, August 14, 2014, <http://time.com/money/3108995/online-shopping-history-anniversary/>

62 FundingUniverse, "Scholastic Corporation History."

63 Rachelle Gardner, "Why Is Publishing So Slow?" Rachel Gardner, June 20, 2011, <https://rachelgardner.com/why-is-publishing-so-slow/>

64 Rebecca Blakiston, *Usability Testing: A Practical Guide for Librarians* (Washington: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 2.

Enter Amazon

In 2002, Amazon.ca announced its entrance into Canada; the virtual bookstore would take on the newly launched Indigo.ca. Of course, by that time Canadians were already spending millions of dollars to purchase books off the American Amazon website.⁶⁵

While it may be difficult to remember what Amazon looked like over a decade ago, a simple trip on the Internet Archive Wayback Machine reveals an aged, but still user-friendly online shopping experience with clear navigation, the ability to filter searches, recommendations and price comparisons. Even the famous affinity analysis appears in the form we still recognize today: “Customers who bought this book also bought...”

Needless to say, by the mid-2000s, Canadians were growing comfortable with their ability to search for and order goods online—including books. But Scholastic Canada, with a firm foothold on the school-based book club market and impressive sales of Scholastic titles in the trade market, still had flyers as the primary means of product discoverability.

3.2 Reading Club Online

It is difficult to pinpoint how Scholastic successfully kept out of the e-commerce business for so long. One argument is that the nostalgia of Reading Club had led teachers and parents to expect and look forward to the arrival of physical flyers—that kids enjoyed the tactile shopping experience and teachers preferred to work with paper even when placing large classroom orders. Thus, customers did not write in hundreds of complaints when Scholastic Canada did not immediately make a move towards online shopping. In fact, twenty percent of Reading Club customers still submit orders by phone or through the mail, so perhaps this theory is not so far-fetched.⁶⁶

The First Canadian Reading Club Website

In 1998, Scholastic created a website for Canadian teachers to place orders online for Reading Club and the Teacher Store (teacher-only offers and classroom resources from the club catalogues). This online platform for placing Scholastic orders came about to satisfy a slowly growing demand on the part of teachers. Scholastic knew a number of customers were looking for a more efficient way to place orders and the company was not willing to lose those teachers.⁶⁷ Still, Scholastic was not quite ready to invest in e-commerce either. It could be said that the only Canadian Reading Club website from 1998 to 2016 was created as a means of placating teachers who were early adopters. It was neither cutting edge, nor a real long-term solution, and the website fell far behind other e-commerce platforms long before it was overhauled.

⁶⁵ Michael Geist, “Amazon, Friend to Canadian Authors?” *The Tyee*, March 16, 2010, <https://theyee.ca/Mediacheck/2010/03/16/AmazonCanadianAuthors/>

⁶⁶ Lovelina Antony (Marketing Manager, Scholastic Canada), interviewed by Author, October 2017.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Teachers who had an account with Reading Club could login to ClubsOnline to find a digital version of the same order form typically found in the back of their flyers. Teachers could look through PDF versions of the club flyers, or sift through their physical copies, and then fill in quantities for the books their students had selected. Orders for each club had to be entered on a separate form. Thus, if a student placed orders in more than one flyer, those orders needed to be placed separately. While the orders would reach Scholastic relatively instantaneously, the actual ordering process was only made easier by the ability to type rather than record student picks by hand. This was the state of the Reading Club website until 2016.

Transitioning to a Full E-Commerce Website

According to Reading Club Senior Marketing Manager Lovelina Antony, today's RCO website was a decade in the making: "Conversations were happening," she explained, "but the business was not at a point to invest."⁶⁸ There were too many unknowns and the company turned south for answers. Scholastic Canada waited and watched the response to the American Scholastic Book Clubs website until both Reading Club and the technological environment were at the point where the need for a full e-commerce website was long overdue.

While Amazon was using algorithms to make recommendations, and allowing users to quickly search through their entire inventory, Scholastic Canada's customers were flipping through physical catalogues and typing in their selections one at a time. Yet, many customers remained satisfied with this system of placing Reading Club orders. In fact, when the brand new RCO website was brought into the world of 2016, Scholastic Reading Club received a slew of feedback objecting to the change.⁶⁹ Teachers who had been placing orders through the simple web form for nearly two decades were suddenly facing a completely different interface, and were unable to locate the form they were accustomed to using. Despite making every effort to make online ordering easier, Scholastic Canada found that, to many, the new site at first appeared only more complicated and overwhelming than its predecessor.

The New Reading Club Online (RCO)

On the original Reading Club website, users were greeted with an order form immediately upon logging in, a clear and simple call to action with no other options. Now, the home screen functions as the main navigation page with links to every area of the site and several banners featuring ongoing special offers and promotions. Teachers can access the current club flyers as PDFs on the "All Flyers" page, but this is not where orders are actually placed.

⁶⁸ Lovelina Antony (Marketing Manager, Scholastic Canada), interviewed by Author, October 2017.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Like any typical online retail experience, the RCO website allows users to search for books by author name, title, or keyword, and apply filters to the search results page (including the ability to show only Canadian titles). Clicking a search result will bring the user to an item page where the book, toy, or classroom resource can be added to the cart. The website also allows users to look up items by grade, collection, or teacher exclusives.

Placing Orders

Aside from directly searching for a product and adding it to cart, there are two other ways to enter orders. The first is through the “Your Teacher Order” page. Here, a user can select the club they want to order from as well as the appropriate month. This will generate a list of all products that appeared in the club flyer for that month. A user can also click on any item to be taken to that item’s page and read more details about the book or product than appeared in the initial flyer. Second, it is possible to add a specific item to the cart by its item number. This function allows teachers to more easily enter orders they have pre-selected.

Ultimately, the RCO website is meant to help Reading Club run smoother in the classroom. As mentioned many times before, Scholastic lives in the classroom, even when it’s online. Since the 1920s, Scholastic has been co-operating with teachers, and since the first TAB club, teachers have been looking for better ways to run clubs in their schools. Therefore, the third way to place orders is designed to keep student orders organized. The best way for teachers to place student orders is through the “Student Flyer Orders” page. Here, a teacher need only enter a student name and item code to place an order. One new feature is that student names are stored in a drop down menu for future use. This list of student names can also be accessed on the “Teacher’s Desk” page where names can be added, edited, or removed from the class list.

The total amount owing for all orders can be found on the checkout page. Here, teachers can also view parent payments. Rather than having students bring order payments to school, Reading Club now allows parents to make payments online for their child’s order. Teachers receive emails when these payments occur and a list of parent payments can be seen on the checkout page. Once a user clicks the “Submit Order” button, a page opens with an invoice and an order reference number.

Resources and Rewards

The “Teacher’s Desk” page is the main source of Reading Club resources as well as news about Scholastic’s special offers and promotions. It is a place on the website for Scholastic to offer teachers extra Reading Club support. For example, teachers can download letters to send home to parents explaining the benefits of Reading Club, edit their class list, and view the details and shipping status of their latest order.

The new website has also made it simpler for Scholastic to offer a variety of teacher rewards. Teacher incentives have long been a part of the Scholastic Reading Club program as a form of customer relationship management. Since going digital, the options for how to incentivize teachers have become more visible, more powerful, and increased in number dramatically. It is much easier for teachers to track and use their coupons and Bonus Bank dollars when they have an account that constantly reminds them how much they've earned in the top right corner (next to the shopping cart, of course). Furthermore, at every order point there is an option to apply a coupon code (even to a specific student's order). Teachers receive coupons through Scholastic email blasts and promotions. Coupons may provide free shipping, or even a free book. When a Free Book Pick coupon is applied, a pop-up opens allowing a user to search for applicable books by grade, title, or keyword, and then to select from the search results.

Site Layout

It is obvious that the new website offers teachers far more options than the old site ever did, and RCO finally resembles other modern e-commerce websites. There's never a need to go back to the paper flyers at any point during the ordering process. Placing an order is made faster by not having to switch between platforms (paper and screen) in order to do so. Still, the multitude of ways to complete an order can be confusing.

There are a few of reasons for the site's divided set-up. Firstly, splitting student orders and teacher orders is intended to make book distribution in the classroom much simpler. When the book box arrives, it comes with a packing slip displaying all orders by student name, and separating teacher orders from student orders. This way, teachers can focus on making that book-box moment exciting and memorable for the students.

Secondly, the site's layout allows users to stumble upon products through multiple points of entry. Where the old online order form only allowed teachers to order products they could find in the physical or PDF flyers, the new website aims to attract more spontaneous purchases (also encouraged by the ease of applying coupons and rewards online). The idea behind having Scholastic RCO feel like a typical online shopping environment is to encourage behaviour that happens in those environments. Ideally, teachers should begin to purchase items discovered online first, not only those they have circled in their flyers. Fostering this environment will become even more important when the option for parent online shopping opens.

Lastly, from a company perspective the division of teacher and student orders allows Scholastic Canada to see who is ordering. Previously, student and teacher orders were lumped together. Now Reading Club can track the percentage of orders teachers are placing for themselves, compared to the amount of orders being placed by students and parents.

One Year Later

As of the writing of this report in Fall 2017, the new website has been operational for a year. Over time, not only have teachers adapted to the new method of ordering, but Scholastic has begun receiving feedback that the Teacher Store website, which still resembles the original ClubsOnline site, could use a similar update.⁷⁰ Many customers are hoping to soon see the Teacher Store have the same options and usability as RCO does now, which might be one of the best indicators of RCO's success.

French RCO

The latest update to happen to Scholastic Canada's RCO was the launch of the French website in August 2017. RCO is now bilingual, with a toggle at the top of each page allowing users to switch the language they are viewing in. All of the website's text was translated by the in-house French translation team. The entire site can be viewed in French, with a few notable exceptions. Pages for English books still show descriptions in English whereas pages for French titles will allow for both English and French. Pages for products that are considered inherently bilingual because they do not require any level of fluency in a specific language in order to be used (for example, a chair) have been translated into both languages.

While having single-language flyers was not a major concern prior to moving online, having a dual language website seemed a necessity. The nature of the website is that French or English teachers can browse products in either category, so there was a much greater motive to translate the digital clubs than the paper ones.

The process of translating RCO took six months. The new RCO contains hundreds of pages and Scholastic Canada's French team simply did not have enough people to translate everything. Still, the amount of translation that was accomplished in half-a-year was no small feat.

The first step to translating RCO was to catalogue all the English content on the active website. This content was then organized in spreadsheets where the French team could include its translations. Every week, the Reading Club team met with the French team to ensure deadlines were being met and to address any translation questions or concerns. Meanwhile, the Reading Club marketing team smoke tested⁷¹ the entire website to ensure that the appropriate languages were appearing in the correct locations. Smoke testing is the preliminary testing of software for major errors that would prevent the software from going public—in this case, scouring every page of the website to try and find serious translation errors.

⁷⁰ Lovelina Antony (Marketing Manager, Scholastic Canada), interviewed by Author, October 2017.

One of the greatest challenges in translating an already active website was that RCO's content did not remain static while the translations occurred. Thus, the French team would complete translations on one section, and then need to retranslate that same section as the English site was updated.⁷² Another hurdle was that the team working on coding the website was not bilingual.⁷³ The French site only came about because several Scholastic departments were able to work closely together and communicate effectively despite linguistic barriers and pressing time constraints.

RCO Challenges and Considerations

Scholastic Canada faced a daunting task creating a fully functioning e-commerce website for Reading Club. The effort to move Scholastic Reading Club onto a digital platform faced several challenges, many to do with maintaining a good relationship with teachers. While Reading Club marketers and editors worked hard to address teacher concerns with the change, some issues could only be solved with time as customers learned and adjusted to a new technology and process.

The original digital order form that teachers had been using since 1998 was straight-forward, and for many Canadian teachers, Scholastic book orders had become a monthly routine. When the familiar form disappeared and was replaced with an e-commerce website, it created an uncomfortable learning curve and disrupted this routine.

After the launch, Scholastic's marketing team created detailed videos explaining the features of the new website, how to place orders online, and how to redeem coupons and rewards. These videos are available in the FAQ section and were also shared on Scholastic Canada's social media platforms. One year later, feedback suggests most teachers have grown to appreciate the change and take advantage of what the e-commerce site has to offer.⁷⁴ Still, Scholastic will need to keep in touch with its audience and listen if it wants to ensure teachers continue to have positive attitudes towards the new website.

A second concern is that RCO Canada's relationship with Book Clubs Online in the U.S. can make it difficult to edit content on the Canadian website. While different, the websites borrow information from one another. Many books and products that Scholastic Canada receives from its American counterpart appear online with American metadata. Oftentimes this data cannot be edited by Scholastic Canada, though the Canadian Reading Club team can notify the U.S. team of the error. Sometimes the issue is as small as correcting the Americanized spelling of words such as "color" and other times it prevents Scholastic Canada from correcting identified errors in the data, such as incorrect page counts and grade levels. Therefore, despite hours of smoke-testing each of the hundreds of product pages that appear on RCO, it is difficult to ensure that all data appears correctly all the time. While human error means that some occasional issues will inevitably be missed, it is a concern that when errors are caught they are not always easily corrected.

⁷² Lovelina Antony (Marketing Manager, Scholastic Canada), interviewed by Author, October 2017.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Another challenge is presented in the open-access attitudes that frequently permeate the internet. As the word “club” suggests, Scholastic Reading Club boasts a certain level of exclusivity. It is a classroom club for teachers, and members must go through Scholastic’s customer service team to create an account and gain access to the website. Even the new parent site, while allowing parents to browse product and submit their child’s order, still has the order linked to a teacher account and delivered to the classroom. This set-up is backwards to the open-access mindset of the web. Generally, e-commerce sites allow anyone to create an account; sign-up is designed to be easy and new customers can begin shopping in minutes. Scholastic RCO presents an immediate barrier to the vast majority of Canadian internet users. This is primarily due to Scholastic Canada’s school-market rights. When Scholastic licenses the rights to publish its own editions of titles by other publishers, they only gain the right to sell these titles within the school market.⁷⁵ The new parent site is Scholastic Canada’s best solution to this problem. As long as a student is on the class list of a registered teacher, a parent can place orders online with Scholastic RCO (but these orders will still ship to the school with the rest of the class order).

3.3 Reaching Consumers Online

Scholastic Canada’s Reading Club finally has a fully functioning e-commerce site available in both English and French, but now it needs to draw in subscribers. Attracting and retaining visitors to a website is no easy task. Many online retailers struggle to get a consumer to click through to checkout, but Scholastic has set themselves a much larger task. Reading Club needs to convince a very specific audience (teachers) to get on the phone and sign up for a club—a major call to action as far as online shopping is concerned. At some point, a method of creating an account online would likely improve sign-up rates. However, complications arise in verifying that the new client is indeed a teacher. For now, Scholastic is increasing sign-ups by building email marketing campaigns and social media presence.

Scholastic’s email and social media platforms are used to help keep Reading Club visible and to continue building that ever important relationship Scholastic has with teachers. This year, for the first time, social media was also used to conduct Scholastic Canada’s Teacher Advisor Boards.

Email Marketing

The main goal of Scholastic’s email marketing campaigns is to get registered teachers ordering. For this reason, emails only go out to teachers who have placed orders within the last three years. Every July the email list is rolled over and inactive members are removed. While this significantly reduces

⁷⁵ Sarah Maniscalco (Marketing Manager, Scholastic Canada), interviewed by Author, December 2017.

the number of teachers on the email list each year, it increases the response rate of each email. Reading Club marketing emails go out each week and often include coupons and special offers. For example, if a teacher places an order by a specified date, they may then receive an additional twenty-five dollars in their bonus bank. Scholastic uses similar incentives to encourage teachers to opt in to the newsletter.

In order to get the most out of each email campaign, Reading Club segments the email list based on the number of dollars customers spend through book clubs annually. This gives Reading Club the option to send different promotions to each segment. For example, gold customers (those who spend the most dollars annually) may receive more frequent deals and exclusive offers than others on the mailing list. Offers also change based on the time of year. Autumn emails focus on back-to-school, re-educating consumers about Reading Club (letting them know what has changed and improved). The winter season is a chance to push special offers for stocking up the classroom and completing holiday shopping, whereas spring is the time to advertise gifts for students and the opportunity to help kids avoid the summer slide.⁷⁶

Getting On Social

Social media is one of Reading Club's newest means of reaching consumers. Scholastic Canada Reading Club first moved onto social media with Facebook in December 2016. Much like with the full e-commerce site, Reading Club had waited until late in the adoption curve to create social media accounts. The creation of a new RCO website triggered a need for a greater internet presence all-around. The Facebook page was launched quietly, allowing Reading Club time to produce a significant amount of content before advertising the page to club members. Scholastic's social media presence could then be blasted out in January. Today, Reading Club and the Teacher Store are active on Pinterest and Facebook. These pages serve two primary functions: offering value to teachers and parents through content marketing, and supporting the brand, books, authors, and illustrators by increasing brand visibility.

Pinterest

Pinterest is Scholastic Canada's newest account and focuses on the Teacher Store. It functions as a resource for teachers to find classroom solutions and products. Scholastic divides its boards by subject matter, such as "Arts and Crafts," "Language Arts," "Math Ideas," and "French Resources." These subject-related boards include books, games, and craft ideas. Certainly, products from Scholastic's teacher catalogues appear on these boards, but many of the pins showcase free tips and tricks to help engage students or present concepts in a new way. For example, one pin in the Math board shows how kids can learn geometry by creating shapes using clothespins, and another recommends creating multiplication table bookmarks. Similar content appears in boards like

⁷⁶ A term used by educators to describe the tendency during the summer months for students to lose some of the skills, knowledge, or achievements gained during the previous school year..

“Classroom organization,” and “Classroom Hacks.” A great deal of content on the Reading Club Pinterest page was created by the Reading Club team exclusively for this platform. As is typical of content marketing, many of Scholastic’s Pinterest posts are not aimed at selling product, but at reinforcing the brand and maintaining consumer trust.

Facebook

Facebook is an amalgamation of all the content mentioned above and more, including information and videos about the new website, tips and tricks for organizing Reading Club in the classroom, quotes from teachers and parents about getting kids reading, and weekly editor’s book picks. Again, much of the content shared is for teachers, and in this case some of it has generated from teachers as well, namely through information gleaned from Scholastic’s Teacher Advisor Boards (which are also being held over Facebook, though privately, through a separate account).

3.4 Moving Teacher Advisor Boards Online

The first Scholastic Teacher Advisor Board was conducted by M.R. Robinson in 1923 and included high school principals as well as the president of the National Council of Teachers of English.⁷⁷ In Canada today, these meetings look quite different, though the goals are likely much the same: to understand what kind of support teachers need to get kids reading in their classrooms.

In previous years, Scholastic Canada had conducted consumer surveys of top spenders, exchanging bonus bank dollars for completed surveys. Reading Club Canada decided to host an official Teacher Advisor board for the first time in 2017 over Facebook. Participants were divided into three grade ranges and two languages (English and French).

The Teacher Advisor Boards involve the active participation of hundreds of teachers across Canada who generously donate their time and wisdom. These boards are incredibly important for Scholastic, as teachers are the ones on the ground actively distributing their product every day. The boards are Scholastic’s opportunity to learn where Reading Club is working and where it needs improvement, and to better understand what kind of support teachers need to meet the demands of today’s curriculum.

Challenges and Considerations

The online Teacher Advisor Boards were not easy to set up or coordinate, and Scholastic faced push back from teachers who wanted to be involved but not through a social media communication channel. While the vast majority of participants were comfortable on the new platform, there were

⁷⁷ Scholastic, “90 Years: Timeline.”

some teachers who had signed up to be advisors without realizing a Facebook account was a requirement. For those willing to try Facebook for the first time, the Reading Club marketing team had to create detailed instructions on how to set up a Facebook account, how to adjust privacy settings, and how to become a member of a Scholastic Teacher Advisor Board. For a variety of personal and practical reasons, some teachers do not use Facebook, and they are not willing to sign up, even temporarily. It may be out of a desire to mitigate the amount of screen time in their lives, to maintain control over personal privacy, or simply to avoid social network. It can even be a professional concern. Regardless of the reason, Scholastic lost access to those voices when the decision was made to host Teacher Advisor Boards over Facebook.

Advantages to Hosting Advisor Boards Over Social Media

Still, there are many advantages to hosting the Teacher Advisor Boards online. Most importantly, this move allowed Scholastic to gain input from a larger and more diverse group of participants. There would be no need for teachers to travel to a central location in order to share their thoughts and concerns. The Reading Club Teacher Advisor boards are a platform for teachers across Canada to give advice and voice their unique classroom and student needs. This year, the Teacher Advisor Boards have 400 active participants spanning every province and territory.⁷⁸

Another advantage are the tools available for conducting surveys and polls online, making it easy to spot trends in responses as well as to analyze and store feedback. While Scholastic editors may pose questions to the boards in the form of a status update and request responses in the comments section, they can also construct elaborate surveys through Google Forms to get at more in-depth or specific answers. When surveys are conducted, teachers have several days to respond and can open the survey whenever is most convenient for them. The extra time also gives participants a chance to think over answers and provide thorough responses.

Lastly, the sense of community that Scholastic creates with the Teacher Advisor Boards is not lost in an online environment. In fact, when the Facebook groups were first launched, teachers took the time, unprompted, to write lengthy introductions about themselves, their teaching history, and their schools for other participants to see. They then read each other's write-ups and responded to those with whom they had grades or subject matter in common. The majority of members voiced their excitement to be involved in the Scholastic Teacher Advisor Boards, and to be working with fellow educators towards the goal of increasing literacy in all Canadian classrooms. A level of trust and a common objective were established by this community automatically as teachers once again took on the role of Scholastic Reading Club's heroes.

⁷⁸ Lovelina Antony (Marketing Manager, Scholastic Canada), interviewed by Author, October 2017.

Chapter 4: Recommendations

4.1 User Experience Testing

An important step Scholastic Canada can take with the RCO website is to conduct user experience (UX) evaluations. While user feedback is taken into consideration, during my time with Scholastic Reading Club no efforts had yet been made to conduct any user experience testing. UX testing involves observing, measuring, and analyzing a user's experience with a system or product.⁷⁹ While analytics like bounce rates and click-through rates can also be effective in determining the usability of a website, it can be very revealing to study a user's subjective experience and see first-hand how a website is used in practice.

There are several approaches to UX testing. One common method is to have a user walk through a realistic, typical task with the product.⁸⁰ For example, a teacher might be observed as they complete the task of placing a student flyer order with a coupon, and then completing the checkout process by paying with a cheque. Specific, quantifiable metrics would be used to determine how the user fares with these tasks and, over time and in light of product adjustments, whether the user experience of the website is improving.

4.2 Marketing to Parents

At the very end of 2017, Scholastic Canada is launching an online Parent Store, which allows parents some access to RCO. As long as the parent's child is registered for a class with a participating teacher, that parent can use the Parent Store section of RCO to view flyers, search for product, select items and make payments. However, the student orders still wait until the teacher submits the classroom order before shipping. As always, all student orders will still ship together to the school.

In light of the forthcoming Parent Store, Scholastic Canada could expand Reading Club's marketing efforts to parents. It makes more sense than ever before to invite parents into the club. At the moment, Scholastic's social media and email marketing efforts are largely directed at teachers. But an entirely new category of customer is on the way, one that will need to be educated on the Parent Store website and acquaint itself with the backend of Reading Club for the first time. It would be beneficial for Reading Club to shift some of its marketing efforts in the direction of this new audience.

As parents register for the Parent Store website, Scholastic will gain access to a large new email list, presenting a major opportunity to reinforce the Scholastic brand, announce special deals, and

⁷⁹ William Albert and Thomas Tullis, *Measuring the User Experience: Collecting, Analyzing, and Presenting Usability Metrics (Interactive Technologies)* (Elsevier, 2013), 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

advertise new and exciting Reading Club titles directly to parents. There would be less need to promote Reading Club in the classroom if parents could take up this charge in their own homes.

Conclusion

Despite the fear that the transition to an entirely new ordering platform might cause the Scholastic clubs to lose members, Reading Club Canada has seen an increase in sales.⁸¹ After only three months, Reading Club began to see customers realizing the benefits of the new website.⁸² When it comes to RCO's features and functionality, Scholastic Canada continues to follow the lead of its American counterpart. As of November 2017, RCO is able to offer most of the same features as the American Scholastic Book Clubs Online.⁸³

It was no easy task to create an e-commerce website that would be accepted and used by roughly ninety-thousand teachers across Canada. Moving forward, it is equally difficult to make decisions about where digital adoption should end.⁸⁴ Online Teacher Advisor Boards have been successful, and the new e-commerce website is growing in popularity, but should parents be able to shop Reading Club deals for their home libraries and earn bonus bank rewards as teachers do? Should Scholastic begin providing students with digital-only Reading Club flyers instead of the classic (and frequently nostalgic) paper flyers? And would it not be simpler for students to order e-books from said digital flyers and see the wonder of having their purchase delivered to the classroom in an instant? Yet, is it possible a digital delivery of digital products could ruin the book-box moment so many teachers rely on to drum up excitement around reading?

These final questions are not simple to answer, but they all will need to be addressed in the very near future. As the internet becomes Reading Club's new home, the definition of what these clubs are and how they function will need to adapt accordingly. The history of Reading Club shows how stable and consistent these classroom clubs have remained over the last half-century. In the face of new technology, these clubs are no longer so fixed. Scholastic Canada Reading Club is on the verge of some major changes, and Canadian publishers who see their books in Scholastic flyers each month should be paying attention.

81 Lovelina Antony (Marketing Manager, Scholastic Canada), interviewed by Author, October 2017.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

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