



Reinventing the Bookstore

Booksellers, publishers, authors, and members of the Kepler's community from across the country gathered late last week in Palo Alto to participate in a Future Search project on Reinventing the Community Bookstore in general and Kepler's Books in particular. Standing in front of a timeline on Kepler's history, from L to R are: Kristin Evans, co-owner of Booksmith in San Francisco and director of operations at Kepler's; Future Search leaders Sandra Janoff and Michael Pannwitz; Amanda Hall, manager of Kepler's; and Praveen Madan, co-owner of Booksmith, who is leading the transition team at Kepler's.

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Reinventing the Community Bookstore

A three-day workshop explores new paths for Kepler's and other indies

By Judith Rosen

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Is there a future for independent bookstores in general and Kepler's Books in particular? That was the question posed by Future Search leaders Sandra Janoff and Michael Pannwitz to nearly 80 booksellers, publishers, distributors, authors, and community supporters who gathered at the Oshman Family Jewish Community Center in Palo Alto, Calif., for a three-day workshop late last month. The short answer is: yes.

Kepler's new owners, literary entrepreneur Praveen Madan and Christin Evans, who also own Booksmith in San Francisco, chose Future Search to look at the store's, and by extension indies', needs—a process better known

for addressing problems in war-torn areas like finding a future for children in the Sudan—in part because of Madan’s experience with such a process for Berrett-Koehler Publishers. The community-oriented program has also been used by companies like IKEA and Whole Foods. “There’s something unique and powerful about Kepler’s,” Madan said, referring to the store’s rescue, twice, by community supporters who donated much needed funds in 2005 and again at the end of 2011. “I have no idea what I’m doing. We need all the help we can get,” he said. “We know part of the business or all of the business should become nonprofit. Should we be a showroom, or events-driven, or a 21st-century learning center?”

Over the course of the workshop, stakeholders met separately and in mixed groups to figure out which, if any, of Madan’s ideas to implement. They began by juxtaposing personal, global, and bookselling time lines on that of Kepler’s—from its founding in 1955 in the midst of the paperback revolution through 1990 when Clark Kepler was named PW Bookseller of the Year to the present. There were sessions about overarching trends and about imagining future scenarios.

While most laughed when Washington Post fiction editor Ron Charles pulled out a plastic dinosaur to represent bookselling past, some comments about the bookstore of the future looking much like that of today—but with integrated technology—brought Kepler’s staffers near to tears. “There’s such an incredible desire for a silver bullet, or panacea, and we don’t even know where [bookselling] is today,” said Lissa Muscatine, co-owner of Politics & Prose in Washington, D.C.

The new store will have a smaller footprint and more books when it reopens; it will go from 10,000 to 6,500 sq. ft. That indies could gain back market share is also within reach. “All the trends we keep hearing about are true. But we are still selling the same one billion units. It’s all about who is going to own the customers,” said Workman publisher Bob Miller. “We need to take the fact that independent booksellers have a knowledge of their community and take advantage of that edge. I’m not sure how booksellers and publishers will survive without it.”

Antonia Squire, children’s buyer at Kepler’s and a board member of the Northern California Independent Booksellers Association, advocated that Kepler’s use minimum advertised pricing, which is used in the toy business and by Apple. Perhaps the most unusual proposal came from the e-books committee. “We are going to ask Kepler’s to be really brave in this space. We encourage you to start selling Nook and Kobo and explore relationships with Barnes & Noble and Amazon,” said committee spokesperson Kevin Murray, director of trade sales for Sourcebooks.

In the end, what each participant agreed on for the new Kepler’s may seem obvious:

- Financially sustainable with new revenue streams
- Clearly defined identity/brand
- Dedicated community outreach
- Serve as a gathering place
- Support lifelong learning/literary education
- Sell books in all formats
- Embrace technology: maintain a virtual presence with technology integrated into the store
- Provide thematic selections

A proposed mission statement encompassed them all: "Kepler's nourishes personal discovery, promotes diverse ideas, stimulates the culture of the mind, and builds community."

But like the devil, what will set Kepler's apart is in the details. For Berrett-Koehler president Steven Piersanti, it's all about creating community relationships. "I don't see how bookstores can compete with online booksellers regarding price or selection or digital support structure," he said. "Instead, they need to compete through engaging their communities, doing outreach in new and more extensive ways to their communities, becoming even more of community hubs, and developing new revenue streams from these activities."

At the end, Madan said, "This room gives me hope." Later he e-mailed, "The overriding goal of Future Search was to expand the circle of committed and engaged stakeholders who are going to work with Kepler's and other community bookstores to build a better and sustainable business model. And we succeeded."

If further proof were needed about how much the idea of community bookstores touched the participants—beyond a willingness to help the store raise the additional \$250,000 it needs to reach its million-dollar goal—it was workshop leader Janoff's declaration, "I'm a Keplerian now."