

If you're an independent bookstore, choose your poison: Covid or Amazon?

By David R. Altman

"Both Covid and Amazon are existential threats to small businesses in general and bookstores in particular," said Tom Vail, owner of Corner Bookstore in Winder.

He's not alone.

Karen Schwetman, owner of FoxTale Book Shoppe in Woodstock says "Covid completely changed my business model and we had to shut down for three months," she told Mainstreet News.

As you might expect, Covid has had a death-grip on many small businesses like Corner Bookstore and FoxTale Book Shoppe.

Vail says they had to fight through some staff hospitalizations earlier this year—although "it's gotten better" over the past few months. At FoxTale in Woodstock, they were affected in a different way.

"Publishers have not been sending out authors for book tours like they did before the pandemic," said FoxTale's Schwetman. For FoxTale, those author appearances and book signing were a major revenue stream.

"We still have strong online sales and we are seeing more people buy in store than we had last year," she added.

But there's another pandemic-type influence on local bookstores—but it's been around longer with an even greater impact on the health of small businesses.

"Amazon continues to be a thorn in the future of Indie Bookstores," FoxTale's Schwetman continued.

"Our culture does not place a value on reading or holding a book in your hands, and as long as people lean more and more toward Amazon, we simply cannot compete."

While publishing has taken a hit in the past two years—Amazon just keeps on rolling—and, sadly, taking many independent bookstores along with it.

And, it's just not Amazon.

"Last week Barnes and Noble sold Diana Gabaldon's new release...at a price that was 50% less than what the cost is," said FoxTale's Schwetman.

According to its web site, Amazon's revenues were nearly \$400 billion last year (yes, billion) although only about 10% of their revenue comes from books (imagine that, only a paltry \$40 billion). That's still more than four times the revenue of the nation's independent booksellers—and there are 1,700 of them compared to just one Amazon.

Amazon has already taken down a number of major chains, like Borders and Book World, and they continue to sell more than half of all books sold

in the U.S.

Small businesses often suffer in a 'free market' economy (look what Home Depot & Lowes did for Mom and Pop hardware stores or look at Walmart, which, according to the Washington Post, now sells more than half of all groceries in the United States).

Why is that? Because it creates an easy, low-cost choice for consumers. Want to buy a book and don't want to drive? Click on amazon.com and you can get it done in less than 2 minutes.

But when we do that, we are (inadvertently) contributing to the demise of one of the last great literary intuitions (not to mention great shopping experiences) in America: the independent bookstore.

FoxTale's Schwetman says "...readers expect the fastest, cheapest, easiest and often electronic books they can get."

Some organizations have surfaced that claim to help out the local bookstores, including Indiebound.org and bookstores.org. But they can do very little in terms of increasing the bottom line of Indie bookstores, with one executive saying "...attacking Amazon is like shooting at the Death Star."

So, what's ahead for these neighborhood gems whose very existence depends upon their local (and very loyal) customers?

Corner Bookstore's Vail said he was "optimistic about the prospects in Winder—new restaurants have drawn new people to the downtown area and they stop to check out our store."

And, in Woodstock, FoxTale's Schwetman says she has "mixed feelings" about the New Year. "We could see positive signs that Covid is under control and go back to more of a business with events and the store full of people talking about books again...but I'm also realistic, as who knows how many strains will continue to be problematic."

These are difficult times. But all it takes is a little modification in how we think.

At least once every four or five times—don't take the 'easy' Amazon way out when you're looking for a book. Check out your local bookstore either on-line or in person and do what neighbors do: buy local.

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