

Can technology save the bookstore?

Independent book retailers have been under steady assault the last decade or so, and their ramparts are looking a little worse for the wear. The recent implosion of Borders comes not so much as a surprise, but as an indicator that yet another retail sector must rediscover itself.

Booksellers like Barnes & Noble and Borders were derided for years as category killers, and while independent retailers have good reason to bemoan the competition, the big boxes haven't actually committed libricide. So, if commoditization of the book isn't to blame, why are their sales so slippery? The answer is technology.

It began in 1995 when Amazon sold its first book online. The Internet promised greater exposure to authors and titles, and it delivered. Amazon provided instant reading recommendations based on our previous selections and, presumably, sophisticated algorithms crafted to predict our tastes. Why wait in line at a help desk when you can pick a book or two online and build your reading profile like you would a Pandora radio station? Online retailing quickly impacted all bookstores, especially the independents, which lacked the resources to build their own transactional websites—let alone operate on the low margins of their bigger competition.

But, the bookworm turned with the advent of the e-reader. By some accounts, 19 million Americans currently use a Kindle, Nook or one of their spawn. Even libraries offer e-readers for check out, perhaps begrudgingly. Nancy Pearl, librarian, author and NPR commentator, laments that “e-readers will mean the death of the independent bookstore and, by extension, the public library.”

Not so fast, says Robert Sindelar, managing partner of Seattle-based Third Place Books. He believes that “by eliminating printing and shipping costs, e-books have in fact triggered a critical pricing adjustment throughout the



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industry.” Earlier this year, as sales of e-books skyrocketed, Macmillan Publishing (then Random House) adopted the Agency Model, requiring independents, superstores and e-book sellers to accept their pricing or not sell at all. So, if the playing field is less askew than in the '90s, what can indie bookstores embrace to regain their relevance?

The answer, again, is technology.

The website for Third Place Books includes links to Facebook, Twitter and an iPhone book search/purchase app. Customers may choose to connect with the business online or at one of the stores for a more personal kind of connectivity. By creatively structuring synergistic partnerships with other businesses, Sindelar is able to promote community events, offer food and live music, and host classes of all types.

Another Seattle-area bookseller, Bryan Pearce, CEO of University Book Stores, invites authors to his store in order to self-publish. Pearce was an early adopter of the Espresso Book Machine and, being not larger than a copier, it conveniently allows authors to download, print and bind a book in the time it takes to grab a latte (hence the name). But it's not just for self-publishers: Pearce can provide his customers the books they want, even if they aren't stocked on a shelf. With more than 4 million downloadable titles and growing, he acknowledges that “on-site book printing is here to stay.”

The reality is that technology will continue to change how books are sold, in ways we can't fully anticipate. Pearce envisions the gradual transition from a physical inventory to a digital one, but meanwhile, he'll keep the store lively with author readings, used book sales and a robust Staff Picks section. Sindelar will continue to synthesize his stores into linked-up community centers and gathering spaces. Perhaps for independent booksellers, it's not who can sell the same product for less, but who can sell the same product *with more*. **DDI**

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