

BOOKSELLING

The Internet and the traditional bookseller: A failing relationship

“He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils; for time is the greatest innovator” —*Francis Bacon*

We couldn't expect it to last forever.

It's been a little over 10 years now since online bookselling began. At the time it was a welcomed addition to us brick-and-mortar types. It opened up a new revenue stream and gave our shops and our inventory worldwide exposure that was previously unobtainable. The possibilities seemed endless.

It started out innocent enough. If we did not have what our customers were looking for, we proudly directed them to ABE (Advanced Book Exchange) so that they might find their long-sought-after books. We were delighted that there was a service available to us that was comprised of booksellers from around the world. We were not only providing ABE and similar sites with our inventory, we were also their marketing department. Their business was built on our backs.

Remember, there were no online booksellers when this all started; there was no eBay. There were booksellers who were selling online.

It wasn't too long before people realized that not only did everyone have access to these online listings but that anyone could now sell books online, the only barrier to entry being the need to have a valid credit card and to come up with a name for your endeavour that was not already being used. Bookselling has always had a low barrier to entry, with the only requirements being a love of books, a little inventory and a space to sell them, but now those barriers were mostly eliminated. An online bookselling gold rush ensued and the trade has never recovered.

Then the third-party aggregators opened their gates to allow factory booksellers (or mega-listers) to set up shop online. These are “sellers” (I dare not call them booksellers) who list books numbering in the hundreds of thousands, in many cases in the millions, and for the most part do not own the books they sell. In the history of bookselling one could count on one hand the number of bookstores who had an inventory of more than 100,000 books. Now, overnight, they were a dime a dozen and most had no physical shop.

Fifty percent of all bookstores have since disappeared. Books that were once hard to find became commonplace, resulting in tremendous downward price pressure on most books. The price of most books has plummeted. As fellow bookseller James Jaffe puts it, “Adding another copy of the book to the virtual pile at a still further reduced price seems to me irresponsible, even suicidal, from a bookselling perspective.”

It is hard to pinpoint the exact time when things started going south, but I suspect it began when ABE and Alibris decided to go big and expand their reach. For ABE it was being bought out by a bigger company, for Alibris it was their decision to try to take their company public (which failed; they have since been bought out by a private equity firm). Now the online book trade was no longer independent businesses supporting independent businesses. They also changed their business models and began shifting their emphasis towards the new-book world. For ABE, in addition to the shift in focus, they changed their fee structure for vendors, raising commissions and bringing all credit card processing in-house. Vendors were now charged more than 5 percent for all credit card transactions (whereas we were paying less than 2.5 percent to process them on our own).

The future for the traditional bookseller will be in building their own Web presence. Companies like Bibliopolis offer basic to advanced solutions for the bookseller at a reasonable cost, and as Google continues its quest to compile a search engine based on all the world's information, these bookselling portal sites will become less important. Having a Web site indexed by Google will do the trick for the most part. The other hope is that trade organizations like the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA) and the Independent Online Booksellers Association (IOBA) will be able to step up their online efforts to provide a viable alternative to the existing online venues.

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