

Some bookstores contemplate charging to browse

By Ron Charles, Washington Post

Chapter 1: You stumble upon an interesting book at your neighborhood bookstore.

Chapter 2: You go home and order it from Amazon for half as much.

Chapter 9: Your favorite bookstore is bankrupt.

Booksellers call it “showrooming,” and it drives them crazy – and out of business. Barnes & Noble believes that 40 percent of its customers use the store as a place to discover and examine titles, but then buy the books online.



This bookstore in McCloud in Northern California is fine with browsers. Photo/LTN

How might “real” bookstores fight back against their Amazonian nemesis?

During an interview on BBC this weekend, UK HarperCollins CEO Victoria Barnsley referred to certain shoe shops that charge customers to try on merchandise. Perhaps, she suggested, bookstores could do that, too. The idea of asking customers to

pay for the privilege of browsing physical books before purchasing them is “not that insane,” she said. Bookstores could become, in essence, “book clubs.”

Would you pay to page through novels in a book showroom?

People I spoke with in the industry saw no hope in that direction.

“If it comes to charging admission for customers to browse, we’re done,” said Mark Laframboise, the manager of Politics & Prose in Washington. Rather than expect customers to pay more, he placed the onus on publishers. “What we need is some recognition from publishers that people are learning about books at brick-and-mortar bookstores and buying them through a multitude of channels and platforms. Publishers, in recognition of this, should offer increased co-op and increased discounts to stores.”

Tim Huggins, a former bookstore owner in the Boston area who now works as an industry consultant, said that Barnsley’s idea made him “laugh and then cringe.” He imagined a carnival carney standing in front of the store shouting: “See the bearded lady turning pages! See the world’s tallest man with two-covered tomes!”

Eileen McGervey, the owner of One More Page Books in Arlington, had a similarly skeptical reaction. But she notes that her business is changing fast since she opened in 2011. “While I don’t see the ‘cover charge’ happening anytime soon (if ever) . . . sometimes there are events where people pay to see an author or participate in an event. But one of the things I love about today’s model is that anyone interested in learning about a book or being surrounded by books, can do it.”

Politics & Prose co-owner Lissa Muscatine said showrooming is a major problem for the industry, but not so much for her store. “As long as customers appreciate the services that

indies provide – a gathering spot that offers human interaction, expert booksellers who can make thoughtful and customized recommendations, other kinds of programming, and the browsing and discovery experience that readers enjoy – we won't have to contemplate something as draconian as charging people to browse the aisles. I certainly hope it never comes to that.”

Perhaps the closest example of the “book club” model is in the San Francisco Area, where the famous Kepler's bookstore recently resurrected itself by collecting more than \$700,000 in donations from area customers. The store is also exploring the possibility of selling charitable shares of its business. But that's a particularly beloved store, set among a particularly wealthy clientele, and it remains open to anyone, whether they want to buy or just showroom.

Knopf Publicity Director Paul Bogaards scoffed at the idea of charging customers to look at physical books. “We already have a pay-to-browse model,” he said by e-mail. “They are called ‘libraries,’ and they are supported by our tax dollars.”