

FUNNY BUSINESS

Comic book shop brings in \$200,000 a year and makes \$350 a week via eBay.

By Kellé Campbell

Glance at the introduction on the Cosmic Comix & Toys subscriber form and you get a pretty good idea of the store philosophy: "We are not a large, glitzy, sterile, overpriced, absentee-owner, fly-by-night, impersonal, fan boy, mall shop or sports card store." Rather, it is a place where regular customers are greeted by name. It's a store where they can pause to talk about comics, movies, poker or anything else with the owner, Russell "Rusty" Simonetta.

Like many comic book storeowners, Rusty was a heavy-duty collector before he even thought about going into business for himself. In 1995, Rusty decided to turn his hobby into a business, becoming a co-owner of Cosmic Comix & Toys, a full-service comic book store in Ellicott City, Maryland. He took over as sole owner in 1998.

Besides his love of comics, the chance to build relationships with customers attracted Rusty to the business. "You can sell anything: crackers or cars or whatever. But with comics, it's a little different because you're selling to people you know," he says. His relationships with his customers explains why Cosmic Comix has been around for almost a decade, brings in \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year, and has been described as "one of the best on the East Coast" by a local Baltimore paper.

Cosmic Comix offers customers an eclectic array of back issues from the Golden Age, the Silver Age and the present as well as a weekly stock of current releases from large publishers and the independent press. As the name suggests, they also carry old and



Russell "Rusty" Simonetta is the owner of Cosmic Comix & Toys, a full-service comic book store in Ellicott City, Maryland.

new action figures. Rusty offers subscription discounts on almost everything in the store from new releases to back issues and collecting supplies.

He also takes a personal interest in regular and subscribing customers, remembering their tastes and pointing out issues he thinks they might like. If someone has been looking for particular out-of-print titles, he'll keep it in mind while buying private collections and mention it the next time that customer visits. If customers like a certain writer or artist, he'll let them know about anything new by that individual.

"Comic book stores are first and foremost a service business. It's really not a product business, because you can get comics anywhere, and that's the way I look at it," says Rusty. "Most of our business, the business that keeps us going, is subscribers every week coming in and buying their books."

Cosmic Comix's customer base is mostly men, aged 20 to 40, living within less than an hour's drive to the store. This includes Ellicott City, two counties and Washington, D.C., District of Columbia customers include Marines and other Armed Forces personnel who may occasionally spend time overseas.

They are able to update or maintain subscriptions through the Cosmic Comix Web site (www.cosmiccomix.com), and each month Rusty sends their comics to

wherever they're stationed. Aside from the online orders, some regular customers have become involved with the web site by writing monthly reports and commentaries on industry news, reviews of new and classic titles, articles on back issues and collecting, previews of upcoming books and action figures.

The close interaction between Rusty and his customers has also paid off in other, unexpected ways. In 1997, when George Lucas' Special Edition Star Wars trilogy came to theaters, one customer, the owner of a local Baltimore City theater, suggested that Rusty showcase his action figures in the movie theater's display windows. That resulted in the creation of a diorama for each of the three movies. Rusty had not anticipated the resurgence of the movies' enormous popularity, but he was positioned to reap the prodigious sales. "Wow, that was amazing," he recalls.

Rusty also conducts two annual sales: a 25 - 50 percent discount sale during community-wide Midnight Madness special events in December and an annual "quarter sale" where thousands of comics are sold for 25 cents each. Rusty sends postcard sales reminders to the approximately 1,400 people on his mailing list. The quarter sale was created as a way of reducing inventory, but also serves as a promotional tool.

"It does keep it in people's mind," says Rusty, noting that people mention the card and event even if they were unable to attend. Although he has held the sale for five years now, Rusty plans to take a break and rely on eBay auctions to clear out stock.

Rusty started eBay auctions in January 2000. Every week he offers over 20 issue lots, action figures, Star Wars items and non-sports cards online. The extra time required to scan items, write descriptions and upload everything to the auction site, plus the extra paperwork, has prompted Rusty to hire two part-time employees to run that aspect of the business for him. Still, the auctions are popular and profitable; although many items are posted with an initial bid of less than \$10, Rusty averages about \$350 in revenue a week from eBay.