



STRENGTHS OF Independent BOOKSTORES

by Kevin Engel

While chain Christian bookstores, or those related to publishing houses, have some advantages over independent bookstores, the latter's independence means they can be strongly market-directed. Because independents cannot rely on income from other sources, they need strong sales to survive and grow. There are five areas where independent stores can have advantages.

Location

Location is a major factor for an independent's customer. A prominent city location near good transport, or a suburban location easily accessible to potential customers, will be a strong selling point. An independent's advertisements should emphasize the store is located where customers can find it.

Independents should also offer first class displays, with special focus points in the store to attract attention. Add a sense of excitement for people passing the store. Make them pause and look. Give your displays local color. Change your displays regularly and keep your store clean and brightly lit.

Inventory

Independent bookstores can decide which publishers' titles to carry. They can offer a wide range of books. Company bookstores, in contrast, will naturally carry approved core titles. In addition, much of their inventory might be tied up with one publisher.

Independents should pay special attention to maintaining computerized records, recording transactions at the point of sale to keep up-to-the minute details on every item in the store. This will allow them to tailor their buying to meet the needs of the local market.

Service

Only the manager's imagination limits what can be done at an independent bookstore. Take advantage of this flexibility. Offer extra special services that the other bookstores do not provide. Wrap gifts, deliver large parcels, perform special searches for hard-to-get or out-of-print books, offer a loyalty program, emphasize excellent in-store service, offer personal attention, and communicate frequently with regular customers. Train all staff, including management, to know all the items in the bookstore.

Develop a "one-stop" shop for all the customers' Christian resource needs. Depending on available space, provide a Children's Corner, a Coffee Corner or other customer helps such as listening posts, video viewing, customer computers. What can your store offer that others cannot? How can your store better meet local needs?

An independent's owner or manager has day-by-day experience directly with the store's customers, which is not possible with some large organizations. Build good relationships with them. Get to know them. Give customers the idea that, because you are locally owned and operated, your store can serve them better than the others can.

Flexibility

An independent store does not have to wait. It can quickly respond to changing local conditions. Management decisions can be quickly made within hours or even minutes. Consider how best to take advantage of this fact. Marketing processes in company bookstores can be delayed as decisions on budgets, strategies, advertising, special promotions, discount programs, range of stock and many other matters must be cleared through committees or superior officers.

Perseverance

A Christian bookstore can be a success both in ministry and profit only if its staff rely on prayer, the right strategies, imagination, and skill at every level. But, regardless of whether a store is company-owned or independent, it is still true that the best marketing strategies in the world will not work without the right products to sell and dedicated staff who give excellent service. Focus on your advantages and minimize your weaknesses. Make your store a success. ❖

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