

Bookstore pops up in South Lake Tahoe as a bit of a test

By Kathryn Reed

From environmental planner to book publisher to book distributor to bookstore owner. That has been the career path of South Lake Tahoe's Michael Scialfa.

How long he will have the title of bookstore owner remains to be seen. For now, Lake Tahoe Books and Art is what's called a pop-up bookstore. It opened Thanksgiving weekend down the stairs from Sports Ltd. in the Village Center. The lease expires at the end of December, with an option to keep going through February.



South Lake Tahoe has a bookstore again -- for now. Photo/LTN

The last store devoted to selling new books in South Tahoe – Neighbors Bookstore – went out of business in January 2008. That was before the economy totally tanked and ebooks became mainstream.

Three main things led Scialfa to open the store: believing it would be a worthy community endeavor, a desire to make money, and a way to get feedback on book buying trends that would be

useful in his wholesale business.

It was two weeks from the day he pulled the trigger to launch Lake Tahoe Books and Art to the day the open sign was put in the window.

Prior to that mid-November decision, a survey had been sent to a slew of people with about 100 people responding. It gauged reading interests, booking buying patterns and shopping interests as related to books.

“One result of the survey strongly indicated there may be local support for a bookstore,” Scialfa said. “The real shock and disappointment was they would not patronize a store two to three miles from their home.”

Considering it is five miles from the Y to Stateline and four miles from Zephyr Cove to Stateline, time will quickly reveal if people will drive for a new book.

Prior to ever sending the survey were numerous conversations between Scialfa, his friends, colleagues and others about whether the South Shore could sustain a bookstore.

Despite the doubt that persists if the right demographic exists to keep a bookstore open, Scialfa is willing to take the gamble for the short term.

What the survey revealed is there are voracious readers in the area. A couple people said their households buy more than 100 books a year. Most buy the real tangible item, as opposed to the digital variety. And several buy both.

Ninety percent of the respondents are year-round Tahoe residents, with the median age being 52, and women outnumbering men 2 to 1.

Background in books

Scialfa has been along for the ride though the ever-changing

book business since the mid-1990s. He started as an environmental consultant with a focus on recreation and interpretive planning. Projects included early signage on the Tahoe Rim Trail, work on the Shasta-Trinity Forest, and interpretive planning near Mount Rose.

He was putting together brochures and other promotional material. These were the days before desktop publishing.

What was missing was a book about day hikes in Lake Tahoe. Scialfa and Lyn Barnett partnered to create "Trail Guide to the Lake Tahoe Basin and Vicinity". More than 3,000 copies sold the first year.

People told them they should do more guides – on fishing, biking and other topics. But Scialfa knew they existed already and told storeowners how to get them. But they ignored his advice.

That's what led Scialfa to go from micro-publisher to distributor. He knew he could figure out a way to get those books into stores. And so, Crystal Range Associates – Outdoor Books and Maps was born. To this day it is his main job.

In the late 1990s he was dealing with a handful of publishing lines. Today he works with more than 300 publishers who represent about 10,000 titles. Most of his accounts are in Northern California, though he goes east to the Rockies.

"We bring to people content knowledge about books and what is appropriate for a geographical location and customer base," Scialfa said.

One change through the years is growing niche markets and where people are buying books.

People traveling like to read about the area (fiction or non-fiction) or they want something by a local author. They are picking up books in visitor centers and gift shops.

Scialfa isn't worried Kindles and other ereaders will wipe out the printed book. His fear is much deeper.

"I think the Internet and Twitter and Facebook are a greater risk than Kindle because people don't know how to read," Scialfa. He fears people are all becoming e.e. cummings – without the prose, without the ability to wordsmith.

Lake Tahoe Books and Art

Selections include fiction, non-fiction, contemporary bestsellers, literary classics, outdoor and nature guides, travel guides, maps, history, food and cooking, gardening and landscaping, humor, gift books, young adult, children's titles, posters and note cards, plus selected titles in Spanish, and a miscellaneous assortment of other genres.

To ensure the store has the title you want before the end of the month, call (530.542.3245) or email (LakeTahoeBooksandArt@yahoo.com) before Dec. 3.

The store will be increasing its hours after Dec. 10. For now they are Sunday-Monday 11am-6pm, closed Tuesday-Wednesday, Thursday noon-6pm, and Friday-Saturday 11am-7pm.

Special events are planned. All of those details will be posted on the store's Facebook page.