

HOLIDAYBIZ LIFE

Time to eat, drink, read, buy and take pix

Bookstores turn innovative to attract digital-age consumers and stay afloat

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E-books, e-book readers and e-commerce may be transforming the publishing industry as well as people's reading habits globally, but the brick-and-mortar bookstores aren't in the mood to throw in the towel just yet.

Faced with the prospect of declining sales and dwindling footfalls, bookstores are writing a new chapter in the history of China's publishing industry by turning innovative and underlining enriched experiences for consumers.

They are offering much more than books. For example, digital-age bookstores incorporate an in-store cafe space. And, they are choosing swanky locations and unusual spots like churches to set up shops.

To distinguish themselves, they are relying on stylish interior decor, exclusive in-store themes, attractive schemes like membership, package deals and discount offers, and engaging events.

This novel approach is attracting hardcore readers, especially young consumers, back to bookstores where selfie-taking is not unusual.

For their part, bookstores are paying attention to the quality of books they offer. Only top-quality books make it to their shelves. Catering, entertainment and creative events provide the icing on the intellectual cake, said publishing industry experts, adding they are bullish on the growth potential of future bookstores.

"In the age of New Retail, physical bookstores should be able to provide diversified business formats, and become places that integrate functions like reading and learning, demonstration and communications, and creative lifestyle consumption," said Li Zheng, research manager at the Leadleo Research Institute, a market research provider.

"A lot of bookstores that are popular online draw consumers by their unique and beautiful designs. This is a way to attract the attention of consumers and ensure footfalls. And they can make higher profit as this approach has proved to be a very good attempt at reinventing themselves," he said.

Mofanshuju Bookstore, an independent chain with four outlets in Beijing, has one of its branches located in a renovated church in an ancient hutong (old alleyways flanked by traditional courtyard houses). Some of the books on its shelves are from the personal collections of the shop-owner.

The church's high roof and open space brighten the bookstore. Many readers prefer to stay there and have



Above: Consumers read books at Zhongshuge bookstore in Guiyang, Southwest China's Guizhou province. NAN LIN / FOR CHINA DAILY



Left: People read their favorite books over hot beverages at Mofanshuju's newest bookstore at a renovated church in an ancient hutong in Beijing. WANG SHIQIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

a cup of coffee while reading.

Founded in 2014, the bookstore aims to inherit and promote traditional Chinese culture. It offers readings of many ancient books. The bookstore showcases moveable type printing. Readers can experience the ancient printing technology and even print ancient Chinese prose at a cost of 30 yuan (\$4.2).

On average, book sales account for 60 percent of the bookstore's revenue. Sales of cultural and creative products make up for about 20 to 30 percent. At one of its four stores, Mofanshuju sells coffee and drinks,

which contribute 30 percent of total sales.

"We don't do standardized bookstores, and every bookstore is different. Until now, we weren't still making a profit due to the pressure of rent, a problem known to every bookstore owner. In recent years, more people have been integrating bookstores into their lifestyle. It's a long process and we are waiting for it to become better," said Jiang Xun, founder of Mofanshuju.

"I never believe e-reading will replace physical books. Many people like to turn the pages with their

fingers. There's no denying the impact of e-reading on book sales. But then, books have become more quality-oriented and exquisite," said Jiang, who is also a poet and a collector of ancient books.

"We strive for immersive and situational marketing. Consumers can feel the aroma of books, have a cup of coffee, and appreciate old buildings. Such aspects present growth potential for physical bookstores."

With delicate interior decor, Mofanshuju became popular quickly even online. Many consumers prefer to go there and take pictures, he said.

The bookstore welcomes increased attention, but it hopes more people will focus on books and reading as it is not a sight-seeing spot.

Meanwhile, the government issued favorable policies to encourage the growth of physical bookstores. In 2016, 11 government departments jointly introduced a guide to support bookstore business.

The guide underlined simplifying the process of administrative inspections and approvals, providing training services, and offering favorable financial and tax support to bookstores. Besides, it stressed beneficial land planning policy.

Zhongshuge Bookstore, which had been dubbed the most beautiful bookstore in the country, now has 17 branches nationwide, including in Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Yangzhou in Jiangsu province, Hangzhou in Zhejiang province, and Guiyang in Guizhou province.

The decor at each bookstore includes local cultural elements. For instance, the one in Zhongguancun area of Beijing has its children's book area designed with wooden huts in rows, which looks

like a mini version of the city.

Outside the bookstore, there is a small bridge over a flowing stream. Inside, the space looks like the traditional hutong of Beijing, with arched book walls at the sides that extend from ceiling to floor.

"The biggest group of our customers are young people like college students and office workers. Many of them were not regular visitors of bookstores originally and preferred going to shopping malls and cinemas. The beautiful design and popularity online of our bookstore has attracted them and encourages them to love reading again," said Xiang Aiqun, manager of Zhongshuge Bookstore at the Beijing Rongke branch.

"Within two months of our opening, we have netted higher-than-expected sales, and sales of books made up 60 percent, the rest came from sales of coffee and creative products. We hope to become a city reading room. We also hold events frequently, such as reading club sessions, and renowned writers' book-signing and book-sharing events," she said.

As a bookstore whose fame has spread online, it has witnessed the phenomenon of people coming to take photographs. This, it said, is a double-edged sword. The popularity has attracted a large number of people to the bookstore, but it's difficult to guarantee a good experience of reading, Zhongshuge said. Sometimes, it feels compelled to limit the number of people streaming into the bookstore.

"Physical bookstores need to attract readers back by offering a unique environment, space and events. They need to keep innovating and exploring more cultural elements," Xiang said.

Page One, a stylish bookstore chain, has its 24-hour flagship store located in Beijing's downtown Qianmen area. The bookstore has an open space with three floors and occupies 2,500 square meters.

Its first store opened in Singapore in 1983. It sells a large volume of original version books in foreign languages. In 2017, listed Chinese publisher Thinkdom House fully acquired operations of the China market of Page One and since has added more Chinese books and elements to the brand.

Li of the Leadleo Research Institute said as more consumers go to bookstores to take photographs and post online, it will actually enhance the sense of ritual in reading. More people will take to reading and treat it as a praiseworthy activity, which will be beneficial to further popularize the reading habit.

"Apart from selling books, bookstores can also make profits by selling derivative products and providing catering services. Fact is, a reader is also a consumer. With the trend of integrated growth of multiple business formats, the profit-making method of physical bookstores is diversifying," he said.

Zhang Xiaodan contributed to this story

The world's highest cultural space shines on top of Shanghai

By ZHANG KUN in Shanghai
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Based on the 52nd floor of Shanghai Tower, the new flagship store of Duoyun Books appears to be at home among the metro's towering heights, as if to indicate the kind of heights of success it would like to scale.

Arguably, it is the highest bookstore in the world, and has received throngs of visitors since its opening on Aug 12.

On its first day, enthusiastic visitors had to wait for three hours before they could take the elevator of the tallest skyscraper in the country to reach the bookstore 239 meters above the ground floor.

The store released data relating to Aug 17, its first weekend business day. "We received more than 4,000 customers, and achieved total sales of 130,000 yuan (\$18,151)," He Xiaomin, the public relations manager of the store, said.

"We can hold no more than 350 customers in the store, so when that number is reached, we have to stop people from coming in, and keep them waiting downstairs," He said.

According to Wang Lan, president of the Shanghai Century Publishing Group Co Ltd, the company chose to open the Duoyun Books flagship store at Shanghai Tower because the skyscraper in Lujiazui "represents the height and new development of the city".

Another Duoyun Books store opened last year at the Guangfulin Park, where relics of ancient culture dating to the Neolithic Age were unearthed in suburban Shanghai's Songjiang district.

The new flagship store has a space of 2,200 square meters, with 60,000 copies of books on display. According to Wang, Duoyun Books at the Shanghai Tower will be a cultural space of great height, as well as a warm home for people's spirit.

In order to achieve this goal, Duo-



Visitors soak in the atmosphere of Duoyun Bookstore, located on the 52nd floor of the Shanghai Tower, the metro's, and possibly the world's, highest bookstore. GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY

yun Books joined hands with Douban.com, one of the most popular reading-themed websites in China, to recommend books that are rated high, with comments from the website users thrown in for good measure.

A special section is dedicated to the esteemed *London Review of Books*, with carefully selected books and merchandise available. More than 3,500 copies of books in languages other than Chinese are showcased.

During the Shanghai Book Fair from Aug 14 to 20, Duoyun Books at the Shanghai Tower was one of the branch venues, where five book readings, lectures and talks took place. Also, the bookstore has launched its own book club

named "The Top of Shanghai", hosting talks, workshops and other events every other week.

Revenue from the sales of books was no more than 30 percent of the business volume in the first week. Customers are required to buy a beverage, usually priced 30 yuan to 40 yuan, before they are allowed to enter a viewing platform overlooking the Lujiazui area and Huangpu River.

"We are a tenant of the Shanghai Tower office building," He said. "We have to pay the rent, only at a different rate from commercial tenants, because we are a cultural institution." She declined to reveal the figure though.

Strolling in the bookstore, you could see that aside from avid book-lovers there are quite a number of curious tourists attracted by the view or publicity.

"A friend came first and waited in line for us for a whole hour before we could come in," said Liu Ping, a tourist from Ningbo, Zhejiang province.

She came with her son and three other families. "We came because it is a new attraction and an internet sensation," she said. Her son, 9, sat on the ground with three children of the same age, reading picture books. "It is a pity that there are only a few books for children, and the few copies we found are not exactly suitable for children," she said.