

Marketing used tomes online 'a stroke of genius'

ABEBOOKS | Victoria-based site 'has made a small local bookstore into a global bookstore'



BY YVONNE ZACHARIAS
VANCOUVER SUN

One are the days when searching for a second-hand book meant trudging through the city and then combing through stacks of dusty, musty tomes, looking for buried treasure.

Now, that favourite childhood book or pricey physics textbook could be just a mouse click away.

The marriage of modern technology with something as old and basic as a book is giving rise to a new marketplace phenomenon.

The numbers are small but they suggest a shift away from the purchase of new books to second-hand ones.

That is good news to Victoria-based Abebooks, the largest online marketplace for used books.

It is crowing over some new numbers showing the shift.

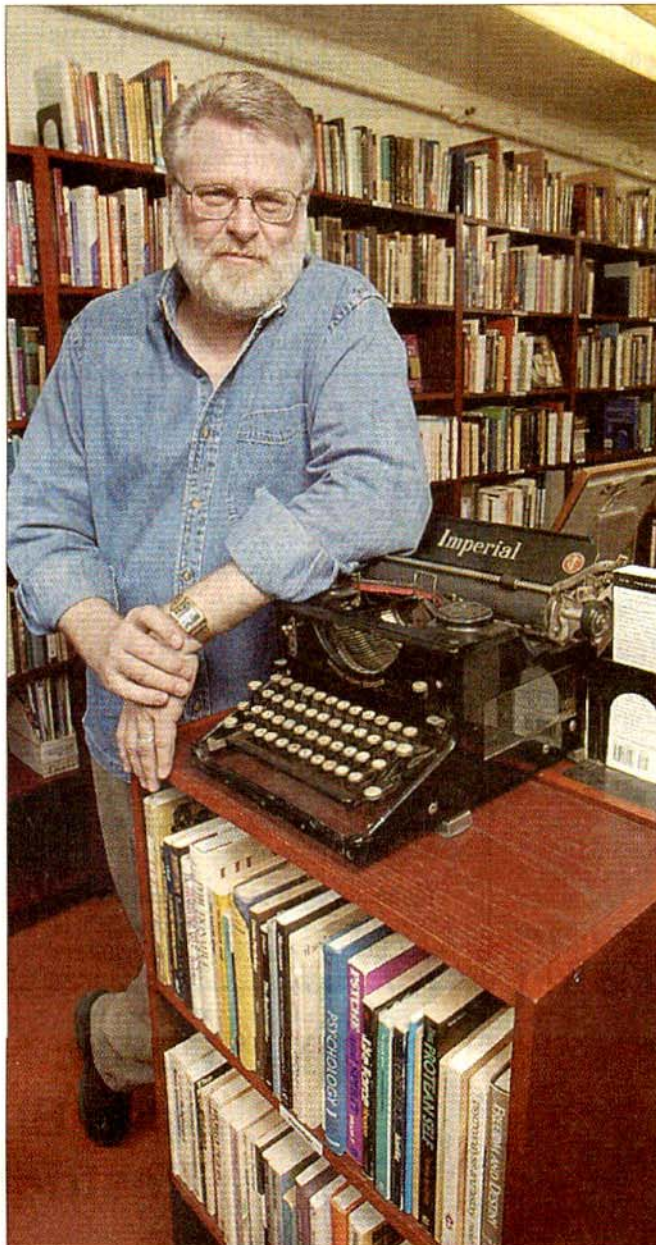
A study by Ipsos Insight, a global marketing research firm, dated April 29 showed the number of used books bought by consumers between April and December of last year increased by five per cent over the same period the year before, while demand for new books fell by two per cent.

Among the favourite items are children's books, those cherished tales that parents want to pass on to children only to find that they have gone out of print ages ago. Textbooks and even gift books are growing in popularity. More than 78 per cent of buyers on Abebooks.com say they would be thrilled to receive a used book as a gift.

Kevin McKeown, owner of Arcanum Books in Gastown in Vancouver, describes the establishment of the used-book marketplace on the Internet as "a stroke of genius."

Specializing in books on religion, philosophy and the occult, he is one of 12,000 small sellers who list on Abebooks.com.

"It has made a small local bookstore into a global bookstore. It has been a huge help," said McKeown, estimating that 40 per cent of his business is now done over the Internet.



GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

Kevin McKeown of Arcanum Books in Gastown is one of 12,000 small used book-sellers who list on Abebooks.com.

Customers click on to the websites, search for books and then choose to order them, using a credit card or sending in a cheque.

Every day, when McKeown comes into the shop, he finds about a half a dozen orders which he fills. Then on Friday, he gets a cheque from the website that handled the transaction.

It's not the same as meeting the Hasidic scholars, retired Anglican archbishops, practicing witches and CIA agents who come into his store. But through his sales, he winds up in e-mail chats and some phone conversations with people from all over the world.

He recalls getting a call from a man in Japan who wanted to buy just the dust jacket from one of his books. McKeown sold it to him.

The boom in Internet used-book sales has driven the price of the majority of used books down but it has had the opposite effect on rare books, said Hannes Blum, president and chief executive officer of Abebooks.

McKeown has experienced this first-hand. Benefiting from an online international search, he discovered that a copy of an expose on a cultish group called Eckankar was exceedingly rare. He increased the price of the book from around \$12 to \$2,500. He doubts he will get that amount for it, but he is waiting for offers.

None of this is to suggest that book-sellers of either the new or used variety are getting rich.

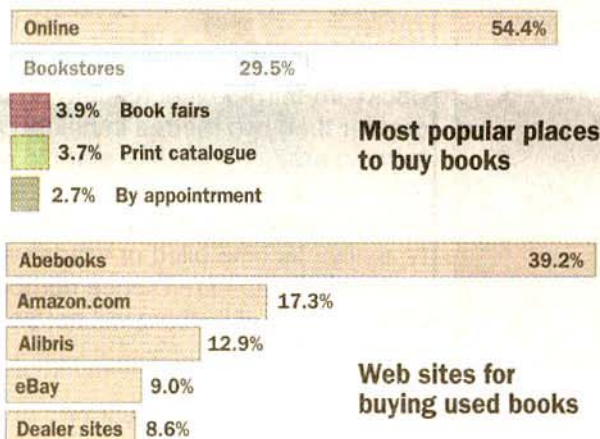
The Ipsos study found that while Americans bought roughly the same number of books last year as the year before, overall spending on books decreased by two per cent. It attributes the disparity to a continued increase in used book buying. Overall, the used book market accounted for 14 per cent of general trade book sales, gaining one full share point since 2002.

Reaching further back, another recent U.S. study found that total sales for used book and ephemera dropped eight per cent between 2001 and 2003. However, online dealers reported a 1.41-per-cent sales increase in that time frame.

Blum said he is happy to see the new studies. "Until now, it has been very difficult to get data. It was not on the radar screen for a lot of research. Finally, the used-book market is getting the attention it deserves."

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Getting a good read on the used-book market



Source: Book Hunter Press

Basically, it works like this: he records every item in his store on a database which is accessible through Abe-

books.com as well as Alibris, a U.S. book-selling website that specializes in obscure books, music and films.