A Modest Proposal
for Book Stores of the New Century

Dr. Romano Montroni

Roma, 15 – 25/1/2012
A Modest Proposal
for Book Stores of the New Century

Many people believe that the keystone for book stores of the future is marketing, perhaps because, in general, this is true of other businesses. But I don’t believe it is true for book stores.

I have always believed and I continue to believe in the idea that, in order to be valued, a book, by its very nature, requires initiatives that a good book seller already implements on a daily basis–and there is no marketing strategy better than this. To underscore the value of books–this is the whole issue. In fact value should be the key word for book stores of the future: value when it comes to stock, proposals and service. As a line of action and as an objective, I think this is the sole way not only to achieve economic balance but also to truly satisfy the needs of people who love books and at the same time attract those who read infrequently or not at all.

To open a book store continues to be an act of love and trust in culture and, in particular, in that unique, marvelous and irreplaceable “good” that is a book. It doesn’t matter whether the person who opens the store is an independent book seller or the manager of a chain store as long as the store has a soul! At this point, I want to take the opportunity to briefly make my contribution the hot debate currently raging among publishers, book sellers and readers concerning the future of conventionally-printed books. Personally, I am convinced that it will be very hard for e-books to replace conventionally-printed books. The latter offer readers not only an intellectual but also a sensorial experience (pages to touch, turn, smell, possess) that people who love reading are not ready to give up. A printed book is lighter, handier and more economical than an e-book. It smells good, and the reading quality is incomparably higher than that of a text displayed on a backlit liquid crystal screen. It is true that technology has made enormous progress with regard to e-books, but in my opinion they will never achieve the quality of traditional books. Not by chance, Jean-Claude Carrière and Umberto Eco declare in their book, Non sperate di liberarvi dei libri (Don’t Think You Can Get Rid of Books) (Bompiani Press, 2008): “A book is like the spoon, the hammer, the wheel, the scissors: once invented, they can’t be improved.”

No doubt e-books are useful instruments for study or work and therefore specialized texts might be very appealing in electronic form. This might be true in the case of manuals but in my opinion fiction is a more complex issue–at least as the situation stands right now, although I don’t deny I might think differently ten years from now! Closer to hand, with regard to book sellers: I don’t think any special reflection is necessary as to where to position e-books in the store. All the seller has to do is shelve the titles in their proper categories because their purchase will be dictated by their utility, not by emotional impulse. However, the book seller could create a platform in the store from which clients can download the titles that interest them, offering them
assistance and suggestions. In this way a client will leave the book store with at least a partially-filled e-book device and the book seller will not lose the role of “advisor.” But believe me, a traditional book is something entirely different!

There is no doubt that society is rapidly changing and, together with it, the challenges we must face and the instruments we must use to confront them. And yet, in book stores as in every other business, the values that allow us to overcome these challenges are the old ones, namely: the intensity with which we work, curiosity, behavior ethics, powerful motivations, exactitude, attention to details, passion…. No matter how sophisticated the information technology at their disposition (instruments that no doubt, when wisely used, enable one to work more efficiently), book sellers should never lose sight of the aforementioned values and the burden of responsibility attached to them. It is a heavy burden because the book seller has a triple duty: to him/herself, to the trademark he/she represents (whether this be the family name or that of a book store chain), and toward his/her clients. It may seem paradoxical, but it is only by remaining anchored to certain values that a person is able to keep in step with the times.

Passion, enthusiasm, team spirit, creativity and the ability to interact with others have always been indispensable ingredients for being a good book seller. Everything else is built on this foundation. But in order to give a book store high quality, other talents must be cultivated. These talents—humility, perseverance and patience—are less visible but also essential. I am aware that these values go against the climate that pervades our countries today but precisely for this reason they must be preserved and fostered as much as possible. Much good can be drawn from these values both inside and outside the book store, and it will prevent them from going the way of the Irish elk, the Tasmanian tiger and the sea eagle.

In addition, I have always thought that a book seller should know, should know how to behave and should know how to be [present]. To know comprises the body of knowledge acquired through the education a person has received. Even though certain “blank spots” can be filled in through the desire for self-improvement, there is no diploma or college degree that can compensate for a lack of enthusiasm or curiosity. Knowing how to behave is a result of the learning process applied to one’s daily work. Above all, it is the ability to work constructively with others and to learn from them, to pinpoint and resolve problems, to seek solutions without giving up at the first sign of difficulty. The synthesis of “intellectual” knowledge (acquired through reading, study, dialogue, etc.) and “experiential” knowledge (deriving from direct, concrete contact with reality) is completed and enriched by knowing how to be [present], that is to say, the way in which the book seller contributes—through his/her personality—to making the book center environment lively and stimulating, to maintaining the best possible assortment of titles, and to offering high-quality service.

I believe that even though the work pace might be frenetic, a good book seller should always know how to be present. By this I mean that he/she should know
approach clients with curiosity, the desire to exchange feelings and establish a dialogue. When a client requests a title, a book seller with these attributes does not immediately bend over the computer keyboard but accompanies the person to the shelf so as to hunt for the book together. Outstanding book sellers listen to the desires of their clients so as to little by little grasp their needs and suggest avenues of reading that a client might not have even considered. This is the best way in which to make clients feel recognized and earn their fidelity. Thus it is clear that book sellers who are able to establish this type of relationship with their clients are the book store’s greatest wealth.

Roberto Roversi said that culture (used here in the sense of “education”) is a solicitation, common to everyone, to search for what one does not know. It is the human need to fill empty gaps in one’s knowledge. Books are not the only way to do this, but they are certainly one of the most important instruments in this regard and so I don’t think I’m exaggerating when I say that selling books is a fundamental duty. In fact, it is so beautiful that, once begun, it is almost impossible to stop!

Now I would like to try to sketch out a possible format for book stores of the future. My considerations are very subjective: naturally, they do not pretend to be blueprints for book sellers. Instead, they are simple suggestions based on my observations of what is going on in Italian and foreign book stores, and also based on what I have been told by many book sellers—both independent shop owners and representatives of chain stores.

**Size.** A new trend emerging with always greater force all over the world is big book stores. Big book stores (and when I say “big” I mean large in size, not scattered, much less anonymous) allow book sellers to carry a much wider and in-depth range of stock (from 40-50 thousand titles or more), so as to content even the most demanding clients and prompt them to satisfy their curiosity, leaf through texts, read them and buy them—and, what is more, to do all this in an atmosphere designed to make them feel at home. And this is without taking into consideration the possibility of offering clients good bargains. If a book store is to hold its own in today’s competitive market, it’s first requirement is that it be big (naturally, we are not speaking here about specialized book shops). In my opinion, even independent book stores (whether small, medium or large) have to move in this direction if they want to compete with chain stores on equal terms. They must believe in what they are doing and must have the courage to take the risk of making a sizeable investment. It will probably take time for them to recuperate this investment, but if the location of the store was well chosen and if its size is adequate, the results will be positive. In saying this, I do not want to encourage anyone to take steps longer than their legs, much less incite them to megalomania! Nevertheless we must be far-sighted; we must know how to use a little imagination so as to look at things from a broader perspective and not be afraid to take risks. If a person thinks he/she cannot carry out such a project successfully, then it would be better to not make the investment. When all is said and done, a good book seller can carry out his/her work very competently as an employee instead of as an employer.
Diverse products and the atmosphere of the store. Given the fact that Italians are not avid readers, the size of the book store is not enough. Book stores must increase their ability to attract the public. While remaining firm about what I said concerning the need for genuine book sellers to give life and vigor to their stores, the offering of books could and should be integrated with diverse products. Book sellers should arouse the curiosity of their clients by offering them something other than books. I don’t deny that a part of me resists the idea that the book has lost its privileged role, but precisely for the good of books I think it would be harmful to pretend that this is not happening. It is much more constructive to take this reality into account and do what has to be done in order to continue to disseminate books and keep book stores alive.

Personally, I think that a book’s ideal partner is food. Obviously, this combination will succeed only if the food is good, but at the same time its prices must be competitive. Sufficient space should be set aside for this “snack bar/coffee corner” and great attention should be given to its appearance. Even its details should be designed to produce and cultivate relationships—as opposed to what Marc Augé calls “non places” (places in which people cross paths without interacting with one another, moved only by the desire to eat something or else speed up their daily activities).

In fact, it is important that people feel welcomed when they enter a book store. If book sellers know how to create a stimulating atmosphere, then clients will find it a joy to choose books for themselves or as gifts. In his book, Minima Moralia, Adorno writes that “the true gift lies in the happiness a person feels in trying to picture the pleasure of the one who receives the gift. This means ‘wasting’ time in choosing the gift because one is thinking about the other person, trying to imagine what he/she likes and his/her situation. Basically, it means making another person not only the gift of an object but also the gift of one’s time by ‘squandering’ it.”

Consequently, it is clear a book store cannot and must not be a place one enters simply to make a purchase. Instead, it is a place in which people should be able to look around, touch the books, leaf through them, think about them and then, finally, make a choice. It should be a place in which it is a pleasure to spend time—time dedicated to oneself (or gifted to others) by exercising one’s imagination. The book seller should aim at creating an atmosphere that predisposes the client-reader to this type of experience. He/she might also want to install a wireless Internet service provider and computer stations so as to draw young people into the book store.

Returning to the subject of gifts: considering the current trend to give others gifts in the form of “experiences” instead of things, large book stores could set aside a space for “gift packages.” In short, a person might drop in to give a friend the gift of a ride in a glider and then also take the time to select a couple of books!

In conclusion: Umberto Saba’s definition of a book store as “a bottle with a genie in it” is no longer applicable today so it is essential to channel all our energies toward the exchange of information and experiences and the cultivation of collateral
activities. In fact, I believe that today people are searching for “trustworthy book stores” staffed by book sellers who love their work and who offer a wide array of titles at reasonable prices, with impeccable service. They should be “meeting places” for friends; places that offer clients the chance to meet authors and publishers and hear them talk about timely themes. To put it short, book stores of the future should stimulate the interest of their clients and expand their horizons.

I fully share these values and feel that it is the duty of all of us working in this field to translate them into reality through our daily behavior and activities.

Dr. Romano Montroni