

The Survival Rules of Independent Bookstores: Community, Curation, and Convening

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Abstract: Independent bookstores are the nostalgia of many paper book enthusiasts, meeting the personalized book-buying needs of nearby readers and contributing cultural and economic value to the local community. However, independent bookstores are currently not only facing the impact of online bookstores and large chain bookstores but also facing pressure from ultra-low profits, rising rent, and employee salaries. The survival of independent bookstores has become a complex problem that bookstore owners are pondering: how can independent bookstores survive in competition? What is its future direction? What should be done specifically?

Key words: independent bookstores; community; curation; convening

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For over 20 years (since 1995), the independent bookstore industry in the UK has been facing the dual challenges of online book buying and offline chain physical bookstores; According to the Booksellers Association (BA), the number of independent bookstores dropped to only 867 in 2016 (The Guardian 2022). The independent bookstore industry in the United States has also been almost equally affected; In the short years since Amazon entered the market, the number of independent bookstores has decreased by 43% facing competitive pressure from physical stores Barnes & Noble and Borders (HBS Working Knowledge 2017).

According to Raffaelli's research, independent bookstores face challenges from external factors (such as online book purchases and chain bookstores) and internal factors such as employee salaries, rising rent, and meagre profits from independent bookstores (Raffaelli 2020). Faced with the challenge of survival, many independent bookstores have carefully designed to create unique features to attract more local readers. Bookbag in Exeter, Devon combines vinyl music with books and creates an exclusive playlist entry point on its official website (Bookbag Bookshop 2024); Creative Clunes in Australia, which has the first certified Southern Hemisphere Booktown, offers local cuisine, books, and a comprehensive service system, attracting a large number of

tourists (approximately 12000 in March 2023) to the region and contributing to the interests of the local community (residents can be free with valid proof) (Creative Clunes 2024; Festival Faqs 2024).

The rise of independent bookstores has become a trend, and Raffaelli believes that its key lies in three elements: Community, Curation, and Convening (Raffaelli 2020); His viewpoint confirms the importance of independent bookstores in promoting community communication and economic development and acknowledges their contribution to discovering and disseminating the unique cultural values of the community. Currently, the survival issue of independent bookstores has become a thought-provoking question for their owners: how to survive in competition? What is the future direction of independent bookstores? What should be done specifically?

1. Community: Not Only Meeting Local Economic and Cultural Needs

The development of communities relies on economic and cultural support; The emergence of independent bookstores can meet these two needs simultaneously and integrate them well, and books are a good example.

A bookseller believes that independent bookstores have established relationships with the community and redefined bookstores. It is the interaction between readers,

authors, and booksellers in the community around the bookstore (Raffaelli 2020). Bookbag, the only independent bookstore in Exeter, Devon, organized a city-wide poetry exhibition; This event collaborated with many local poets and clubs (such as Sirisha Damarla, local group Roots Resistance, The Bard of Exeter Ceri Baker Night community) to print out poems with themes of unity and hope from their works, and showcase them in cafes, bakeries, Exeter cinemas, and various community art venues throughout the city (Poems for Hope and the City 2024). Bookbag's project embodies the community value of independent bookstores, integrating the bookstore itself into the community and binding it with authors and readers (including potential readers within the community). All these physical displays are printed with the "Bookbag" logo and website information, and any residents, foreign tourists, or students interested in them can support the community's interests by subscribing online or purchasing from physical bookstores.

As a provider of knowledge products within the community, the owner of an independent bookstore was one of the earliest people to propose regionalism; They infused local values and cultural characteristics into their promotion (Raffaelli 2020). This has made independent bookstores based on local communities the main battlefield for promoting local culture. For example, Bookbag is active in supporting the Southwest region; Weird Walk: The covers of *Wandering and Wondering through the British Ritual Year* are displayed in large format images in prominent positions on the website (Weird Walk 2024); The name of local writer Fiona Williams (Bookbag Bookshop 2024) also appears on the website. October Books explicitly states in its purpose and values that it strives to support local writers and provide them with a place to promote and sell their works. Readers can directly purchase local writers and various books with local characteristics stored in bookstores (Ethos & Code of Conduct 2024).

The list of these independent bookstores not only includes works by local writers but also includes conventional categories of novels, non-fiction, and nature books; However, this still cannot meet the needs of all customers, such as Queer and LGBT books. October Books helps readers subscribe to books they need that do not appear in the bookstore, while readers only need to complete a brief message on the website.

So far, October Books has served its community for

over 40 years (since 1977), providing book services to local residents and bulk bookings of daily necessities such as shampoo, conditioner, and tissue (Order 2024). Due to the harmonious and mutually supportive atmosphere created by the local community for a long time, the local community and its residents have been able to lend a helping hand to independent bookstores when it facing difficulties. In 2018, October Books could not afford the store rent increase. The local community helped raise £ 500000 for the purchase and renovation of the premises and called on approximately 250 people to form a human chain to help them move the books to a new location (150 meters away) (The Guardian 2018). October Books initially held a unique position in the local people's hearts, and this mutual assistance within the community strengthened the relationship between independent bookstores and the local community.

Some independent bookstores rely on their advantages (such as having enough free space) to provide unique services to the community. October Books provides a paid room reservation service on its website, which Community groups, societies, local businesses, and individuals in the community can use. Seven days a week, daytime, and events are available to hire (Community Space October Books 2024). The independent bookstore that can rent space to other organizations or individuals has solved the problem of insufficient public office space in the community, providing a solution for residents who need space. October Books also emphasizes that their rental prices are within a reasonable range that the local community can afford and accept. It is worth mentioning that the facilities in the rooms provided by independent bookstores at such a low price are complete and equipped with sufficient foldable tables and chairs, and the Flipboard chart and Laptop can be used for free. What is more convenient for customers is that they also provide a fully functional kitchen area (Facilities October Books Community Space 2024).

2.Curation: Not Just Exclusive "Book Pickers" for Readers in Community

Independent bookstores' competition should focus on experience and quality rather than inventory and price (Raffaelli 2020). Compared to sizeable offline chain bookstores such as Waterstones in the UK and Barnes & Noble in the US, independent bookstores will have a more significant advantage in personalized recommendations of local products rather than comparing prices and inventory.

The current survival of independent bookstores is more based on the tastes of local readers, and they recommend and sell books that readers may be interested in, rather than just relying on the latest bestsellers (Raffaelli 2020 quoted in Publishers Weekly). Bookbag has set up several areas on its website displayed in large images (New In, New In-Chapter Books, Nature and Outliers, New&Pre Orders, etc.) to guide readers in making choices (Bookbag Bookstore 2024). For independent bookstores, recommending best-selling books is necessary, but not the most important; Customers can obtain a list of the latest best-selling books and make purchases in many places (such as Amazon's rankings, newspapers, magazines, etc.). However, they rarely have the opportunity to receive personalized book recommendations. Independent bookstores have the ability to carefully select and guide customers to purchase specific books by frequently interacting with readers face-to-face and understanding the reading habits of almost every regular customer; This is something that chain bookstores or online booksellers find challenging to achieve. Some independent bookstore employees still stick notes on their bookshelves, with reasons for recommendations written on them (Raffaelli 2020). This design can provide readers with a reasonable reference when choosing books. The independent bookstore hires people who particularly enjoy reading to serve as salespeople, and these salespeople themselves have rich reading experience and are very familiar with various types of books and authors. They will ask customers who often come to independent bookstores about their reading preferences and then help them find one or two of the most suitable books each time. This "manual sales" method is a unique and charming feature of independent bookstores.

The pleasure of selling books lies in delivering the right books to those who appreciate them. A bookseller described the commercial behaviour of bookstores as follows (Raffaelli 2020). The passion required for successful curation is not only determined by price and content but also by the established strong relationship between the bookseller and the reader. As a large platform that offers online book sales, Amazon can provide customers with almost all categories of books (Amazon. Co. UK's Book Store 2024). However, it is unable to establish a close emotional connection with customers and provide value beyond books, such as emotional value. However, it is usually the employees of independent

bookstores who recommend books to readers, and they can often become friends for these readers to chat with.

After multiple personalized recommendations of books that satisfy readers, independent bookstores gradually build trust in these frequent customers; Independent bookstores have started using a more comprehensive range and more significant quantity of "manual sales" to surprise readers. Bookbag has launched a "Subscription Bookbox" service on its website (Bookbag Bookbox 2024). This service is subdivided into several categories, and readers can choose from Fiction, Non-Fiction, Fiction/Non-Fiction mix, Young Adult, Poetry, and Book Advance Calendar. The Book Advent Calendar is a selection of 12 books from local or global sources by Bookbag, whose titles are unknown, niche books or classics favoured by independent bookstore managers or employees before readers receive them. Readers are willing to spend considerable money to subscribe to the Bookbox service of independent bookstores in advance and believe in the book selection taste of independent bookstores. This behaviour usually requires independent bookstores to establish a strong relationship with readers.

In addition to recommending books, some independent bookstores also place various foods (such as vegetarians) or daily necessities that align with their values next to their bookshelves. In addition to inventory of books and accepting foreign orders from customers, Southampton's October Books also stock a variety of organic and fair trade foods, as well as green toys and household items, and the suppliers they collaborate with are in line with their values (About Us October Books 2024). The careful planning of these "side businesses" by independent bookstores can help them mitigate the risks of rising rent or low foot traffic to a certain extent and bring convenience to nearby communities. However, Raffaelli also mentioned in his research the potential adverse effects of such behaviour, which customers can define as another form of gift shop, and bookstores lose their pure (Raffaelli 2020).

3.Convening: Independent Bookstores Become Places Where Local Like-Minded People Gather to Exchange Ideas

According to a study published by Raffaelli in 2020, independent bookstores hold 500 regular or irregular events each year, including author lectures, book launches, book reading, various handicrafts, and on-site cooking or coffee brewing (Raffaelli 2020). Some of these activities are free, some require a small amount of money, and some

require readers to purchase specific books. These activities have made independent bookstores a gathering place for community book enthusiasts and a social space for interacting with family and meeting new friends.

Independent bookstores will also maintain the function of the area as a community gathering place by continuously organizing various activities of their own or in collaboration with other organizations. October Books has published the content of the "Regular Events Calendar" on its website, which includes coffee, reading groups, games, and community Choirs (Regular Events 2024). These activities are repeated every week, so people who are interested in the activities gather at independent bookstores almost every day. In addition to these fixed activities, some extra events such as new book launches, handicraft workshops, and salons will also be held in these independent bookstores that serve as community gathering places. Bookbag launched the "Blind Embossing & Rubber Stamps with the Botanical Print Summer School" event for ten and above participants in August 2023 (Richards 2023). According to the October Books website, they plan to organize a handicraft workshop on weaving baskets using recycled materials in March 2024 in collaboration with an artist, Barbara, who has received professional weaving training. Visitors just need to bring an old newspaper from home (We Can Learn to 2024). This short and exciting course brings together people interested in handicrafts and makes these places a gathering place for parents in the community to accompany their children's growth. More importantly, it can attract potential readers from these participating groups to buy books.

Independent bookstores usually ask ticket prices for events, which may be used to help community groups. Bookbag released an open mic event called "Bookbag By Night Open Mic Poetry" in September 2023, where participants can share their poems or just listen. Bookbag will donate £ 3 in ticket fees to a fund established for the poet Gboyega Odubanjo (Richards 2023). This activity successfully brought together people nearby who were interested in poetry writing and willing to share or listen in a relaxed atmosphere without financial burden. The "friendly open mic" emphasized by independent bookstores allows every like-minded person equal opportunities to express their ideas. October Books also holds a similar "Open Mic Night" event on the evening of the third Friday of each month, welcoming authors of any type (Poet et al., or Novelist) on the street where their bookstore is

located to share their works, and the ticket fees will be used by October Books to organize more unique events for the community (October et al. 2024). In addition to paid events, October Books has also made promises for free in some events. For example, the "Toes in the Water - Book Launch and Signing" was held to assist Rachel Jones (Toes in the Water - Book Launch and Signing 2024).

As an essential part of the independent bookstore's "Convening" function, the signing launch for new books often brings together professionals from various fields. The arrival of these well-known figures can attract more readers to continue paying attention to the launch itself and the independent bookstore. Bookbag held a launch on February 14, 2023, for the new book *Chase of the Wild Goose*, published by Lurid Editions. Artists Sarah Joy Ford, Daniel Fountain, and Jana Funke all present for a conversation (Richards 2023). This event not only received much attention on the websites of Instagram, publishers, and independent bookstores but also attracted a large number of readers who were interested in the Queer to come to the launch.

Raffaelli mentioned in his research that independent bookstores could showcase their identity as important partners in the local community by organizing events in collaboration with schools (Richards 2023). October Books has organized activities with Southampton University and Solent University more than once, including pop-up Book Stalls, Reading Buddies, or exhibition launches (Independent Southampton Bookstore 2024). These activities have allowed books to leave bookstores and appear on campus, bringing convenience to students studying in the community.

4. Love: The Key to The Survival and Sustainable Development of Independent Bookstores

Independent bookstores are the dreamland of many physical book enthusiasts, and the owner of an independent bookstore is likely to be a seasoned reader who loves books. The independent bookstore provides convenience for nearby readers to purchase personalized books, contributing cultural and economic value to the local community. The community needs the existence and development of independent bookstores. However, the reality is that due to various factors such as location, scale, and management mode, the average profit margin of independent bookstores is only about 2% to 5% (FinModelsLab 2023). This low-profit margin limits independent bookstore operators' ability to cope with

rising rent, utilities, and employee wages (Raffaelli 2020). Faced with such problems, if independent bookstores can leverage their unique value in the community, encourage more customers to purchase high-quality local products selected, and continuously organize activities that align with the interests of other organizations in the local community, such as club choirs, coffee shops, and art studios, the pressure on survival may be reduced.

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