Book Buddies Land at Idlewild Books  Jun 15, 2008

Located in an airy, elegant space, David Del Vecchio's Idlewild Books, on 19th Street just off Fifth Avenue in New York City, which opened officially several weeks ago, has great potential as a site for events--for book and author readings and signings as well as publisher parties. (Manhattan houses please take note!) And the store's emphasis on travel and literature "with a strong sense of place" will allow Idlewild to build an unusual and broad sense of community in a city with such an international accent.

Such were some of the observations made last week when Book Buddies, organized by the New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association and Bookazine, made its second foray to consult on and critique bookstores and help their owners. The group--about a dozen booksellers and Shelf Awareness--took its first trip earlier this year to Sparta Books, Sparta, N.J. (Shelf Awareness, February 8, 2008).

Del Vecchio, who was a media officer at the U.N. for many years, said he does not think of Idlewild, named after the original name of Kennedy Airport, as a travel bookstore. (He also said that opening a bookstore was not a lifelong dream--instead the idea came several years ago as a way to combine several major interests.) The 1,000-sq.-ft. store is organized geographically: each region or country has travel guides, language books, literature and historical works, even cookbooks "if they tell a little bit about the place." Sidelines include maps, globes, plug adapters, journals, and more. The only other stores that have a similar organizational style are in London and Barcelona, he said.

In the first few weeks of business, one of the biggest surprises for Del Vecchio was finding that customers did not move around the store as he had anticipated. He had stocked new books in the front, assuming that after coming in the door that is part way down the rectangular space, they would turn toward the front window and then work their way back. "But people come in, look at the middle, go back, and then go to the front." (The store has dramatic floor-to-ceiling front windows that offer great views both looking out and from the street looking in.)

Because of the traffic pattern, Del Vecchio is "scrambling to reorganize" sections. For example, New York, "a destination" in more ways than one, is now in the very front. New books are closer to the middle. And he is stocking a display table--risers are on their way--with new releases.

He's also been surprised by what's selling. "Nobody's buying anything new," he said. Rather, "they're buying a lot of classic, little-known titles. It's very exciting that customers are finding the things we spent a lot of time finding." But he expressed some concern because he expected frontlist to "pay the rent." Some of the booksellers thought backlist did a better job of that. Now Del Vecchio believes that "guidebooks will be our frontlist," he said. So far, the most popular guidebooks are Rough Guides, Footprints and "one-off guides"--the more unusual guides.

Del Vecchio said that customers are buying more "big, oversized $40 books than $24.95 hardcovers," and that some are buying 10 paperbacks at a time. Toby Cox of Three Lives & Co., New York City, where Del Vecchio worked parttime to help learn the trade, said that sales were strong at his store now, too: many of his customers are stocking up for summer reading, so much so that June has become his second-largest month.

Idlewild Books has a very limited selection of foreign-language titles--just a few in Spanish, but Del Vecchio is considering adding other languages, likely French, German, Portuguese and Italian. Booksellers encouraged him to do so, especially considering the many international tourists who flock to New York and the Big Apple's many multilingual residents. Rita Maggio of BookTowne, Manasquan, N.J., pointed out, too, that some customers seek children's titles in foreign languages for their own children. (Interestingly until about 15 years ago, the blocks on Fifth Avenue near Idlewild featured several of the biggest French-, Spanish-, German- and Russian-language booksellers in the country.)

Idlewild has hosted several events, and in each case, the store was approached by an organization. Last Thursday, for example, a book launch, discussion and cocktail reception, co-sponsored by the Mexican Cultural Institute for First Stop in the New World: Mexico City,
Capital of the 21st Century by David Lida (Riverhead), drew 100 people--"we've never had fewer than 60 people at any event"--and resulted in sales of 30 copies of the book. The co-sponsors bring wine and send e-mails to all their lists, Del Vecchio noted.

Stephanie Anderson of Moravian Book Shop, Bethlehem, Pa., encouraged Del Vecchio to continue to have regular events. "It's important for people to have a sense things are happening at the store. We have one event a week. It's great to tell customers, 'I can't believe you missed it.' "

Similarly Margot Sage-EL, Watchung Booksellers, Montclair, N.J., said "people want events and parties, and [Idlewild's] space allows that."

Booksellers recommended Del Vecchio hold open houses for various publishers, and Jason Rice of Bookazine emphasized that he should approach local and trade media and get on their radar. "Get in touch with Galley Cat," he said. (Ron and Andy, if you're reading...)

Del Vecchio said he was considering a lunchtime reading series and having reps talk about forthcoming books, ideas that the booksellers greeted enthusiastically.

Noting that he has a background in public relations, Del Vecchio said he has less experience in marketing and advertising. So far he is trying to get mentioned in the media based "on products and the store concept" beyond the idea of the travel store as well as mentioned in any place that might cover a store opening.

Ron Rice of Bookazine emphasized the role of the bookstore in the community, noting that "after 9/11, bookstores played a role in the healing process. People were shocked and wanted information. They wanted books of history about the Middle East, Islam, atlases. They wanted to find out why 'they hated us so much.' Bookstores were a magnetic draw; people didn't run to Ann Taylor."

Picking up on that theme, several booksellers likened their stores’ function to that of the traditional bar. Harvey Finkel of Clinton Book Shop, Clinton, N.J., said, "We say we're the bar without the liquor: they tell us their life stories." And Toby Cox said, "We're Cheers with books instead of beer."

Harvey Finkel recommended Del Vecchio look into spreading the word via FaceBook and YouTube, which have worked well for his store. "They're another new way of getting hold of people," he said.

Booksellers suggested Idlewild put more emphasis on staff picks and consider posting shelf talkers. Margot Sage-EL said that "people are overwhelmed by books and want to know what to buy." And Stephanie Anderson said shelf talkers "help sell backlist really well."--John Mutter

Idlewild Books is located at 12 W. 19th St., New York, N.Y. 10011; 212-414-8888; idlewildbooks.com.

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