

# OF INDEPENDENT BOOKSELLERS

## THE "3RS"

*Experts weigh in on how to reimagine, reinvent and reinvigorate your store to succeed in the new book retail environment*

By Joy Ferguson

Twelve years ago, acclaimed science fiction author, Robert J. Sawyer, watched a demonstration of print-on-demand (POD) technology. It inspired his futuristic comment on the bookstore in *FlashForward*: “In a brilliant bit of preadaptive evolution [like feathers emerging for insulation and only subsequently being co-opted for flight], book superstores had been building coffee shops into their facilities—giving people the perfect place to spend some pleasant time while their custom books were printed.”

As the number of brick-and-mortar stores crumbles, debate continues as to how bookstores can rebuild. What will it take to “Reimagine, Reinvent and Reinvigorate” bookshops? Independents are challenged in this versatile and competitive marketplace—e-books, online booksellers, big-box chains, Costco and more. And the Internet has redefined—or rather removed—competitor boundaries. Here, we have called upon experts to talk about the bookstore of the future.

### **Adding to Your Electives: book formats**

At Mabel’s Fables ([www.mabelsfables.com](http://www.mabelsfables.com)) in Toronto, Eleanor LeFave predicts one noticeable difference in her children’s bookstore of the future: Fewer print books. The space will be taken up more by events, than inventory. “In future, I will embrace e-books. Because we sell YA books, we

already have customers who love to do everything on a screen. And we would add an Espresso Book Machine®. Then I would carry only single print copies of backlist titles, although I would stock more of the complex books such as pop-ups.” In this scenario, print becomes just one more format on the list of choices for the book buyer. She adds, “It will work better for our footprint if we offer choice ... and in a welcoming environment.”

### **A Community Institution: enhancing store experience**

Donna Paz Kaufman at The Bookstore Training Group of Paz & Associates—which also publishes a free newsletter at [www.PazBookBiz.com](http://www.PazBookBiz.com)—stresses that beyond “welcoming,” the store environment must be “dynamic.” “Whatever the store design, it must give customers reasons to log off the computer and look forward to their escape into the bookshop. The store of the future must provide that sense of ‘Ahhh’ or ‘Wow!’, then customers will come back because the experience will never be replicated elsewhere.”

Kevin Graff, President of Graff Retail ([www.graffretail.com](http://www.graffretail.com)), also emphasizes the Wow!-factor. “Customers can get content, price and convenience online, but they cannot get experience, so the store must be theatre.” He explains that the bookseller’s production must engage all the senses. He imagines, “the smell of fresh coffee, relaxing music, designed

# D E N T L I N G

lighting, big comfy seating, unique events and sales staff that become a passionate, knowledgeable customer resource.” Graff adds, “The pressure on the frontline staff to sell and to provide valuable service will go up exponentially.”

## **Cross-training Advantage: boosting sales performance**

“Engage all staff in the business,” says Kaufman. “What’s fabulous about inclusivity is that it means cross-training, multi-tasking and job enrichment, and that is good for the individual, and it is definitely good for the business.”

Bookstore staff are an important editorial filter. They guide customers to content. LeFave believes, “Right now, the gadget guys have sucked away the focus from the content, and placed it on the gadget. But eventually it will be the books, not the gadget, that determine people’s interest.” And at that point, overwhelmed by the millions of titles on the Internet, customers will rely on their independent’s staff to, “differentiate, channel, filter, categorize, highlight and celebrate” books, says LeFave.

Still, at Galiano Island Books ([www.galianoislandbooks.com](http://www.galianoislandbooks.com)) in BC, Lee Trentadue believes there is a real need to increase bookstore staff’s selling skills. “In this competitive environment, sales skills must be developed.

Particularly, I want them to learn how to effectively hand-sell.” She adds, “My staff are all involved in our selling, marketing and social media efforts.” They have to be because Trentadue is inviting the whole world to shop at her store.

## **Bragging Right: marketing above and beyond the norm**

Galiano Island Books is located in a

small community—1,300 permanent residents. But Trentadue is ready to grow the community to global proportions: If online booksellers are capturing some of her business, then why not promote her wares to their market? Already she has customers as far away as England, Mexico and New Zealand who order books via email, and soon, Trentadue will sell ebooks on her website. “We can take the values we share as booksellers out to the world, and we have knowledge and a passion that will differentiate us from the big online sellers.”

She has recently redesigned her website, and is actively engaging her staff in using social media to promote books. “When people come into the store they are pleased that we have so many staff picks, and we have extended this to the website.” Trentadue knows that to drive customers to her website on a regular basis she must keep the site content fresh and relevant. Her plans are to refresh content every three days, begin a blog and add audio/video.

“Marketing is changing, becoming more dynamic, and there are new tools that complement the tried-and-true promotional strategies,” notes Kaufman. She adds, “To be successful into the future, booksellers must believe in what they are doing, and use all means available to speak about it, write about it in marketing materials, and have this permeate every person who works in the business.”

## **Advanced Communications: ignore social media at your peril**

Trentadue warns, “Booksellers ignore

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# READING AHEAD

## *Twelve steps toward long-term bookselling survival*

1. Promote “Shop Local” as purchasing both in-store and on your website.
2. Learn how to use social media like Facebook and Twitter.
3. Make bloggers, small presses, etc. your Facebook “friends.”
4. Partner with college programs and local groups for dynamic events.
5. Attend to store details: lighting, music, aromas, seating and displays.
6. Offer POD by purchasing a machine or accessing one in town.
7. Watch prices and the evolution of technology—e.g. Microsoft Surface.
8. Share Knowledge: What is working for other retailers and booksellers?
9. Rent out your space to local events—e.g. Film Festivals, Art Groups, etc.
10. Keep the media informed of store events.
11. Offer Privileges—e.g. exclusive shopping experience tailored to a specific target audience (select after-hours, promotions, entertainment, hors d’oeuvres, and bar).
12. And do not forget to ensure that your current business model is working well before you adapt it for the future.

social media, like Facebook and Twitter, at their peril.” Her recent experience with Facebook confirmed its value: On short notice, she decided to host a literary festival. She posted on Facebook and notified her Facebook “friends.” Within two days, 20 authors expressed interest in reading at the festival.

Her advice to booksellers is to use the “friends” function on your Facebook page to invite people and organizations—such as publishers, small presses, writer’s unions, literary sites, bloggers, etc.—to join your network; according to Facebook, the average user has 130 friends. Work with your staff to keep Facebook and Twitter busy with updates, links and information. This approach will be demanding, so Trentadue now requires staff to write book reviews. And she has invited the local college’s creative writing students to contribute reviews in return for free books. Social media is a significant marketing resource that Trentadue deems “essential.”

### **Review Your Work: re-examine what and how you sell**

In the future, booksellers must determine which sidelines—and side effects—will increase sales, bring in new customers and enhance the in-store experience. Experiential marketing and creative event planning will be tools for the bookstore of the future. Determining which other products or services might increase profits will also require thinking outside the Big Box.

For example, at Titles ([//titlesondemand.ca](http://titlesondemand.ca)), McMaster University’s independent bookstore, the POD machine purchased in 2008 is also used to generate self-publishing income. The store offers packages and services that include cover design and basic editing. Other independent bookstores with POD machines include in-store promotions and placement in their self-publishing packages, adjusting rates accordingly. The machine—with its 100,000-title database—also gives customers another opportunity to buy locally. A 250-page book prints in five minutes. Mark Lefebvre, book operations manager, says that although the Espresso Book Machine cost US\$174,000, he expects

the cost will be recouped in about two years of operation.

Another innovative approach to book sales was initiated last year by the Follett Higher Information Group. The company partnered with select U.S. campus bookstores to rent textbooks—print or e-book formats available—by the chapter for 60, 90 or 130 days.

Creative revenue streams, enhanced store milieu and vibrant marketing strategies will bring success to the bookstores of the future.

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### **Independent Study: bookstore research**

Marketing, in the future, will not just be about the book, says LeFave, but about promoting the value of the brick-and-mortar bookstore to both consumers and government.

But to accomplish this, she insists, “Research is needed into topics such as: How a trusting bookseller can encourage a customer to read more and better; who uses book websites; how bookstores impact literacy rates; and how literary rates been affected by store closures.” In LeFave’s open letter ([www.cbabook.org/files/News/CanadianReadersatRisk.pdf](http://www.cbabook.org/files/News/CanadianReadersatRisk.pdf)) regarding, “Amazon’s deceptively simple request to

establish a distribution centre within our borders,” she laments how “as more bookstores close, more Canadians will live in book deserts.”

To prosper in the future, independent booksellers will have to offer quick and reliable access to any title, while providing knowledgeable staff and individualized service in a dynamic, social environment. Our experts share a similar vision of the bookstore of the future:

Customers lounge in overstuffed armchairs toying with demo e-book devices, or thumbing through sample copies of print books. Others perch on stools at bistro tables with built-in computer screens or surfaces, sipping lattes and discussing the exciting upcoming in-store events. Staff circulates, chatting with clientele, answering questions and taking book orders after determining in which format the customer cares to purchase the content. If the customer selects an e-book download, then she simply plugs her laptop into the Ethernet port for transfer while paying the cashier. If the order is POD, the staff member will arrange for the printing in-store so that the customer can leave with the book. Issues with ordering, warehousing, overprinting, shelving, space, inventory, shipping and returns are lessened or disappear entirely, while stock expands exponentially. But, creating an extraordinary in-store experience becomes essential. How to use the space to generate revenue, and, most importantly, to keep customers coming back, becomes key. Independents must “Reimagine, Reinvent and Reinvigorate” the bookstore using creativity and passion so that it becomes their community’s—i.e. their local and online global community’s—venue of choice.

Sawyer may have seen the future in POD, but Kevin Graff predicts one more brilliant bit of preadaptive evolution in the brick-and-mortar store itself. “In the future, independent booksellers may not be sellers of print books at all. Any hardcover books in the store may just be fixtures. Booksellers will see themselves as not in the bookselling business, but rather in the service business—selling the experience of their store—and just happening to sell books.”

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