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President's Message

by Mark Lefebvre



"May you live in interesting times."

Unattributed curse (often referred to as the "Chinese Curse")

When I first moved across the book-selling world into the academic side, I heard rumours that working at a campus store would get rather quiet; that there was a time mid-summer where things would settle down, one could take vacation without having to worry much about missing something and a person could actually find the time to get caught up on a backlog of projects and tasks.

I, of course, have yet to experience a summer like that. And I'm pretty sure I'm not alone. Every bookseller I have spoken to in the past several months has been up to their eyeballs with plans, events, meetings, renovations and struggling to stay on top of the multitude of challenges being hurled their way.

I'd argue that this "chaos" is a reflection of good things. If it were actually dead in your store, with nothing to do and no critical tasks in front of you, no pressing issues to deal with, no dozens of people to call, meetings to have, information to gather, what would that mean?

Yes, we live in interesting times. This has been yet another challenging year for booksellers. On top of the unique personal challenges we encounter, there are larger ones pressing in from the industry itself. We face continued pressure from a dollar hovering near par combined with unbalanced dual pricing of books and increased threats from foreign-owned online retailers; the ever-exploding hype surrounding e-books; the dominance and unfair terms of trade offered to the big chains, box stores and non-traditional retail outlets carrying books.

It might seem more hopeless than ever, that the next big digital device or technology is going to be the thing that finally kills the book, that it's time to give up this good fight. But there is hope, there is a future, and there is a chance for independent community booksellers to continue to not only survive but prosper. And I continued to see evidence of that at CBA's National Conference.

Despite having much to do in a short a time, many came away from a weekend spent with other booksellers and the publishing community recharged, refreshed, re-inspired and re-committed to our passion. CBA has renewed our focus on working with our Canadian publishing partners by striking up of a publisher relations committee and a digital strategy task force.

CBA and RCC (yet further evidence of the incredible advocacy advances our alliance has brought us) are working with various organizations towards helping booksellers be involved in the digital landscape.

Optimism amidst Upheaval

One of the dilemmas we booksellers face is figuring out how we can fit into a world where books are delivered digitally. We know the curatorial importance we play when trusting customers return to us because we help them discover new reads and wondrous new authors slightly off the beaten path. But what happens when the customer would prefer to buy the e-book instead? How can we be involved in that transaction? How can we offer that to our customers, particularly given limited budgets and access to technology?

We're not only exploring methods of helping independent booksellers sell e-reader devices, but also partnering with various distribution channels that will allow us to offer the e-book content to our customers with very little financial investment.

Something critical to note when it comes to electronics and digital (from a bookseller who has been selling iPads, iPods and other tech devices in a campus store): The margin on most electronics is usually about five per cent or less. Yes, you never thought you'd find a retail item with a lower margin than books, but it's true. So, no, the margin isn't so sweet, but the real thing to question is whether it's about margin or market share. While margin remains critically important, 40 per cent of nothing is still zero.

And, of further note, the transistor radio did not kill the book, nor did television, nor the internet. New technologies add to the existing culture rather than fully replace it. It's a process of evolution, not extinction. Our future depends on helping each other carefully evolve and extending our offerings while maintaining our identity.

We live in interesting times and we face challenges like never before. The key is how we work together; engage with other booksellers, publishers, authors and our communities; how we can share ideas and successes and guidance and support.

Booksellers transform lives and open minds every day—we improve the communities we work within by offering culture and a physical meeting place of minds where books and authors are celebrated. And we will continue to do this together.

To quote from an author whose books we continue to sell even though his books are in the public domain and available digitally for free, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Dickens certainly covered his bases with that epic opening paragraph by being in both places at the same time. Perhaps it's a lesson for those of us now facing interesting times. **CBA**