



## **An Observational Study of an Independent Book Store**

Rakhi Rajani  
Mobile and Media Systems Laboratory  
HP Laboratories Palo Alto  
HPL-2003-107  
May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003\*

E-mail: rarajani@hpl.hp.com

shopping,  
technology,  
mobility,  
bookstore

This report describes an observational study of an independent bookstore. The study was part of a larger effort that looked at shopping as an information rich nomadic activity that is split between the virtual world of online shopping and the very physical nature of products in 'real world' stores. Our research program in UbiMedia [1] influenced the choice of bookstores as the shopping domain to focus on as an environment rich in information and choices. The purpose of this report is to *describe* the rich environment of the store.

# An Observational Study of an Independent Book Store

Rakhi Rajani

Hewlett Packard Labs  
1501 Page Mill Road  
Palo Alto, CA, 94304

rarajani@hpl.hp.com

## Abstract

This report describes an observational study of an independent bookstore. The study was part of a larger effort that looked at shopping as an information rich nomadic activity that is split between the virtual world of online shopping and the very physical nature of products in ‘real world’ stores. Our research program in UbiMedia [1] influenced the choice of bookstores as the shopping domain to focus on as an environment rich in information and choices. The purpose of this report is to *describe* the rich environment of the store.

## 1. Introduction

This document details the findings from a two week observational and interview study that took place at Kepler’s, a large independent bookstore located in Menlo Park, California. As a rather quick study, the details outlined here are not conclusive but provide a preliminary glimpse into the environment and habits within the store.

The document addresses the logistics of the study and goes on to describe the salient behaviors observed. We begin by describing the environment of the store, its atmosphere as described by customers and the functions of the store as described by the staff. We go on to discuss browsing activity, detailing the different types of browsing behaviors and the factors that affect how people browse within the store. We then move on to discuss some of the environmental factors that influence buying behaviors, how social behavior affects the experience in the store, the use of shopping aids, and the reasons people come to the store. We conclude by providing some perspective on the most salient issues.

## 2. Logistics

The study took place from October 28 – November 9 2002. The time slot was chosen so that it did not coincide with the busy period and possibly unusual shopping habits (given that Thanksgiving and Christmas were near) of those who buy from the store.

The observations provided a wealth of data; however, interviewing both customers and staff was more difficult as disturbing staff during working hours was not an option and with regards to customers, interrupting their time in the store was not an option either; interviewing as they were about to leave was difficult and interviewing as they came in was not fruitful as they hadn’t done anything yet! A total of 21 interviews were conducted 4 informal staff interviews and 17 customer interviews.

### **3. The Book Store Environment**

Kepler's is a large independent bookstore located in Menlo Park, California. It is in an area of Menlo Park that is surrounded by 'everyday' stores (grocery, hardware, restaurants etc) and the actual location is above a parking lot and next to a popular café. This location plays a part in how the store is used and the length of time people are there. The store, as described by customers, is comfortable, calm, welcoming, and 'homely'. Given this environment, the pace is often slow and relaxed.

#### **3.1 Architecture and Interiors**

The interior of the store is adaptable; some of the fixtures such as tables and shelves are maneuverable. This adaptability means that during author events, tables are moved to accommodate the increase in people and the floor can be rearranged to suit the occasion.

The interior is also easy for people to move around in as it is spacious and open. The only problem in getting around involved a woman with a double buggy who could not get into aisles so left the kids on the outside of the shelved section - but her browsing was interrupted by the attention she was paying to the fact that her kids were not next to her. This was not common and the majority of people navigated the store with ease.

### **4. The Customer's Perspective**

A total of 17 customers were interviewed. Using some of the interview questions, but more often just chatting to people revealed that most people came into the store just to look around and browse – a type of 'opportunistic exploration' [2]. The majority had some intention to buy but most of the time they were there to kill time before meeting someone or passing through from some other place. Buying was often related to needing to buy a gift for someone (which ultimately ended in them buying something for themselves too), buying books for a particular topic such as house building etc. When that was the case, they immediately went to the relevant section which was found by either wandering, looking for signs, or asking someone where to go.

One lady for instance came into the store to browse while killing time and also to buy some books. She knew she wanted to get her husband something and knew that that something would be in the history section because he liked "anything old". So she knew she was going to the history section but not what she was going to buy. She spent some time browsing the books there given her knowledge of the "old things he likes" and eventually found something to buy him. She then moved to the audio books section where she did the same thing (this time for herself). After this she moved onto the biography section where she was looking for new books by a particular author and then she just browsed the tables for "anything that looked interesting". She mentioned how she always went to bookstores to buy books and only ever bought online when she knew exactly what she wanted or when what she wanted was not available in Australia (which is where she now lives). When asked how she identified possible purchases she said it was usually by word of mouth and that she was just as keen to share her opinions and recommendations with other people and did so while in the store when she heard someone talking to her husband about possibilities for her next reading group. She also mentioned that she would buy based on who she liked – if she got hooked on an author she would more than likely buy everything by that person (one book at a time). The feature she mentioned as most beneficial to her in any store would be to have public recommendations available – having people in the area voice their opinions about books would be useful. The other thing that she would find useful, she said, was to be able to sample the audio books somehow. She could browse through normal books but bought audio books out of faith for what the cover said, or she would go and browse through the physical book and then buy the audio book counterpart. When asked if she might use an application that would allow her to link to more information about the items she was considering purchasing, she said she might but its not that important to her – being able to sample books in an audio fashion however would be something she would like.

Another gentleman mentioned how he just came in to look around – he liked to look at the book covers and read the backs of books but didn't buy anything because he had a big enough stack of books at home that

he had not yet read – he said he bought books from second hand stores because they were cheaper and he liked to recycle paper!

When asked about online shopping all of the customers said they bought online when they knew what they wanted and came to the store to “hang out” or when they were unsure of what they wanted – the most common reason for being in the store was because “I just want something new to read”. However, the one feature of the online world they liked was that it let you link to things that you might not otherwise link to. The ‘you might also like’ feature of online stores was valuable.

One male customer mentioned how, in the online bookstore, he could read sections of books and start in literature and end up in some weird genre that he would never have even thought about (apparently ‘The Hobbit’ lead him through a trail of recommendations that ended up in him also buying a Yoga book!). However, he liked spending time reading in the physical store because it was the only time he got to read properly and even if he didn’t read the whole book, it was time away from other things. He did however, feel some need to buy something just because he had been in the store and would often walk away with a magazine “at least”. When asked if he would use a device that gave him more information about a book he said he’d like star ratings for the books but not much else as he liked to daydream around books.

Another gentleman commented that he came to the store to support local business. He was there with his daughter who had gone to the kids section to look for a book while he was in the photography section. His daughter came back with the book she wanted plus a calendar, some other books etc – he told her to take the calendar back but said she could buy the other books if she also went to find something for her sister. When asked what he thought of buying online he said he didn’t ever buy online ever because he liked to be in the store and especially because his kids liked to come to the store. Despite this though he thought that “men don’t browse, we come in with our wives and look at magazines and put them down when she says she’s done. Look around, how many of these guys look bored? You see they are waiting for their wives”! However he did buy a book even though “I didn’t plan on buying anything cause I have stack this high at home that I still need to read, but you know this one will further my education so its ok”.

## **5. The Role of Staff**

The staff play a pivotal role in creating the atmosphere within the store. They are not just there to make sure the shelves are in order and that people can pay – the rapport they have with customers is outstanding and their commitment to ensure that people get to what they want means that customers come back for more. The store is a comfortable place to be and people are comfortable browsing for hours, chatting to staff about what’s a good read and finding their way around the store, getting recommendations for themselves and other people. A conversation with one of the managers showed how in tune the staff were to the customers needs and made it very much their aim to create an experience in the store that would make people want to come back. Even during the conversation, people came up to this staff member to say hello and she mentioned the delivery of a couple of new books that had come out that she had put aside for these people. She mentioned that the role of the staff was to sell the book by making it interesting, make recommendations or find someone else who can help, be aware of what people are doing so that you ask if you can help at the right moment, provide a comfortable place and generally help make the experience rewarding.

## 6. Moving, Browsing, Buying

### 6.1 The most common path

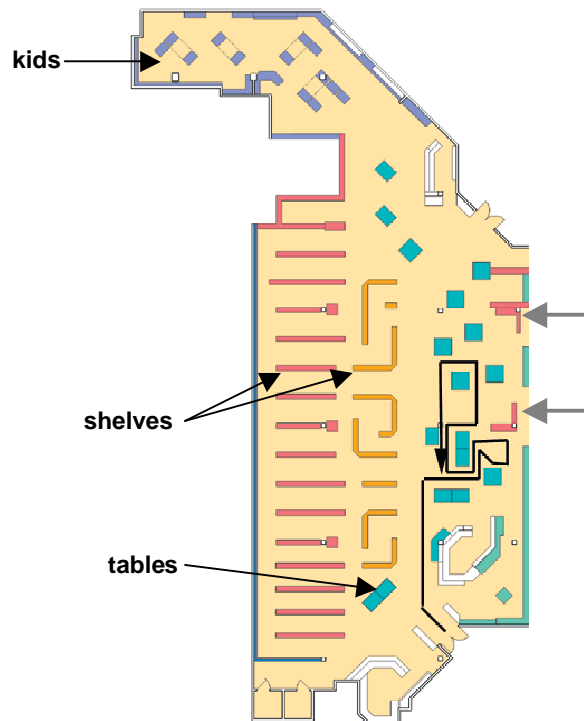


figure 1

Movement through the store often began at the tables by the magazine section unless the customers wanted a particular type of book from the shelves. It progressed among the tables, to the staff recommendations shelf and sometimes to the main shelves but often ended up back at the tables and then at the magazine section before final purchases were made (the black line in figure 1 illustrates where the majority of people would spend their time).

The majority of movement however occurred around these tables which represented bestsellers and people would wander up and down through that section either bumping into something of interest or really looking for something. The biography shelf and reduced books shelves that were close to the tables were the shelved areas that most people looked at first after viewing the items on the tables (indicated by the grey arrows in figure 1). There did not appear to be any well laid out path through the store with people just literally wandering to and from sections, in and out of shelved areas, spending a lot of time at areas that interested them.

It was interesting to see how people negotiated movement around the store, stepping over people sat in aisles, going in front of and behind them to get at books, trying their best not to disturb anyone – it was very different from how you see people negotiate their space in a grocery store for example.

### 6.2 What is browsing?

Browsing is an activity that leads to changes in perception, buying behaviors and body language depending on the length and type of browsing experience. In the initial stages of browsing, it's about searching for something that takes your interest, people are very hands on and quick in picking up and putting down the books: they see the front cover, glance at the back, flick through the book and either put it down, put it to

one side or put it under their arm. When they reach a point of not wanting to browse that way anymore, their behavior changes, their body language changes and they look for comfort – its almost as if the searching is done and now they are taking a seat to see what they got (or could get!). They appear to become more relaxed and often spend a large chunk of time examining the books in more depth. Their behavior changes again to surfing behavior when they either return the item to the shelves or look for other items but they move between these states unless interrupted by something that catches their eye or by a companion.

We identified three main types of individualistic browsing behavior: opportunistic, task-oriented and selective reading.

### **6.2.1 Opportunistic browsing and buying**

When it appeared that people had come into the store to kill time they wandered through the tabled section picking up books at random, moving through all of the topic tables and especially the magazine section. They rarely went towards the shelves and always stayed in the more open areas of the store not spending much time at one stand or with one book. Occasionally, they would stop, take a step back, rescan the table and pick something up but otherwise it was a very detached type of activity. The magazine section was popular with this type of customer as it seemed to provide a quick and easy read before they left the store again.

The other type of browser who appeared to come in to look for something to buy but was unsure of what that might be (because they just wanted something new to read) was again more prone to scanning all of the tables, never entering the shelved section and always first browsing all of the tables. Sometimes they read the signs on the table that detailed genre but most of the time they moved through all of them once, came back again this time paying more attention to the individual titles and then back again this time paying even more attention – it was like they were getting the big picture for what was available, taking some mental notes and then scanning again to narrow the search before honing in on something – they would sometimes spend a few seconds longer at a table that they revisit on their third or fourth round and actually pick up a book and browse it in depth.



**figure 2**

This customer in figure 2, for instance, spent almost 25 minutes just wandering through the tables without touching anything before returning here to read the title he is reading quite comfortably.

#### *Creating a personal space*

Figure 2 is also interesting because it demonstrates customer behavior when they found a book that engaged them. They either found a bench, ladder (figure 3), or piece of floor to sit on or they created a space for themselves on one of the tables, leaned on the books, spread out the book they were reading and often spend a considerable amount of time there. What happened as a result of this was that others could not get to the books on that table. Some would say ‘excuse me’ while others would hover and yet others

would keep an eye on the table while browsing different tables and return when the person had left or moved but it was important to note how people created a private space for themselves in what was very a public place. This was most noticeable in the cookery section which contains a number of rather heavy books which are difficult to manipulate when you are holding 3 other books under your arm (very few people used a basket, perhaps because of where they were located in the store [3]). People would actively look for somewhere to rest the book they were flicking through and this place would either be the nearby bench but more often than not (maybe because they were comparing more books in this section), it was the magazine shelf or the nearby table that provided the book rest. And if there was nowhere obvious to rest the book they might also sit down or hang onto a shelf as if to anchor themselves whilst holding the book, map etc (see figure 4).



**figure 3**



**figure 4**

*How the space provides opportunities*

Often people chance upon things to buy in unsuspecting places. The tables are a good place to find things but things left in the wrong place are sometimes looked at and on more than one occasion were bought.

This stand (figure 5) near a bench by the magazine section was used as a place to leave things that had been read. To some people waiting for others to complete purchases etc it was a place to 'hang out' and they browsed whatever had been left there and sometimes (although not often) bought what was there too.



**figure 5**

The seats were used frequently and as a result, for many people, there was no space to sit down. In some instances people would not sit down if there was already one person on the two-seater bench or if part of it was covered with books.



**figure 6**

This bench (figure 6) for example was not used for approx 30 mins even though people wanted to sit down until one brave (!) customer moved the books and took a seat. At this point, a lady who had been hovering by the bench also came and sat down.

Being able to sit down and look through things gave people the space and time to decide whether or not to buy something or indeed, what to buy. They did not feel rushed and used the space to put things down, lay things out, compare books and magazines and eventually decide upon a purchase.

These buying behaviors were calculated, so to speak, in that an evaluation was made before a purchase decision was made. The environment of the store means that this is possible and encouraged. However, there were also opportunities for impulse buys at the register areas which were surrounded by books. On some occasions people did get to the registers and look down at the books and buy something. On other occasions, they would look down, ask the member of staff something and decide to buy (or not) something there. Often staff members would look at their purchases and suggest a title from the stack below. However, I noticed that instead of prompting impulse buys, this area was treated like another table top shelf and people would spend some time browsing that section (which was often a challenge in trying to look at the books while others were trying to pay, thus causing some conflict of space). Not many people made an



impulse decision to buy from what was there, maybe because they did not have enough time to make a decision or were concentrating in the task of paying. People did look, but less bought.

Author events were a good place for impulse buys and a number of people would say things like “oh she was really good, I’m going to get everything they have by her” – this semi impulse decision to buy was fuelled by something else but a purchase decision was made pretty quickly in comparison to other times.

*Using your hands*

In many instances of browsing, people’s hands were overloaded and there was sometimes a struggle to figure out what to hold, where to put your other things etc.

In the shelved areas this was less of a problem as people often used the shelves to put down their things (phone, keys etc) and then browse (while quite happily leaving their wallet on the shelf) and then also take a seat somewhere and read.



**figure 7**

The customer in figure 7, for instance, made himself very comfortable, putting his possessions on the shelf as well as his feet, coffee, etc! Alternatively, customers might use the shelf as a bookstand (figure 8):



**figure 8**

Despite having their hands full, very few people used baskets. Magazines made good carrying surfaces as they bent and molded to the customer's hands and the 'bucket' created by the magazine was a good place to hold keys, a wallet and even other books. Having full hands proved to be a problem when people had picked up a number of books but were still browsing for more. They started to run out of places to put things. It was never a major problem but the juggling acts were common. In cases where there was more than one person in a party, the carrying load was shared but otherwise, the shelves were a good place to 'hold' things for a while.

### **6.2.2 Task Oriented Browsing**

In more task-oriented browsing, people would go to one of the tables or a particular shelf e.g. non fiction, psychology, and look hard for a book to read – this would involve picking up and reading the back or inside covers of a number of books and then either taking them all to a bench somewhere to delve into more deeply or picking one or two to buy fairly immediately.

What was noticeable in all instances other than when picking up books on a list was that people spent considerable time looking through the books and compared one book to another in depth. There was rarely an instance (other than when shopping for very specific items) when someone came in, picked up a book and walked out.

#### *Finding specific items*

The process of finding the required book took place in three main ways. The first was to go to the desk and ask someone. The information desk is located by the main front doors; it's easy to go in and ask if you want something specific as soon as you walk in. The other option was to browse the shelves for a little while and then to go to the desk, say that you tried to look for it and then ask for help because you haven't found it yet. This was the most common way of finding the book. The final way was to be persistent in looking for the book yourself by going to the correct section and locating it. In this instance though the customer would have very concrete and comprehensive information about the title they were looking for.

On those occasions when the customer knew what they wanted, there appeared to be no major problems in locating the item. When it was difficult for the customer to locate a specific item a cooperative effort between a staff member and the customer ensued in order to complete the task. No one, when asked, said that they had any problems, mainly because, 'I can just go and ask someone'. The only frustration in this instance was waiting in line to speak to a member of staff or locating one immediately in your vicinity.

When the customer did not have all of the relevant information to hand about a book, the banter between staff and customers became an interesting process of negotiating:

Customer: it's tall

Staff: It's a big one you say?

Customer: It's tall not thick, shall we go look in the arts shelf?

Staff: have you seen it before?

Customer: I think so, it's about the size of that (pointing at another book on the table)

The process continues until either one or the other person manages to provide something more concrete, someone else is consulted or they determine whether it's there. The process itself can take anywhere from 2 to 20 minutes and the banter that goes on often results in a longer conversation even after the book has been found, it's almost like a rapport has been created that exceeds the bounds (in that moment at least) of the relationship of staff and customer and I witnessed many conversations/discussions surrounding the book (an similar books) that was being searched for.

One occasion that didn't result in a purchase involved a young boy who was looking for a magazine for his brother. He came into the store and headed straight for the magazine section, looked around in the sports section and then on the other shelves. He then took out his phone and called his brother and asked him for the "title again" and made sure he was looking for the "right thing and it has \_\_\_\_ on the front cover right?"

well I can't see it but I'll check". He then, while still on the phone, went to the register and asked a member of staff for some help, asking for the title of the magazine and mentioning who was on the cover, they both looked on the shelves and the young boy every now and then updated his brother on the progress; he then told him he would call him back. The staff member could not find the magazine but found a different one that was similar and he asked the boy if he wanted "this but the basketball version". The boy agreed and they looked some more. It was not on the shelves and so the staff member went to look up the title on the computer. He came back and said he could not find it. The boy assured him that his brother had bought one here the week before and the staff member went back to the desk. Another staff member asked if he had found it and when he said no he too went to the shelves to look. The magazine was not there and they offered to order it for the boy but he said he'd check with his brother and get back to them. He then left the store.

What was interesting in these situations was the constant push and pull of information. This kind of negotiating provides feedback to each party and together they can fairly quickly identify a title, a particular book by its cover, etc. It is important, I think, to note here the different processes involved when searching for the book in the physical store versus searching for it online. The feedback provided by the personal interface in the store allows descriptive clues to inform the search for the book which would otherwise be unsuccessful as the customer does not know its name – the process on the web is not like that and it is a lot more difficult to find the "tall red book on architecture, you know the thin tall one?" The online search for a book requires some specific information that relates to the content of, or information about, the book and one expresses search terms with these criteria. In the physical store the customer has the ability to find a book by other means, and the physical appearance of it was a popular method.

#### *Making a choice*

Most people were also open to suggestions from other customers when completing their tasks. One lady for example, in the 'nature' section was looking through some books on birds by a particular author and writing down titles on a piece of paper (for her Christmas list it turns out). Another lady came along with a member of staff and was trying to find some books by that same author. The staff member helped her find the titles and pulled some books down from the shelf for her, asked if she needed anything else and then left her with the assurance that he was just "over there" if she needed anything else. The lady who was looking through the books initially was paying some attention and offered her own opinions on which ones were the best. Holding one book in her hand she mentioned how she would be done with this in a second and it really was one of the best ones and she recommended it highly. She also pointed out that the author was due in the store in the next few days for a book signing. They exchanged some information about books and both went away with something – one with a written list of books and the other with some actual books. They both commented on how heavy the books were but no one had a basket and their hands were full of books and keys and purses and phones.

With the plethora of books in one section, on one topic, on any shelf, it's sometimes difficult to figure out which one to get. Some people come in with an idea of which titles they should compare and others just spend some time browsing and picking the ones that attract and suit them. Others still look for more information. The staff recommendations and BookSense (an organization that represents independent book-stores) recommendations that are attached to the shelves play a part in the decision making process. Figure 9 shows just how many recommendations are in the store and these are often read and relied upon. Some people have a rapport with a particular staff member and know that they like a certain person's recommendations and so look for them personally or any tags that show their summary of a book. The fact that more than one member of staff may recommend and write a review of the same book reinforced the recommendation. It was also interesting to note that the majority of people paid more attention to the handwritten recommendations by Kepler's staff members as opposed to the BookSense recommendations that were typed and looked almost like ads.



figure 9

### 6.2.3 Selective Reading – Detailed Browsing?

The store was often used like a library. People would take books to a bench or find a spot where they could read, make notes etc. One lady in the cookery section was copying recipes from a couple of different books, one gentleman was reading through a number of computer books and many people in the travel section would take notes. For some such as the gentleman in the figures 10, 11 & 12, it really was a place to read. For others they would spend some time reading the first few pages of a book and then take it to the registers to buy it. What was curious about this behavior though was that on occasion, the people who wanted to buy the book they had been reading, would go to the shelf or table, put down the copy they had been reading and then pick up another copy from down in the pile and take that one to the register.



figure 10



figure 11



figure 12

The gentleman in the figures 10, 11 & 12 spent a good few hours in the store reading this book. I'm not sure where in the book he started to read on this occasion but he was in the store until closing one evening reading and moving from one area of the store to another, but always reading the same book.



**figure 13**

Other people such as the lady in figure 13 laid out a few books on the floor, read a few pages from each one and then picked the ones she wanted to buy.

The kids section was a good place for reading for both adults and kids. It was a place where adults who had kids with them could take their kids who would happily browse through the kids books whilst the adults read/browsed through the books they had picked up.



**figure 14**

Given this way of doing things it was very common for the adults to go shopping for something before heading to the kids section. Figure 14 shows the results of an adult browsing in the kids section who did just that. He had picked up some books for himself before taking his child to the kids section. Both seemed to be enjoying their time there and the adult sat on the small chairs reading his 'business for dummies' book as the child 'read' considerably more of the kids books!

The fact that it was ok to read in the store, I think, was an encouragement for people to come back – subtle marketing as one staff member put it because they do come back and eventually buy something.

### 6.3 Other Elements of Browsing

#### 6.3.1 *Feeling Comfortable in the Store*

An important feature of customer behavior was the comfort levels. People were very comfortable creating a space for themselves in the store, there was no hesitation to leave a bag on the floor and go and find something, to leave your belongings on the shelves etc.



**figure 15**

One lady for instance left this bag (figure 15) on the floor for some time while moving between shelves in the area. She also created a shelf for herself which she used (figure 16) to store the books she was picking up and wanted to keep to show her husband (as they were picking paint colors for their house).



**figure 16**

The pile on the top of this shelf (figure 16) represents the few from the many books she flicked through that she then spent approximately another 40 minutes going over with her husband, discussing the different shades of blue (along with the magazine her husband brought over from the magazine section etc). Her mother on the other hand, although standing near her daughter, was not really a part of the discussion. Eventually the pile of books grew and then shrunk again as they decided on one to buy and returned the rest to the shelves. One magazine was also bought while the others too were returned to the magazine shelves.

### **6.3.2 How Genre Influences Browsing**

The type of browsing also depends on the genre. The travel section is often a ‘flick through to find a format that suits’ and also an index search for the specific place the person is going. It’s a place where people sit and take notes (figure 17) or look through a number of books on one subject and find, by flicking through the book, which one of “these 12 books on New York”, they want to buy. All of the books on New York are about New York of course in terms of what tourists can do, histories etc but the layout is different, some focus on different areas etc and so it’s a search to find the one that suits the trip, the layout preferences and the location details.



**figure 17**

Cookery was another genre that prompted note taking. It was also a genre that involved more comparisons between books of a particular category before a purchase decision was made.

### **6.3.3 Hands On vs Hands Off Browsing**

There was a difference between Hands off vs hands on browsing. Some people walked around the store never touching a book, looking only at covers, their arms crossed or in their pockets, they just walked around with their heads tilted looking at the books. At some point they might pick one up and that’s the book they bought, but they never touched it before that moment. Others (in fact the majority) were extremely hands on, picking up and putting down countless amounts of books, reading the covers, opening them, looking at different editions etc and then there were those who were somewhere in between. But the people who bought the most books were those who touched them, even if it was to feel the cover, skim over the table with their fingers until they landed on a book that looked interesting – the very hands on approach led to more time being spent in the store and more books being bought.

### **6.3.4 The 3-step Process to Picking up a Book**

There appeared to be 3-step process to approaching a book that is then picked up. The first is to scan the whole shelf from afar, the next is to hone in on one or two levels of shelving or a topic area and the next is to target a specific book. This 3 step process occurred in the majority of cases and I assume allowed the customers to first evaluate what was there generally and then to slowly but surely move to a specific section and then a specific book. The attraction to a book (based on the observations) starts with how the cover looks, the title and the author name. These are the main criteria by which people will choose to pick up or ignore a title (and when books are stacked on a shelf, all they can see is the spine). Other factors that

come into play might be the size of a book (too many or too few pages, tall, short), the publisher, hard back or paper back and any ideas or preferences the customer came into the store with, (this is speculative based on observations). It is the cover of the book that conveys this information - it's a very visual process because as you scan the tables and shelves, things catch your eyes (and we should question how any technology would change the focus of attention). This means that some books, even though they might actually be interesting to someone, will not be picked up and will probably only be accessed if specifically pointed out. This is possibly why the recommendations section is popular; it gives an insight into things that "I'd otherwise not even look at". When a book is 'face up' as they are on the tables and recommendation shelves, they convey much more information than those stacked on shelves – pictures, comments, quotes, award stickers etc all add to the appeal of a book and perhaps this is why the tabled areas are so popular – because you can 'see' much more without having to pick up as many books.

### **6.3.5 Browsing in the Magazine Section**

The magazine section was different to the book areas. People spent a lot of time near the benches there reading the magazine articles, flicking through more picture oriented magazines, reading the newspapers, articles etc. It appeared that less people bought magazines preferring to read them in the store unless it was a publication that they bought regularly, or a news publication that had many articles in it. Otherwise, people would spend 30-40 mins flicking through the magazines, picking up different ones, returning others, reading the odd article etc. One person mentioned that he came to read a particular article in TIME magazine that he'd seen on the TIME website because it was laid out better in the magazine than online, which had links to pictures and so it was less enjoyable to read as he had to move between screens.

## **7. Social Behavior**

Social behavior in the store was interesting to watch and sometimes difficult to monitor but people do come into the store together, they often browse together and make decisions together. However, it was much more common to see people come into the store together and then separate after a few minutes, do their own thing and then regroup – if they bump into each other in the process then so be it else they regroup when one is done or if they want to share something with that other person. I never heard anyone mention that they should regroup in twenty minutes, for example (unless kids were present then this time limit was stipulated in some cases). Generally, people do their own thing and then find each other again and decide what to do from there - there was always some awareness of where that other person would be either because they had said they would be there or because they were keeping an eye out and knew where they had last seen them.

The people who browsed together often talked about the books they were looking at, exchanging stories, using the books to trigger stories and generally having a conversation around the books. If one saw something they might bring it to the attention of the other person and they would read the back of the book together and maybe discuss something or share a joke. In other instances people browsed together to find a gift for someone else and in this case the conversation would be focused around "do you think he would like this" and "you know him better, what do you think?" and "he was reading something by this guy last time, do you remember what it was?" – the conversation focused on exchanges of information to assist in the buying process.

Some of the more prominent examples of cooperation and social behavior involved families with kids. On one occasion a family (mum, dad and two boys ages about 8/9) came in together and picked up some books about science fair projects. They then took the books to a nearby table and sifted through them, discussing the project ideas. They each had an individual book and were looking through that book but would engage the others in the conversation when they saw something they wanted to discuss. They would then pass the books around and sometimes would make comments such as "did you see this one, we could do this". At this point, they would all become engaged in the conversation.

On other occasions the tables in the kids section provided a facility for families to spend some time browsing. One family for instance, came to the store and headed straight for the kids area. There were two



young boys, the dad, mum and a teenage daughter (older teen). They spent a little while looking at the books on the shelf and then the dad and two boys went to the table and read some books out loud together. The mother and daughter were browsing the coloring books and after a while they sat down in a couple of chairs looking through the books they had picked up. Every now and then the daughter would go back to the shelf while her mum instructed her on which book to pick up (using verbal clues as to the color, left right etc). The two boys and the dad were still reading at the table. What happened next was fun to watch because it turns out that the book the kids were reading was one they knew and liked and had read before because at a certain point the mum and daughter who were talking to each other joined in the reading (from afar) and began to cite the passage that the boys were reading (they must know it by heart) and as a result, the whole family was essentially reading (or reciting) together. The same happened later as a song that appeared in the book triggered them all to burst into song together (from different parts of the room).

When there are kids involved, the adults and kids usually stayed together and browsed together, as the pictures below illustrate (figures 18, 19 & 20) this co-browsing led to some discussions and conversations between parent and child that lasted for some time. In the first picture the father is explaining some pictures from a book about the Vietnam war to his son who was animatedly interested in the stories his dad was telling him.



**figure 18**



**figure 19**



**figure 20**

When families are together they also question each others purchases – there was a lot of “do you really need another book like that, don’t you own that whole damn section” to “no, you have to start reading something else you are a big girl now, how about this one” to “you have enough books already and you haven’t even finished reading the ones you have so why are you buying more?” People seemed to have to justify their purchases in this case and they did, more often than not, manage to do so.

But it’s not just families who come into the store together. On one occasion there were 3 women (friends) in the store together, they chatted about the books on the table and wandered the store together. They sometimes broke away from each other and then found each other again and carried on the conversation (and there was an acceptance of that type of break in the conversation). What was interesting about people shopping together was that if they were not family members or partners etc, they would often not wait until everyone was done to pay for something; it’s like they have an individual shopping trip taking place in the larger social activity and they will complete their purchase and rejoin their group. This happened with this group of people and when one of them returned with their purchase the other asked what she had bought and commented upon the purchase and that book then became the focus of the conversation.

The banter that surrounds the tables is interesting. The shelved areas are very quiet and people spend a lot of time there reading and browsing but the table areas are more ‘chatty’. People talk to people they do not know, recommending books, looking at what someone else has in their hands and saying, “that’s a really good book, I read it in a day” and “oh my god have you read that, isn’t it brilliant?” and “the first chapter is really slow but then it’s amazing” and “my kids love those books, how old are yours?”. Personal recommendations were often shared here.

All in all, there was a fair amount of social activity but it was often limited to being together passively and so people might sit next to each other and read individual titles, sometimes breaking into conversation about things and also sometimes to plan what should happen next. The experience in the store is very personal - what I’ll call ‘me time’ – that is, time to yourself.

## **8. Personal Shopping Aids and Other Devices**

Looking out for how people either brought information to the store or went away with it, along with any tools or devices they brought with them was something that we were keen to do. I did not see many people come in with shopping bags and I’m assuming that’s because of the location of the store. However, people did have their personal bags with them, laptop cases and handfuls of ‘stuff’ such as keys, wallet, phone etc.

## 8.1 The Mobile Phone

The phone was a common tool but I noticed that when people are on the phone its rarely about events in the store, they are involved in other conversations that just happen to be taking place in the store (see figure 21).



figure 21

On a couple of occasions I heard customers tell the person on the other end of the phone that they are in a book store and maybe as a result I've heard the customer have a conversation about a book, but that was not very frequent and the phone was used in it's traditional role as a social tool just as it would be used anywhere (the one thing that did stand out though was that in the shelved areas, people didn't talk as loudly as they did near the tabled areas). One woman used her time there to do her phone chores, leave messages, return calls etc while also browsing but her browsing behavior was very rushed while she was on the phone, she wasn't really paying much attention to the books and looked like she was more 'picking up and putting down' without paying attention to what she was looking at (something I'll call non-engaged browsing).

## 8.2 Bringing Information to the Store

When we think of shopping, we often also think of shopping lists that people create and carry with them to direct their shopping experience and purchasing behavior. These observations did show that in this environment, some people came in with lists and left with lists but it was not prevalent among the majority of customers. Of those who did carry lists, these were the most common observations:

### 8.2.1 Handwritten Shopping Lists

There was a lady with a post it note stuck to her hand who picked up titles and crossed them off. Another man with a list of names, who picked up books and crossed names off the list and another who had a list of titles and authors who did the same. The activity in the store was to find these but to also spend time browsing other titles. The lists were informal and thus although indicative of a task, like grocery shopping trips where people go in with a list and come out with the more, the same held true in this occasion. This was in contrast to how people shopped when they had non-handwritten lists.

### 8.2.2 Non-Handwritten Shopping Lists

A few students came in with typed lists that were used to direct their purchasing behavior and they moved around the store looking for and picking up what was on the list and crossing off the items as they went along. There was another lady in the store with a booklet and she was picking up books laying them on the floor, crossing off something in the booklet and either adding them to a basket or re-shelving them.

I also saw a number of people walk in with pages torn out of the book review section of the newspaper who would go to the information desk, point to an item on the list and ask "have you got this one". Those who

appeared to be members of book clubs also often came in with something that had the title and author of a book written down.

I saw approximately 5 people come in with Amazon.com printouts that included the main info page and also some review pages. On one occasion the 'look inside this book' Amazon.com print out was used to compare the content of books on the shelves with that of what had been found on Amazon.com.

On almost all occasions the printed artifacts were abandoned in the store after a purchase had been made and the experience, in contrast to those who hand-written lists, the was purchase driven and focused and the artifact helped complete a purchase action.

### **8.3 Taking Information Away**

#### **8.3.1 Using Technology**

As for technological artifacts, I only saw one person use a PDA while in the store. This gentleman in figure 22 used his PDA to record some information about the book he had been browsing - he wrote on the PDA for less than a minute after browsing the book for more than 30 mins (I was unable to ascertain what information he took down).



**figure 22**

#### **8.3.2 Pen and Paper**

It was, however, common for people to have paper and pen with them and for them to write down some information while they were in the store, but apart from the lady who was writing her Christmas list, I did not really see anyone taking note of the titles of books. I did see a number of people taking notes from books and the gentleman who had his feet on the shelves (figure 7) mentioned that it would have been nice for him to have a camera so that that he could photograph the page he wanted. Others like the gentleman in figure 23 took notes from a dictionary and figure 24 shows the common behavior of people in the travel section making notes. One gentleman commented that he used the travel section to get some ideas for hotels for a place he was due to visit and others just said they wanted some information but did not want to buy the "whole book". A couple of people also took notes from the recipe books and felt comfortable doing so.



**figure 23**



**figure 24**

Yet more people looked like they were doing research and would create desk space for themselves (see the left side of figure 25).



**figure 25**

When talking to a member of staff she pointed out that the staff sometimes write down book information for people, especially when someone is not sure if they want the item they have requested information on. She said that what she does is to write the information on a book mark and hand it to the customer for future reference, perhaps to aid the process of a buying decision that was deferred [4] until a later time. Apparently those bookmarks have come back to them when the customer decides they do want the book.

## 9. Rhythms

### 9.1 Why people come to the store

The main reasons for people being in the store were that they were killing time before meeting people at the café, they just wanted some time out for themselves, they wanted to buy a specific item or a gift for someone, they were trying to think of gift ideas, they were passing through, or they just wanted to see what was new, came into buy a paper etc.

### 9.2 How much time is spent in the store

The time spent in the store of course varied from person to person but on average most people spent at least 35-45 minutes browsing the books. However, it was just as common for a person to spend 1 hour and up to 4 hours in the store at any one time. If killing time before meeting someone at the café, some would come in, kill the 15 minutes, go to the café and then come back into the store and resume their browsing and this was fairly common. On other occasions, people would come into the store while someone else was guarding the table at the café, in order to buy the book or magazine they wanted.

5-11pm was a busy time especially when there is an event going on. When this happens the floor area near the kids section is completely cleared of books (indicated by the black outline in figure 26). The tables are moved into the aisles and seats are put out instead. The store gets very busy before and after an event as people come in to hear the reading and meet the author. There are also regular customers in the store and it's sometimes difficult for them to navigate the aisles as there are carts in them but they tend to keep trying or ask staff to get the book they want – I saw one man climb over a table to get to the book section he wanted.

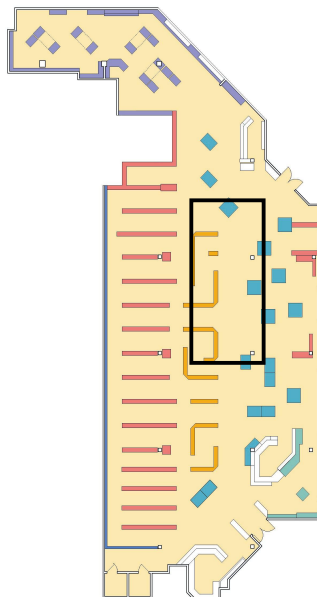


figure 26

The store is busy on the weekdays in the mornings after 10:30am. It gets busy towards lunchtime but quiets during the lunch hour (12-1pm). It then picks up towards the end of the lunch hour and then again later in the afternoon. Lunchtime was a popular time for people to just wander in and out quickly looking at a few items – “I’m here on my lunch hour, I’m going to buy a sandwich and run”. Killing time was another big player while others set aside the time and built the visit into their schedule: “I lived here about 10 years ago and am here visiting. I’m meeting friends and wanted to stop by here so I made some extra time for it”.

The evenings provide a steady stream of people and there is a rush of people around 9:30pm when the cinema closes and people come back to their cars in the parking lot below. At around 10:30pm on a couple of days I counted between 33-35 people in the store and although it sometimes looks quiet, there can be a lot of people in the shelved areas who are hidden away from the main floor.

Over the two weeks I saw some familiar faces come in and out of the store on a regular basis and there is a steady stream of people in and out of the store at all times.

## 10. Gaining Some Perspective

This report has detailed the most salient behaviors observed in the store. It was intended to be a descriptive account of the environment of the store and of the situations described, the things that stand out most are how people carve out a space for themselves in the very public environment of the store, how people wanted access to more information, how they sampled products and how purchasing decisions were made.

Let us take each one of these in turn:

*The need for people to create a space for themselves* that they could use to sample the products and make purchasing decisions was always an issue. They were generally able to do this successfully in any part of the store. This comfort appeared to be important to them.

*The majority of people wanted more information* and this was demonstrated by the fact that they spent time reading the front and back of book covers, read staff recommendations and valued passing comments by other shoppers. The quality of information they can access when just flicking through books is of course limited to what is there, but the information that seemed most effective was the personal information provided by others. These recommendations appeared to be valuable in identifying possible contenders and in making decisions. The animated nature of someone next to you getting excited about the book in your hand seemed effective in getting people to look into it further.

*This point leads to the need to sample goods.* People came to the store because they could see what was there, touch it, flick through it, compare it to other candidate products and even if they did not buy and had no intention of buying, the fact that they could sample was a reason to come into the store; and they could take the recommendations as mentioned above and use them as a guide to what to sample. Sampling audio books was an issue that was resolved in an interesting way. There was no way to sample the actual audio book and so on occasion I saw people pick up an audio book, take it to the shelves, find the ‘book’ counterpart, sample the ‘book’, return it to the shelf and then either return the audio version, or buy it. Clearly people want to know something about what they are getting.

All of the above examples influenced purchasing decisions, deferred purchase decisions or even time decisions (such as ‘should I stay in the store a little longer or leave?’). The picture is complex, varied and interesting. Going to a bookstore is an ‘experience’ and not just a goal oriented purchasing activity.

The data described in this report provides some evidence for consumer needs when in a bookstore environment – recommendations and opinions are elements customers want access to and we might support these needs, for example, with technological artifacts that give people access to such information on the open internet. However, such developments need to be supported by more evidence of value and we are

conducting another study in a similar but more technologically enhanced environment to ascertain how in-store technology affects shopping related experiences.

### **Acknowledgements**

With thanks to Tim Kindberg, Mirjana Spasojevic, Mik Lamming and Erik Geelhoed for comments on drafts of this report.

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