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In November last year the results of the project ‘Shopping 2020’ were published. This was a large-scale investigation on the shopping habits of the Dutch consumer and how these will change by 2020. The research was based on a fifteen-minute questionnaire which was filled in by almost 12,000 consumers. Many corporations and institutions, such as Google, Rabobank, IBM, PostNL and ANVR participated. The results were surprising. During the last few years we have only heard alarming news about the disappearance of the physical bookshop. This study, however, presents a more nuanced image. Yes, consumers will order more and more products from the internet, but the pricing is not as important as we previously thought. Reviews by other users and delivery times also play a big role on deciding where to buy products. The most striking result in my opinion was that 9% of the people who buy online, experience stress because of the abundance of choices. 20% of this group stated that this leads them to purchase fewer products than they initially intended. There is thus still hope for the physical stores.

There were also some results which only concerned online book buying. 20% of the respondents said that they did not ever go to the store to buy a book anymore, but purchased it online. While 97% of the respondents who buy books online were very satisfied or satisfied with their book purchase. This sounds ominous for the physical book trade, and it gets worse. Whereas most websites of other products are only promoted by 20% of the consumers, the online bookstores are recommended by 35% of the purchasers. Only 12% of the book buyers surveyed actively dissuaded other consumers for using a website. 12% sounds like a lot, however, it is a small percentage compared to the online stores of other products (21% for shoes, 25% for telecom and 41% for sports gear).
The results of this research was good news for most retail branches, because consumers get stressed by the enormous number of products available on the internet and are more critical about their purchases. However, it is different for books, people are in general very satisfied with the books they bought online. So why bother to go to a physical bookstore? And in the long run: will there actually be an end to bookselling through physical outlets or can these institutions survive? I looked at several articles between 2010 and 2013 in the magazine Boekblad to see how Dutch bookstore owners experience this situation. What do they do to increase or maintain their sales level?

There is a development in the thinking of Dutch booksellers from 2010 until 2013. In 2008 the economic crisis started. At first, booksellers did not notice the effects, but in 2010 there were already a few stores that had to close their doors. In interviews with the owners of these stores, external factors were mentioned as a cause for their bankruptcy. Not only did the economic crisis have a great impact, but also the local government and the location of the store were influential factors. The streets where many bookstores were located were not maintained well by the council and promises were not kept. Internet sales were only briefly mentioned or glossed over in these stories, but that would soon change.

The first issue of Boekblad 2011 had the following heading: ‘Bookstores and publishers have to tempt customers in order to achieve stable sales’. In this article, Journalist Robertine Romeny discusses future possibilities for the physical bookstore. They should tempt the customers into buying a product, because often they do not come into the store with the intention to buy a particular book. According to Romeny, most people who have a specific book in mind will buy it online. In order to create a tempting environment the owners should broaden their stock by adding non-book products to their shelves. Only bookstores that sell gifts, wine, or CDs will survive the current crisis.

Two years later, Boekblad provided examples of these new strategies. One bookstore sells board games, an...
other DVD’s and yet another reading glasses. There is even a company on the market which specialises in this new approach: 62Damrak Plus. The company can be hired by a bookstore to investigate the customer needs and what can be added to the shop in order to improve sales. One of the founders, Amin Usman, describes the five needs for a successful bookstore, namely: the physical shop, an online store, e-books, a suitable stock and catering. According to several interviews in the second issue of Boekblad 2013, expanding the store’s stock beyond books has both its pros and cons. The bookshops say that their clientele grew, but that the sales volume of the added product is not that significant. Also the employees have to acquire a lot of additional knowledge about these new products.

Usman recommends an online bookstore over physical bookshops. But what does an online bookstore add if you cannot offer the diverse and vast range of large companies such as Bol, Amazon and Bookdepository? In the second issue of Boekblad 2012 four entrepreneurs discuss this. They suggest that an independent bookstore with an online shop should try to fulfil a regional role. In other words, the customers that visit the physical store should also be the customers of the online shop. Of course an independent store cannot always deliver books for free. If this is a problem for the customer, they can suggest them to collect their books from the physical store and that of course is free of charge. This is not as appealing as a book being delivered to your front door, so the question if it will actually make any difference, remains unanswered.

Another solution for the decrease in sales is to economise on costs. Independent bookstore owners cannot easily increase their profit margins, because of the fixed book price policy. Still, there can be savings on lots of other things. In difficult times the bookseller has to be conscious of his purchasing costs and stock size. If there is only enough room for five books he should not buy ten. Also, staff and housing are costs that can be downsized. However, this solution has its limits. There is a limit to the amount of cost cutting that can be done, otherwise the quality of the service suffers.

Not every bookstore owner is inventive. Most booksellers therefore use the easy measures that are discussed above. In my opinion these are not solutions, but workarounds. In the past it was enough to have a store with books, the customers would come by themselves. Now booksellers have to advertise, pay close attention to costs and profit margins and they must have innovative ideas in order to attract new customers. These are difficult tasks for many booksellers who may lack expertise and knowledge in these fields.
The best advice I found in Boekblad is to create and maintain good relations with your regular customers. This will take a lot of effort and may not immediately produce results, but in the long run the customers will keep returning to the store because of the service and attention they receive. Some highly successful book traders gave examples of new approaches they were adopting. Martha Baalbergen (Boekhandel Van der Meer, Noordwijk) helps her customers with installing e-books on their e-reader or computer;9 Ad Peek (Boekhandel Van der Velde, Leeuwarden) arranges four to five dinners a year in his bookstore;10 Daan van der Valk (H. de Vries Boeken, Haarlem) posts new tweets and Facebook messages every morning, to inform customers about the arrival of new books and upcoming activities. Valk also organises contests in collaboration with local entrepreneurs.11 This is the one advantage that physical bookstores have over online stores: a personal touch. A bookstore owner has to exploit this characteristic. So, every time a regular customer of the store buys a book in an online store, he should immediately get the feeling that he is lacking something. Only then the customers will return to their local bookstore.

The question that remains unanswered is: Should all bookstores survive? We have to consider that the Netherlands is one of the countries with the largest density of bookstores. Is it really a problem if some of them disappear? Is this not just natural selection? Only those entrepreneurs who can adapt their business to the new situation will survive. They show how a true bookseller should act. It is not just about the love of books, it is also about innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit. ■

Notes
1. The numbers came from a presentation by ‘Shopping 2020’ and can be downloaded from here: https://www.shopping2020.nl/view.php?action=view&Pagina_Id=57
2. ‘Boekblad’ the leading Dutch magazine for the book trade.