



Independent Bookstores in the Digital Age

By Linda Gray (Seattle)

Sarina Sheth is Community Outreach and Events Coordinator at University Book Store in Seattle. I spoke with her about how indies are finding their strengths and seeing their futures in the new paradigm brought on by digital disruption.

LG: The book industry has been through a lot in recent years with the digital disruption. How do you see what's happening?

SS: It wasn't the shuttering of Borders stores across America or the news that Amazon had brokered a deal with the USPS to begin Sunday delivery that stuck with me as the most startling sign of the shift in the book industry. The threat of big box stores has come and gone, and the "Shop Local" movement is on the rise. Amazon's predatory pricing model has already picked off the customers for whom cost is the sole influencing factor in their book buying. Indie booksellers have been confronted with the increasingly digital world and have made great strides in adapting to it. What rocks me are stories that take a fatalistic perspective on the state of our industry, stories that show a pervasive nervous tremor.

LG: Good point! What have indies done, and what are they doing, to adapt?

SS: The challenges are there. The indie bookstore cannot stock as many titles as Amazon can list, cannot offer the quickest options for shipping, cannot guarantee lowest prices. But we can, and must, do one thing: remain a visible and vocal hub in our communities.

Now is the time to refigure the bookstore into an active and experiential place for conversation. Implementing author events programs, hosting book clubs, getting your booksellers out around town with folding tables and books in crates, all these work.

And never underestimate the physicality of the indie bookstore. Its doors, its floors, its walls--these are our advantages. The indie bookstore should be visually stimulating and engaging. Have fun with your displays, consider the design elements of color and texture as you stack books. Make everything tactile.

SS: What about working with different groups in your community?

SS: Absolutely! A mistake being made is the reliance on social networks for the promotion of store messages. The most fruitful engagement efforts come out of old-fashioned community partnerships. Work with passionate individuals and organizations in your community to spread the word about bookstore programs, sales, and author visits. A practical advantage to such partnerships is cross-promotion. Request that your listings be shared with their list servs through e-newsletters and your events and programs may reach a brand new audience! The biggest benefit, however, is that any receptive and active community partner is the core of the industry's changing customer base.

Active partnerships with local museums, nonprofits, and educators can be the most successful routes for promoting the message of bookstore programs. A good community partnership makes a great story for your local newspaper and builds your identity as a helping neighbor.

LG: All great ideas! Thank you, Sarina.