

# CROWDING YOUR SPACE

**Not situated in a high-traffic neighbourhood? Then, go beyond the books to design a 'destination' store that offers an experience worth going out of one's way for.**

Joy Ferguson

As booksellers struggle to overcome the box stores—or more specifically, box pricing—it becomes increasingly important to offer more. But what is “more”? At BookExpo Canada panelists detailed their practical and “*Creative Ways to Increase Bookstore Traffic*” but the underlying message was: Know your community and be innovative in creating your unique and indispensable place in it.

Saul opened her first store, on Queen Street West in Toronto, in 2006. Her intent was a seamless fit into the neighbourhood—designated the Art and Design District. One inspired decision was to open an art gallery in the basement.

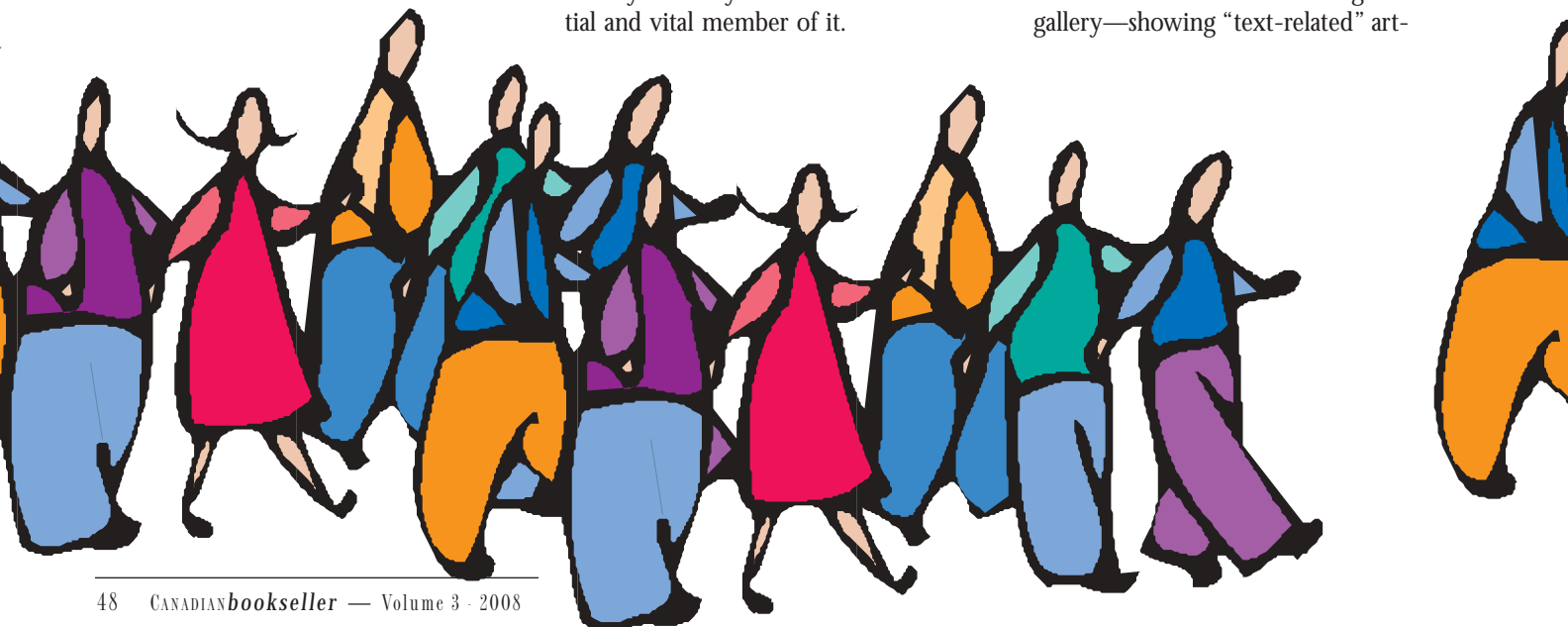
The art gallery concept was sketched out during a tour of the rental space. Saul loved that the space was “architecturally quirky and unique” with soaring

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## **The Art of Knowing**

Joanne Saul, co-owner of TYPE Books, grew her business into a mini-chain in two short years. Her advice to other booksellers: Truly understand your community so that you can become an essential and vital member of it.

ceilings and an interplay of light and shadow. Since the downtown Toronto rent was also soaring, she committed to using all available space. “The basement ceilings were high, so it seemed like a waste to use that area for storage.” A gallery—showing “text-related” art-



work—seemed ideal. In addition to local artists, students from the Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD) have displayed their bookarts; Kids Can Press showcased illustrations from its *Visions in Poetry* series; and Alanna Cavanagh exhibited her Penguin cover art.

Saul hosts a new artist every six weeks, and 80 per cent of the artists shown live within ten blocks of the store—ensuring that they bring in local contacts. The artist is expected to do her own publicity, and these launches allow TYPE opportunities to garner media attention. As for profit, TYPE employs a sliding scale of commission on the art, which amounts to “only a small percentage of our business revenue.” But, says Saul, “the gallery strengthens our profile in the community and our brand.”

Besides the gallery, TYPE is a part of the community canvas in many other ways, for example, as a sponsor of The Scream Literary Festival, a participant in the Queen West Art Crawl, and even the CBC’s most-cool George Stroumboulopoulos has dropped by to tape a segment of *The Hour*. All these ventures, says Saul, “Allow us to access media and mailing lists, and let us immerse ourselves in the local art community, to make more connections, and to be part of these other big publicity machines.”

Saul has continued this strategy of getting in sync with the community in her two newer bookshops. The most recent TYPE Books reflects its family-friendly Danforth neighbourhood by devoting the bright and sunny upstairs to children’s programming.

## Building Bumps

Doug Minett, co-owner of The Bookshelf in Guelph, adds that it is key to innovate. Know your community, but also try new things; offer new experiences; “do what you have to do to get the next bump in sales.”

Minett began bookselling in 1973. He

With an additional investment of \$750,000, they added another storey, movie theatre, art gallery and 200-seat bar. Again, they realized a big bump in sales. “In the 1990s,” says Minett, “The question became, ‘What to do to get the next bump?’”

Minett has found it increasingly expensive to generate higher sales num-

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was located downtown, and, with a chuckle, recalls, “marketing did not seem to be required; books sold themselves.” He adds, “People read, so, if you built a bookstore—in a good location—they would come.” He remembers how novel it seemed when his friend opened a store in a poor location—to avoid steep rent—and advertised to bring in clientele. As they brainstormed about how to promote a bookstore, Minett pondered—and scribbled on his cocktail napkin—a plan for a bookshop that included a movie theatre, restaurant and bar. They laughed. A decade later, the cocktail napkin was translated into architectural plans. That is, in 1980, Minett invested \$115,000 to increase space and add a 100-seat café. “The café was magic. Sales doubled immediately. That was our first big bump in sales,” says Minett.

bers “in this era of competition; competition, not just amongst bookstores, but including the Internet and other media vying for people’s time and affection.” He cites “downloading as becoming a real problem.” The key for Minett is, as it has been for 35 years, innovation. Back to the drawing board—or cocktail napkin as the case may be. He believes that the solution is basic, “booksellers know how to market books.” And by that he means, market good books and great writers, not the titles that publishers are committing megabucks to promote. “Ultimately, booksellers will have to identify books that are *not* bestsellers or heavily promoted by publishers, and rekindle interest in ideas.” For Minett, success has come from knowing what his community wants and being ceaselessly innovative in exceeding their expectations.

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## Coffee Earn


Since 1982, Christopher Smith has offered customers more than books at Collected Works in Ottawa. The bookshop includes a coffee bar, art sales and now virtual author readings.

Smith's goal was to create traffic—and sales—in the bookstore. Although the art—at 20 per cent commission—adds only about two per cent to his sales revenue, Smith notes, "It is satisfying: How often do you sell a \$1,000 book and get to pocket \$200." But the most significant addition is the coffee station. Here, says Smith, "We turn coffee drinkers into book buyers."

This concept has brewed success. In fact, his coffee urn earnings are overflowing. Smith shares that coffee sales are 13 per cent of his gross revenue and his profit margin on coffee is 74 per cent. His store grosses about one million, which makes the take-out-only coffee station worth \$130,000—and it only occupies 200 sq.ft. But Smith cautions that it cost him as much to build and equip the coffee bar as to fixture his 1,200 sq.ft. store—price tag on an automated espresso machine, \$20,000. If a bookseller is considering the idea, Smith advises: 1. Get expert help. 2. Be sure your location is right—"If you have a Starbucks around the corner, it's probably not such a great idea." 3. Ensure you have the financial resources to set up the café efficiently.

Smith's most recent innovation came as a result of finding it increasingly difficult to schedule authors. The solution: An interactive virtual reading. Co-op funds offset the \$500 for the equipment—projector, screen, MacPro with webcam, and using skype (www.skype.com). He cautions that it took two test runs and a techno-savvy assistant to clean up the network and get the sound quality needed. But, customers loved the experience. They enjoyed two-time Booker Prize-winning author Peter Carey reading from *His Illegal Self*, and found it titillating to meet Carey in his home environment. Significantly, the virtual reading hosted the usual 35-65 demographic, but also brought out 20-year-olds. "It felt 'funkier'" says Smith, "And it is difficult to catch the interest of the younger demographic so this was great!" The technology does allow Q&A, and for autographing, each customer spoke with Carey to submit their autograph request. A customized plate was couriered to Carey to be tipped in, then, the following week, customers returned to the store to pick up their personalized copy of his book. A side benefit was that the event drew extensive—free—media attention. Smith taped the readings to replay in the store and on the website. He envisions tremendous potential in virtual readings, including inviting bookclubs to come meet their author.

These panelists know their neighbourhoods and have worked to become an integral part of those by being innovative. Identifying what "more" your store can offer customers depends on the unique character of your community and your location. And if you are not in an ideal location, enhance your store until it becomes a destination.

Asked what would be the ideal bookstore, Minett laughed, "A store on a busy street with a bakery and café on the left so customers strolled by more than once a day ... and with a laudromat on the right." 

Contact freelance writer Joy Ferguson at [maggief@rogers.com](mailto:maggief@rogers.com).