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A new chapter for bookstores: Shops find offline niche

By Richard Thompson: First published Boston Globe June 15, 2006

Growing up in St. Paul, Dan Chartrand gained a reputation as an avid reader at his local bookstore. But it was from the other side of the register that he realized his love of literature could extend to a lasting career. "The owners of the bookstore said, 'You're here so often, why don't you apply for a holiday job,'" said Chartrand, co-owner of the Water Street Bookstore in downtown Exeter, N.H. "Within a week or two, I figured out that this was something I could do for a long time, something that I would really love."

Now, a decade later, Chartrand's plan for operating "within the context of a community" is still going strong but in an increasingly different landscape than when the store opened in 1991. On the Internet, sites like Amazon.com, which boasts having "Earth's biggest selection," have had a strong impact in the retail industry. Amazon earned \$332 million in net income in the fiscal year 2005. Likewise, megastore Barnes & Noble, which offers movies and music in addition to its inventory of books, brought in \$4.36 billion in sales in 2005, excluding online transactions.

However, a study released last year by Ipsos BookTrends reported that sales at independent bookstores had increased in both revenue and volume in 2004, accounting for a 9 percent share of the money consumers spent on books, up from 6.9 percent in 2002. The effect virtual bookstores have had on their physical counterparts has been "more pronounced nationally than locally" and has been waning over the past five years, according to Rusty Drugan, executive director for the New England Booksellers Association. "They do have a market share now," he said, "but statistics have shown that the national chains have lost more market share to the Internet than independent bookstores have."

To some independent booksellers, like Janice Severance, the numbers can't tell the whole story.

"The Internet is a big issue, but you can't replace coming into a bookstore and having the books displayed and hand-picked," said Severance, who has owned the Bookstore of Gloucester since 1990. "I like to tell my customers, 'Go on the Internet all you like, but just copy down the number and call us up, leave a message -- even if it's in the middle of the night -- and we'll get the book'," she said, "and if you don't want to come in, I'll send it to you."

Stores like Water Street and Gloucester can join the Booksellers Association, which holds an annual trade show and runs educational programs as a way of promoting the retail book industry for its 375 member locations, 45 percent of them in Massachusetts. "One of the publishers I know thinks of this area like the spokes of a wheel" said Pam Price, co-owner of the Book Shop of Beverly Farms. "There's the hub, and these spokes that go out to each of the communities." For Allan Schmid, president of the Booksellers Association, the arrival of a chain in his market provided an incentive for renovation. "Even though my sales were down because of the new place opening, I spiffed my store up," said Schmid, who has owned Books, Etc., in Portland, Maine, for 17 years. "I sort of went against what some people may be inclined to do with the threat of declining sales, but because you know that consumers are going to come back, and when they did, I wanted the store to look nice."

"You can't just be asleep at the switch and think that the old model will work," Schmid said. "You have to be creative, inventive, and on your toes, and I think people who are in tune with that can have a better chance for success." From Chartrand's perspective, New England has proven to be "a really good fit for the independent bookselling model."



Inside his shop , occupying three storefronts along a main stretch through downtown Exeter, are shelves stocked with an array of titles, including books by local authors and on regional subjects as well as a "calling card section" that, Chartrand said, reflects his personal interests in history and political science . Lorca Sloan , a sophomore at Phillips Exeter Academy , was more interested in brushing up on her science fiction -- as could be seen by the stack of books she gave to her mother, Joan , as they shopped together over Memorial Day weekend .

"This is what happens," Joan Sloan said . "We can't stay too much longer or we'll end up buying the store".....**THE END**

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