Fighting Back Against Amazon, Indie Bookstores Wage a Cardboard-Wrapped Protest

Mom-and-pop bookstores around the country are taking on Amazon in a sharp-elbowed stunt that uses lookalikes of the retail behemoth's ubiquitous cardboard boxes as a trolling medium.

The program, called #BoxedOut on behalf of the American Booksellers Association, comes from DCX Growth Accelerator, an agency known for punking a group of fashion influencers with $20 Payless shoes and remodeling a Brooklyn bodega to make an anti-gentrification statement.

For the booksellers' nonprofit trade group, DCX has taken over the storefronts of indie shops in New York; Washington, D.C.; and Los Angeles, wallpapering them with cut-to-the-quick messages like, "Our WiFi is free—please don't use it to make a $1.6 trillion company even richer," and, "Books curated by real people, not a creepy algorithm."

McNally Jackson in Manhattan
Not only are the windows of the stores covered in brown cardboard, but there are also boxes of varying sizes spilling onto the sidewalks. (They're Amazon-like, not Amazon branded, but the comparison is unmistakeable). Those also contain snarky Twitter-worthy slogans such as, "Buy books from people who want to sell books, not colonize the moon" and reimagined titles from classic literature like, "Little Women Who Own Bookstores And Are Getting Priced Out By Giant Warehouse Retailers" and "To Kill a Locally Owned Bookstore."

Among the participating shops are Book Soup in West Hollywood, Calif.; Solid State in D.C.; McNally Jackson in Manhattan; and Brooklyn's Cafe con Libros, Greenlight Bookstore and Community Bookstore.

The displays, which will be in place for at least a week, have been designed to create a media spectacle but, beyond that, to make an impression on consumers.

"We're taking that symbol – the Amazon box – and using it to increase share of mind for indie bookstores," Doug Cameron, DCX's chief strategy and creative officer, told Adweek. "We want the public to think about what they're doing and understand that buying from Amazon has big repercussions for small businesses."

The program was conceived with "a wink and a bit of intellectualism" that would likely appeal to the well-read target demo, Cameron said. Its voice, intended to capture the spirit of indie businesses and the respect of bookworms, isn't far from the Comic Book Guy of Simpsons fame.

Book Soup in West Hollywood

Cafe con Libros in BrooklynRobert Douthat
“We told our writers to tap into that character—who’s sarcastic, a little weird, a little left of center, but really funny and smart,” said Tommy Noonan, DCX’s executive creative director. “It’s someone who says things that blow your mind.”

The agency could afford to go bold because the client encouraged it, he said, noting that the stakes are high for the 2,500 mom-and-pop book stores in the country. Stats show that 20% of them are in danger of shutting their doors, after suffering the one-two punch of Amazon and Covid-19 closures,

with the trade association calling the former “a pre-existing condition” and the latter a potential “cause of death.”

“People may not realize the cost and consequences of ‘convenience’ shopping until it’s too late,” Allison K. Hill, CEO of the ABA, said in a statement. “Closed indie bookstores represent the loss of local jobs and local tax dollars, the loss of community centers, and the loss of opportunities for readers to discover books and connect with other readers.”

The original plan had been to debut a holiday campaign, but the partners stepped up the pace to coincide with Prime Day, when Amazon is reportedly expected to rake in some $10 billion. Data also showed that more than one indie bookstore a week has closed since the pandemic began, and the nonprofit booksellers’ group didn’t want to wait any longer.

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