

Shelf Awareness, Tuesday, September 29, 2009

MBA Report, Part 1: Indies and E-Books

E-books, online bookselling, selling in the recession and fall lists featuring many promising books were among the major topics at the Midwest Booksellers Association annual trade show held last weekend in St. Paul, Minn.

Booksellers in a session on e-books led by Paige Poe of the ABA indicated that while only a few of them have IndieCommerce websites and many believe they should sell e-books, they are apparently reluctant to sign up for the service. (Several said later that this had to do either with unfamiliarity with the program's details or not having the authority to make such a decision, which applies especially at college and other institutional bookstores.) ABA CEO Oren Teicher urged them to consider--or reconsider--IndieCommerce, saying that indie booksellers can't afford to lose the e-slice of the market.

In her presentation, Poe gave a history of e-books, e-book readers (we had almost forgotten about the Rocket eBook!), historical patterns for the broad adoption of electronic products by consumers, and judged that "e-books have reached the takeoff point. Reality is catching up with the hype."

Among indicators of changes in e-attitudes: consumers have become comfortable with digital content, so much so that they look for information online before most anywhere else. The next generation of readers and consumers are already "eagerly using digital content," which is well-established on campuses and "trickling down" to high schools and lower grades. Mobile access to digital content "is everywhere." People are buying e-readers and e-reader apps. And the book industry has adopted an open standard for books with the ePub format.

Already Random House e-book sales have increased 400% over last year, and AAP sales figures show major gains every month, most recently 213% in July. While e-books are still a "small fraction" of book industry sales, "they are going way up," Poe said.

She also outlined steps the ABA is taking to make sure bricks-and-mortar independent bookstores become a major part of the e-book world:

- The ABA is talking with several e-reader makers, including Sony, about making "e-reading devices easily available to indies" in time for this year's holiday season.
- The ABA is partnering with publishers to develop digital opportunities that will be exclusive to indies and mostly involve bundling: likely the e-book version of a book would be offered to the purchaser of a printed version of a book at a nominal cost.
- IndieCommerce is integrating e-book functionality into the IndieBound app for the iPhone and iPod Touch. This is "nearly ready" and will allow consumers to buy e-books this way.
- The ABA is working with others to develop an independent open source mobile e-book reader program competitive with Stanza and others that are now owned either by Amazon or Barnes & Noble.
- IndieCommerce has made a transition to the open source solution with Drupal that allows enhanced e-book functionality. (Ingram Digital is working with IndieCommerce on this.)

Poe also made recommendations for booksellers who want to be competitive selling e-books:

- Download an e-book and learn about e-readers such as the Kindle and the Sony Reader. "Understand the Kindle system," Poe said. "Customers want to know if you can sell the Kindle or books for Kindles. Explain how your system will be different."
- "Visit the competition" by getting to know how e-books are promoted on Amazon, B&N.com, Fictionwise and elsewhere.
- Focus on market share not margin because "the goal is to put your foot in the door. Right now the e-book market is a race to the bottom in terms of price since everyone wants to emulate iTunes."
- Keep in touch with the ABA and its e-initiatives.
- Keep reading about e-book developments in *Bookselling This Week*, *Shelf Awareness* and [TeleRead](#).

--[John Mutter](#)

[More from MBA this week!]

***Shelf Awareness*, Wednesday, September 30, 2009**

MBA Report, Part 2: Buy Local; Social Media; Handselling

At a Midwest Booksellers Association session last weekend on buying local campaigns, Becky Anderson of Anderson's Bookshop, Naperville and Downers Grove, Ill., related that using the IndieBound name and materials, the local business alliance in Naperville has grown into an active organization with nearly 100 member businesses--just the kind of connection with non-book retailers that ABA had hoped would develop from IndieBound when it founded the program two years ago.

Last summer [IndieBound Naperville](#) held an independents week that included a blood drive; a "tax-free day" (stores took 7.25% off purchases); and a bingo card that businesses stamped. The group has held other events and recently conducted its first survey of members and is planning to do several holiday promotions. Members are also now patronizing each other more than in the past.

Membership in IndieBound Naperville costs \$30; businesses receive large IndieBound Naperville signs for their store windows. Anderson said that she is starting a similar organization in Downers Grove.

One unforeseen difficulty: scheduling meetings is like herding a bunch of cats, Anderson said, mainly because stores have widely varying opening hours.

ABA CEO Oren Teicher emphasized that booksellers can "start small" with local business alliances. "Some of the most successful efforts are operated by a small number of stores."

In a social media panel, Martin Schmutterer of Common Good Books, St. Paul, Minn., said that social media is "ultimately about selling books," but encompasses much more. Social media, he continued, helps stores become enmeshed in the community and find new communities, helps people "turn to you

first," helps develop affection and loyalty for the store and extend the brand, and helps build social capital.

Social media also "humanizes the store quite a bit and allows customers and others a way into the store they wouldn't otherwise get." On Twitter "there is a group who direct mail me who may not come in all that often," he said. "They make it their first line of contact."

Sometimes tweets resound in unanticipated ways. Schmutterer said that a recent tweet about a burglary at the store "a few tweets later became a major new item" that was picked up across the country. (And here too: [Shelf Awareness](#), August 2, 2009.) "As my boss said, it's the least expensive way to get a lot of publicity."

Schmutterer added that through social media, he learns a lot from other bookstores about a range of things from what's selling to what they're having problems with.

Todd Sattersten of [800-CEO-READ](#) recommended that all booksellers who haven't yet done so should start a blog. His company, which specializes in business books, has used social media for five years. All social media is on the front page of the company's site and includes a daily blog, audio interviews and videos.

He called the efforts "digital handselling" and emphasized that "we're having a conversation with a huge group that chooses to have that conversation. Many of them aren't coming into the store, and many will be future customers."

Sattersten praised social media, saying, "I don't know another way to talk to your customers every day for free." He noted, too: "I can send out what I want, and I'm not dependent on media coverage or postage and printing. This is people talking to people, not a marketing brochure."

At a session about customer service, Lanora Hurley, owner and general manager of the Next Chapter Bookshop, Mequon, Wis., talked about a range of programs at the store and offered all kinds of tips.

Hurley called handselling "a key component of customer service" that helps booksellers meet customers' needs and differentiates independent bookstores from both online and bricks-and-mortar competition.

Shelf talkers are an aspect of handselling and lend themselves to community bookstores. Hurley prefers handwritten shelf talkers, and lets customers write them, too, particularly children. "It's great to have a 13 year old recommend books to her peers," she commented.

IndieBound is "one of the easiest ways to handsell," Hurley continued. The selection of titles "tells what's good." The Next Chapter also has a bookcase with faceouts of all staff members' picks.

In discussions with customers, booksellers should "always be honest," Hurley said. "Booksellers shouldn't be afraid to say, 'I didn't like the book.'" In part, this contributes to stores' credibility "that we believe in what we sell."

Hurley hires people "who love books and who love working with people. I don't want to hire a reader so much as a reader who can talk about what she's reading."

At Next Chapter, Hurley promotes handselling by holding contests among the staff with prizes such as a day off, free movie passes or a free lunch. She also promotes handselling by giving some staff members, particularly children's booksellers, small amounts of paid time off so that they can read f&gs, which "helps them sell." Staff meetings begin with a discussion of what each staff member is reading, which "reminds us of why we're here and allows me to sell books I haven't read," Hurley said.

Rep nights, an old Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops tradition at which three or four reps present their picks for the season to the staff, also help booksellers sell books they haven't read. (Next Chapter coordinates these evenings with Boswell Book Company, another Schwartz successor store.)

Next Chapter staff members greet every customer who comes through the door, always phrase comments in ways to avoid "no" as an answer and always take customers to a section when referring them to where a book is. Staff members also don't use the phrase "special order" and estimate delivery times of ordered books in terms of business days. When customers say they can order a book online, Hurley says she can order the book as well but doesn't charge for shipping and notes that the sale supports a local business.

Hurley called "branding booksellers" a great idea, both in the store and online.

Another kind of handselling is displays. For example, Next Chapter has a Get Lost in Translation display that features Europa Editions titles, which aren't promoted in any other way. "We can't keep them in stock," she said. "People love them." One title, *The Most Beautiful Book in the World* by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, has achieved a most beautiful status: since its publication in July, it has sold 55 copies in Next Chapter.--[John Mutter](#)