

More Good News than Bad for Independent Booksellers over the Holiday Season

Canadian fiction was a particularly powerful draw for bookstore customers over Christmas, fueling a sales increase for many Independents over the previous year

By Emily Sinkins

Responses to CBA's annual Holiday Sales Survey from 71 booksellers from across Canada reveal that for most Independents (65%), holiday sales for 2009 were greater than (47% of respondents) or equal to (18%) those from the same period in 2008. Of course, that still leaves 35% of booksellers experiencing a sales decrease during the season, but the general sentiment expressed in the comments was relief that the fallout from the poor economy did not have as great an impact on holiday buying as feared.

Further breakdown of the numbers shows that most of those booksellers who saw a sales increase were up a slight 2-5%, though a surprising percentage (13% of *all* respondents) reported an increase of more than 15%. Meanwhile, most of the "decrease" respondents (13%) were down 2-5%. October and December were the best months—most experienced better sales in those months than in 2008, while in November, more booksellers were down than up (42% up versus 45% down). One bookseller wisely pointed out that November is prime time for online sales which may be related to the less than stellar bricks-and-mortar sales that month.

Independent holiday bestsellers

What was selling? Well, in fiction it was Linden MacIntyre's *The Bishop's Man*, followed by Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol* and Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows' *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Wade Davis's *The Wayfinders* was the top selling non-fiction book, with Anne Murray's autobiography (written with Michael Posner), *All of Me*, not far behind. The third most popular was *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson.

Kids—and those who buy for them—were far and away most drawn to Jeff Kinney's *Diary of Wimpy Kid #4 Dog Days*. Runners-up in children's sales are *New Moon*, the second in the Stephenie Meyer's Twilight series, which tied with Maurice Sendak's classic *Where the Wild Things Are*, which rekindled reader interest in light of the movie release. In third place for children's titles this Christmas was Barbara Reid's *Perfect Snow*.

Boxing Week blues

Boxing Week was less rosy sales-wise: 44% of booksellers were down in sales compared to the previous year, while only 23% were up (33% reported it was the same). Slightly more than half of booksellers (56%) offered discounts during that time—either on selected titles or everything in the store, while 43% forewent discounting altogether.

Anticipated returns

With regard to returns predictions, 30% of you expect you'll make more this spring than last, while 33% expect your returns will be lower. Explanations offered in the comments section include the belief that more judicious/frugal buying will lead to fewer returns; the fact that many booksellers (though clearly not all—as evidenced in top fiction sellers noted above) found they couldn't compete with discounters on *The Lost Symbol* so will end up returning a lot of those; and the observation that publishers are tightening the billing reins, leading some booksellers to return

more/earlier. As one bookseller notes: “Publishers are quite aggressive about threatening to put accounts on hold this year (my payments have been consistent for 11 years) so I’ll do higher returns to offset the incoming statements.”

Billing, pricing and e-book anxiety

When asked what you would like CBA to tell suppliers, you had a lot to share. First off, many of you had good things to say about the service during the holiday season (a few “thank-you”s were even offered up), though for every bookseller who said delivery times were great, there was another who said not so much. The other issues on the minds of booksellers are equally unsurprising: e-books (booksellers are concerned that publishers aren’t discussing their strategies in this area directly with them; there’s a fear they’ll have no place in the new digital model) and pricing (remove the prices from covers or lessen the US/Canadian pricing disparity). There was also anxiety expressed about the possibility of publishers offering less leniency to independent clients in light of the high profile bookstore closures of last year.

Bookstore trend-spotting

What trends did you spot? Well, vampires, obviously, but many booksellers mentioned that fiction was the thing this year, and not just fiction, but Canadian fiction, with regional interest titles performing especially well. This is particularly true for Eastern booksellers, for whom *The Bishop’s Man* and *All of Me*, titles that enjoyed national attention, are also local interest.

Many of you noted in your “trends” comments that sidelines sold very well this year, though when it comes to numbers just 34% reported a sidelines sales increase from the previous year, with 27% selling fewer and 39% the same. There were few surprises to be found among bestselling sidelines—most cited were calendars, stationery and journals/date books—though quite a few bookstores reported a surge in interest in local arts and crafts items, including ornaments, pottery and jewelry.

What weren’t browsers enquiring about? E-books. Only 8% of booksellers reported customers specifically seeking electronic formats, though others note that they certainly became a topic of discussion in-store over the holidays.

When it comes right down to it were your customers behaving any differently this holiday season? Apparently, they became even more cautious in their spending—words like “careful” and “discerning” popped up frequently in the comments. They were drawn to discounts and paperbacks, and some booksellers observed customers returning to the store several times before making a purchase. In short, they weren’t parting with their cash lightly. Lots of you mentioned customers being more polite, considerate, civilized, relaxed, happy even. This, of course, is a marked change from the book-tossing, tantrum-throwing season of two years ago during which the pricing issue reached boiling point, and perhaps indicative of the fact that the welcoming environment of an independent store produced the desired effect. As one bookseller noted, “I found my suggestions for people were really well-received this year—perhaps people are realizing there is value to knowledgeable staff, instead of stupid discounts.”