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BARNES & NOBLE: A REPORT

By

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Barnes & Noble (B&N), the largest physical retail bookstore company in the U.S., has been an established brand name since 1917. The store, while majorly successful, has seen its fair share of ups and downs. I took the opportunity to visit the Barnes & Noble retail store in Lexington, Kentucky and record the details of the store and the interactions I witnessed. With these observations, I am comparing the look of this store and its marketing to the overall company standings. I will be reviewing the company's consumer base, its brand recognition, its struggles or successes through the Covid epidemic, the products it offers, its marketing, and the competition it faces.

Barnes and Noble is the largest physical bookseller in the U.S., currently operating over 600 bookstores across all 50 states. It also hosts an e-commerce site and digital bookstore. The company "sells 155 million books per year" as well as "5,500 magazine titles and 1,000

newspaper titles” (Marketline Industry Profile). Amazon.com, on the other hand, is Barnes & Noble’s main competitor, selling at least 300 million print books per year and holding 68% of the market share for e-books. From 2012 to 2019, Barnes & Nobles Revenue has been decreasing gradually while Amazon’s has only grown. About “two-thirds of all books in the U.S. are sold online, almost exclusively through Amazon. Barnes & Noble is fighting to keep selling 1 in 5” (Buckley and Deveau). Amazon’s invention of the Kindle Tablet solidified their place in e-book retailing with about “3 in 4 e-books in the U.S. [being] bought and read on a Kindle,” but when Barnes & Noble spent \$1 billion to create their own version of an e-reader, the NOOK, the product never became as popular, and they lost the battle of online books. Amazon also hosts its own audiobook site, Audible, which has become increasingly popular with the rise of audiobooks after Covid. When Amazon first started its journey into the book industry, the popular opinion was that “the one area in which B&N and Amazon are most easily distinguishable is in how speedily the two can serve their customers, and in that contest, the edge goes to the bookseller with the most books physically on hand,” with the assumption being that Barnes & Noble obviously having many more books than Amazon (Stross). Now, however, the idea is laughable, as Amazon has an almost endless supply of books through thousands of independent sellers and their own warehouses. Though Barnes & Noble is the most successful physical bookseller chain in the U.S., it is overwhelmingly losing the race to keep up with Amazon’s dominance in the book industry.

When I observed the Barnes & Noble location in Lexington, Kentucky, I was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer number of books thrown in my face. There were dozens of small tables set up in the main pathways that boasted the types of books they hosted: mythology, BOGO deals, fiction, short novels, must-reads, specific authors, banned books, and

many more. I believe the idea behind this is a decent one—let consumers find a table with they associate most, with topics they find most interesting—but having these dozens of small tables blocking your path to the true bookshelves, mostly just getting in the way, is truly irritating. There are better ways to steal your consumers’ attention than forcing them to go around these items.

This idea of putting enticing items in customers’ ways is nothing new, it’s seen across almost all retail stores. In fact, this is working extremely well for Barnes & Noble as the notion of BookTok has become increasingly popular. On TikTok, there is a subsection of individuals that call themselves “booktokers” who rave about books they like, whether they are new or old. This idea has expanded Barnes & Noble’s consumer base, bringing in larger young audiences than ever before. The company, to match the popularity of the platform, has been remodeling its stores to make them feel more welcoming, something that was obvious in the one I visited. Barnes & Noble has also been adding “tables or shelves filled with popular BookTok titles and topped with colorful signs” which I found as I perused the small tables and now these tables “can be found across its 630 U.S. shops” (Paris). Unfortunately, with the rise of BookTok, has come the rise of audiobooks. Barnes & Noble does not have a set place in the audiobook business, unlike Amazon. Hearing someone recommend Audible was nothing out of the ordinary, but when it was said in Barnes & Noble, it immediately takes customers away from Barnes & Noble and sends them to Amazon. If Barnes & Noble doesn’t establish a solid place in this industry, they may never be in it at all, losing thousands of valuable customers.

The center of the store hosted most books and the most popular genres. Here, you can find fiction, young adult, fantasy, romance, mystery, and horror genres. Right at the entrance were the cash registers and in a large area surrounding these were small take-home items such as

stationery, journals, and knick-knacks. To the left, marked by artistic signs painted on the wall, were the nonfiction and music sections. Here, you can find your religion books and WWII novels as well as CDs and records. In the back was a large, colorful children's area with comfortable seating and low shelves. To the right there was manga, adult games, and newspapers as well as the Barnes & Noble Café which hosted Starbucks drinks.

There was a wide range of shoppers ranging from about ages 25-80. While there were a few wandering the aisles, most people were sitting in the café talking, reading, and working. While some people were doing independent activities, most people in the café were chitchatting as they drank, many had a book in front of them. Twice, I witnessed someone walk in and rush straight to an employee, asking where the bibles were. I didn't realize that quite so many people would have an apparent need for bibles. At one point, a lady was looking for a book, but the registers were down that day and they only took credit cards. The lady, apparently, didn't have her card and the employee offered to hold it for her but the lady turned the offer down and left the store. At another point, a customer recommended to another customer that she try Audible's free trial, as audiobooks are all the rage nowadays. Overall, the Barnes & Noble hosted a calm, open atmosphere, inviting people to come in, relax, and read a book, while also encouraging them to pick up extras they maybe hadn't expected to leave with.

According to consumer reports, Barnes & Noble hosts a high volume of millennial shoppers compared to the average age of shoppers, which matches my observations (Spearman). Though there were a wide range of shoppers, most seemed to be in their 30s. Barnes & Noble shoppers also are more interested in arts and literature and overall partake in more hobbies than the average person. This is evident in the number of hobby books provided at Barnes & Noble as well as the area dedicated to music which had the arts sitting right next to it.

Barnes & Noble has a moderate amount of brand recognition. Most people recognize the name and, perhaps, the logo, but they don't have a color scheme that people would recognize and don't have a solid foothold in advertisements. As Amazon threatens the company, especially during and after Covid, Barnes & Noble has had to learn how to adapt. Previously, Barnes & Noble relied on having the largest inventory of books in the U.S. as well as partnering with authors instead of relying on publishing companies by hosting signing events in their stores and offering exclusive, front-table spots to authors. As the private prisons industry relied on many different companies to provide the resources necessary to run a prison, so did Barnes & Noble rely on their favorite authors to generate excitement for what's to come (Eisen pp. 17). Unlike prisons, however, it didn't always work for Barnes & Noble.

In 2019, Elliot Management, a successful UK bookstore acquisition company, bought Barnes & Noble. With this change came a wave of change for the physical stores. James Daunt, CEO, chose to adapt the method of his UK stores, with the idea being to eventually change each Barnes & Noble store to something that fits the area appropriately. For example, in New York, they changed their flagship store to begin displaying more paperback books than hardcover, because they were easier to carry around (Buckley and Deveau). With this adaptive method, positive results were found. Books may be mostly universal, but everyone has their own story, their own preference for what they would choose to read. These differences can oftentimes be found regionally. If "the lessons learned from cooking and the civility of the table are what make us fully human," then it can be assumed that the lessons learned through the written text add to our innate humanness (Delaney pp. 279). It is a way of understanding the people around us, before us, and after us. If Barnes & Noble can learn to adapt to these experiences people expect, then they can expect growth in this dying industry.

Bookselling, however, is not without its faults. The subject of book-banning, for example, has become increasingly popular and Barnes & Noble, as the face of booksellers across America, has faced the most assaults. Barnes & Noble has not backed down from this fight, saying we live in a diverse society, and everyone should have the right to read what they like, and you do not have to purchase these books (Ceron). With the addition of a “Banned Books” table in almost every Barnes & Noble across the U.S., including the one I visited, it’s almost as if Barnes & Noble is laughing at those who try to stop the spread of education. Most banned books center around the LGBTQ+ community and the laughter that the company provides at this terrible idea “[brings] a mad reckless optimism every revolution needs” (Vagabond). Whether or not the company truly is laughing at the absurdity of the idea, it brings comfort to know that they will not be bullied into restricting access to novels that may help somebody.

Barnes & Noble has had its struggles, certainly, but the company is starting to pick itself back up with the growth in reading books after Covid. Stores are starting to be dusted off, restocked, and organized to what would make the consumer happy. The company relies on the people around it, the community it brings in, and without that community, the stores simply wouldn’t exist. Maybe Barnes & Noble isn’t as trustworthy as a small independent bookstore, but it certainly cares more about its consumers than the retail giant, Amazon. As the company sees the first years of revenue growth since 2012, consumers can recognize that physical bookstores will always exist, even if they may struggle.

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