

"Publishing is suffering from no shortage of good books. What's missing is the retail experience."

# Buying Books Isn't Necessary

Bookselling should be about catering to wants, not needs

BY SETH GODIN

Supermarkets are ostensibly about selling something consumers need—food. But there's a limit to how much (and what kind of) food any of us really need, so supermarkets make big profits selling us what we want—expensive, unnecessary stuff that gives us joy.

That's something booksellers have forgotten how to do. In the rush to get bigger and cheaper, a lot of independents are focusing exclusively on need, ignoring the power of want. Occasionally a book gets handsold, but generally speaking, bookstores have become self-serve establishments. "Here's 10,000 or 50,000 or 100,000 books, well organized. Please find what you need and we'll see you at the checkout."

There are lots of good reasons for this system. It makes it easy to launch a new book, easy to run a store without a lot of staff and easy to serve the customer who knows what he's looking for. The problem is that bookstores are too good at meeting needs. Books have been turned

into boring commodities, which has led to low prices, the growth of Amazon and an ever-diminishing audience for books.

Bookstores and publishers have become obsessed with the facts of what they offer. This title, that subject, this price. We assume that our customers are smart, and give them the freedom to decide what to buy. And it's not working as well as it should.

The good news is people can be persuaded to buy and read (or buy and give) more books. A lot more books. We've all had the experience of going into a great bookstore to buy one book and coming out with five or six. And that, precisely that, is the future of bookselling. If someone comes into a store looking for a book that isn't there and leaves empty-handed, the bookseller has failed. If a customer comes in looking for a particular book and leaves with only that one book, the bookseller has failed.

Readers have access to all the books they will ever need. They can get non-fiction information online, instantly,

for free. They can find fiction at the library or at

a friend's house or

they can,

once a year,

buy that

year's *The Da*

*Vinci Code*. Selling

books that people

need is the short road

to failure. Needs are satisfied quickly, for the lowest possible cost, and then

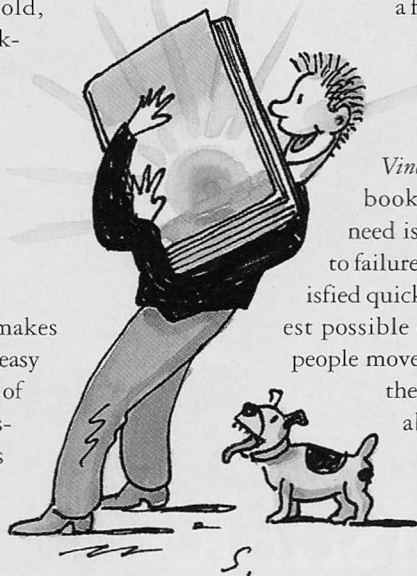
people move on. Wants, on

the other hand, are

about dreams

and desires and

stories.



So, what do people want? They want buying books to be fun. They want to feel smart. They want to be respected. They want their friends to admire them. And they're willing to pay money to achieve these goals. What does a store about wants look like? Well, jewelry stores are about want—the blue Tiffany box stands for a universe of want. The Container Store is about wants as well.

Publishing is suffering from no shortage of good books. The words are fine. The copyediting is excellent. The pricing is more than fair. What's missing isn't the merchandise. What's missing is the experience.

If I ran a retail store, I'd get rid of a third of the books and rearrange the rest into a circle of discovery. I'd find clerks who were excited to be there and reward them for telling stories about the work that's there to be discovered. I'd hire a dozen summer interns at a time and let them get good at telling stories. I'd create gift baskets for newlyweds, expectant moms and job seekers. I'd package and primp and light and wrap and put joy back into the process of shopping. I'd remember every customer, start book clubs and realize that taking money for a book is not what I'm there to do.

I know, some booksellers are doing this already. But not really. I'm not talking about going through the motions—I'm talking about reinventing the bookstore, turning it into a destination where customers fulfill desires they might not even have known they had before they walked through the door. ■

Seth Godin is the author of *All Marketers Are Liars*, published by Portfolio.

Illustration by J-C Soares