

Q&A: How Bookshop.org reimagines book ecommerce

Article

Andy Hunter

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Insider Intelligence spoke with Andy Hunter, founder of Bookshop.org, an ecommerce platform that helps local bookshops sell books. Since its launch, Bookshop.org has brought almost \$18 million in sales to local independent bookstores across the US and almost £2 million in sales for UK bookstores.

Hunter has launched book-related websites like Literary Hub, amassing 25 million readers per year, and Electric Literature. In addition, Hunter has helped publish books with various

presses, such as Catapult, Counterpoint, and Soft Skull.

Insider Intelligence: Why did you start an ecommerce platform to support local bookstores?

Hunter: I've been watching Amazon grow in its market share and dominance, breaking the 50% mark of all books being sold on Amazon about two years ago. It was distorting the culture around books and having a negative impact on publishing, authors, and the stories being elevated and embraced.

It was getting harder for bookstores to survive, so I wanted to find a way to make it easy for brick-and-mortar bookstores to compete with Amazon for the online sales that are becoming more important for the survival of any business, small or large. Ultimately, I wanted to do it because I care so much about books—to have a healthy culture around books, we need bookstores to keep going.

II: How do you compete with Amazon?

Hunter: I had the idea of recruiting around 1,200 bookstores with audiences, and then also bringing on affiliates like BuzzFeed or Oprah.com. We have Instagram influencers writing about books, podcast hosts, literary organizations like PEN America—all as affiliates. They bring their audiences to the platform, and now we have over 28,000 affiliates who create content through the medium of book recommendation lists.

It was created as a social media site by having users give book recommendations, so the website functions as social commerce. When you're on the Bookshop homepage, you can see what a book club in Hawaii is reading, what Black-owned bookstores recommend around Juneteenth, or you can check out a list of books from a cool bookstore in Alaska. It becomes a buzzing hive of activity from real human booksellers and book fans.

II: How did you support booksellers during the pandemic?

Hunter: When the pandemic hit, a lot of people were laid off, the booksellers formed groups, and we let them join the platform. There was a famous one called “The Bookstore at the End of the World,” which was just a group of around 40 laid-off booksellers who were making book recommendation lists. We gave them 30% of the cover price of every book that sold from those lists, which gained a lot of traction online.

That has kind of tapered off because most stores have reopened and bookstore sales are back and incredibly strong—the numbers for July were better than any month since 2012. Bookstores as a whole have been really rebounding this year. Hopefully some of it is because

we've been beating this drum to support independent bookstores, and it's caused us to see a change in consumer behavior that will continue long after the pandemic is over.

II: How have you handled the issue of book shortages around the incoming holiday season?

Hunter: Some books just got pushed, especially those that were printed in China because they are not going to be ready for the holidays. If we had preorders, we would have to tell all our customers. We don't like having to do it, but we try to stay on top of it and communicate to our customers as soon as possible what's going on.

In addition, it's also about having enough inventory for us to manage our customers. We spent weeks trying to do a holiday forecast, asking publishers and booksellers what books they thought were going to be popular for the holidays. We created a massive list of 225 books, and we preordered them in huge quantities in September so that we wouldn't have to worry about being completely out of stock in the holiday season.

II: What would you like the future of book ecommerce sales to look like?

Hunter: I want to aggressively prevent Amazon from taking more of the ecommerce market share away from stores. If you extrapolate the current rate of growth, by 2025, Amazon is going to sell almost 80% of the books in the US. If Amazon's selling 80% of books in the US, how many bookstores could there still be? We're trying to slow that rate of growth by teaching customers that they can buy a book online and support their local bookstore easily.

We're also trying to teach local bookstores ways to become better at ecommerce. We want them to all get good at creating online communities that mirror their real world communities. We're trying to push the whole industry forward.