



Industry insights E-commerce platforms for independent bookshops

RISE
BOOKSELLING

 **eibf**
The voice of booksellers

What is Industry insights?

RISE Industry Insights is a series of research papers that investigate priority topics for the bookselling sector. They give insights into key issues, policy reforms and external initiatives that affect the bookselling sector. In addition, they provide network members with tools to engage with relevant political stakeholders, culture sector professionals and private sector representatives to ensure that their priorities are adequately upheld and supported.

This Industry Insight paper was produced by Tora Åsling, Policy Officer at the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF). EIBF is the organisation behind the RISE Bookselling programme.

About RISE Bookselling

Resilience, Innovation and Sustainability for the Enhancement of Bookselling' (RISE Bookselling), is a three-year EU co-funded programme run by the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) for its network members, aimed at upscaling, reinforcing and maximising the capacity and resilience of the European bookselling sector.

About EIBF

The European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) is a non-commercial European and international umbrella organisation representing national booksellers associations and booksellers across Europe and worldwide. Our mission is to represent our members and their interests on a global platform, as well as to provide a forum for cooperation and foster the exchange of best practices.

About Creative Europe

Creative Europe is an EU programme that supports a wide range of cultural and creative sectors, encouraging cooperation and exchanges among cultural organisations and artists within Europe and beyond.

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Introduction

With the rise of online shopping over the past decades, independent bookshops all over the globe have explored paths to developing their online presence and making the most of this market. Over the years, multiple e-commerce platforms designed especially for independent bookshops have been launched, either by the national booksellers association, a cooperation of independent bookshops, or other independent entrepreneurs. These platforms have generated real added value for brick-and-mortar bookshops by allowing them to take the plunge into the online market; a move that many small independent bookshops might not have the capacity to do on their own due to lack of financial means, IT expertise, legal knowledge tied to online trading and much administrative red tape.

This Industry Insight research paper investigates a sample of e-commerce platforms dedicated entirely to independent booksellers, showing the different solutions available in three different countries: Libris in the Netherlands, Todostuslibros in Spain and IndieCommerce in the USA. The paper will provide an overview of the key elements of each platform, describe briefly how the website functions and gather the impressions of booksellers who are using it to learn how independent bookshops can make the most of their online presence.

Context

Truth be told, until recently, online sales only represented a moderate share of the revenues of many independent bookshops; the physical shop was still, uncontestedly, the main outlet. As a result, part of the bookselling profession had made the decision to not be present online and to dedicate the time, energy and finances they would have put in running a website, into high-level customer service instead. Meanwhile, the other part of the profession decided to join the online market as a mean to reach a new customer's base, increase its visibility, take up space and provide a more local alternative to big market players. That is, until 2020 and the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

While the health crisis forced people to stay at home, shops to close, and in many ways completely upended the world as we knew it, it also changed people's shopping habits. As the world moved online, the pandemic brought a new appreciation of the added value that local businesses bring to the experience of shopping in city and town centres and in the local community, and how those businesses suffered during the lockdown. Gradually, or perhaps it is more accurate to say abruptly, people became conscious of how their spending habits could support the local commerce. This awareness, in the middle of the pandemic, exponentially boosted the demand for buying books from local bookshops online – and clearly demonstrated the essential need for independent bookshops to be part of the online market.

For many booksellers, the COVID-19 pandemic was a shrill wake-up call that made a multitude choose to substantially increase their online presence in order to continue to connect with their customers in the midst of numerous lockdowns. As a result, in 2020, and the years following, e-commerce platforms for independent bookshops experienced a surge of new bookshops signing on. By hosting the bookshops' websites and web shops, offering features like secure online payment processing and customer data protection, all the while taking care of the maintenance of the sites, these platforms allowed bookshops to access the online market space with relatively little means at a crucial time.

Though the pandemic has now passed, and customers have returned to their local brick-and-mortar shops, online sales continue to make up a significant part of independent bookshops' revenues, with many customers still expecting at least a click and collect option. Thus, for many bookshops, the e-commerce platforms and the possibility to offer online sales are now an integral part of their business model, with most booksellers trying to find the right balance in accommodating both activities: managing an online presence, and all the other connected tasks it brings about, while having enough time to run a physical shop and everything that it entails.

Methodology

In this research paper, the three e-commerce platforms mentioned above, Libris, Todostuslibros and IndieCommerce from three different countries, the Netherlands, Spain and the USA respectively, will be spotlighted and analysed as case studies, providing valuable insights into existing online solutions for independent bookshops around the world. These e-commerce platforms were chosen to give a wide geographical representation and showcase different approaches to and solutions for e-commerce options for independent bookshops.

To begin, the reader is given an overview of the concerned markets and the key features of each e-commerce platform in the table directly below. This information is then developed in

the following sections, one for each country. Lastly, the similarities, differences and impact of each platform is further analysed in the discussion.

For each country included in this paper, national booksellers association's representatives or representatives from the e-commerce platforms, have been asked to provide their opinion on the overall impact and benefits of these platforms. Any additional information has been accessed via the official websites of the e-commerce platforms, national booksellers associations or national literary journals and publications.

Comparative table

Below is a comparative table, spotlighting the key features of each e-commerce platform and market discussed in this paper.

E-commerce platform	Libris	IndieCommerce	Todostuslibros
Country	The Netherlands	The USA	Spain
Fixed/Free price	Fixed	Free	Fixed
Type of service	White label + centralised e-commerce platform	White label	White label + centralised e-commerce platform
Managed by	Libris Blz, collective organisation for independent bookshops	The American Booksellers Association	The Spanish Booksellers Association (CEGAL)
Number of distributors	1	1	50

Case studies

This section introduces the three e-commerce platforms mentioned above, outlining how they function and which features they offer. It also spotlights a number of specificities for each platform and recounts the impact it has had on the bookselling community in the country.



Libris.nl

WEBSITE
www.libris.nl

PLATFORM LAUNCHED
2003
(functional webshop as of 2008)

TYPE OF SERVICE
Centralised e-commerce platform and white label

MANAGED BY
Libris Blz (a collective of independent bookshops)

40 million
BOOKS OFFERED
THROUGH THE PLATFORM

AFFILIATED BOOKSHOPS
IN 2023
220

Behind Libris.nl are Libris and Blz, both collectives of independent bookshops in the Netherlands. By coming together, Libris and Blz allow the Dutch indies to achieve collectively what a bookseller might not have the resource to do individually, like making collective agreements with publishers and suppliers, marketing and, notably, running an e-commerce platform. The two joined forces and founded

Libris Blz in 1982 and the organisation now has around 30 full-time employees and 220 bookshops in membership. Libris Blz sport a market share of more than 20% of the entire Dutch book market.

How does it work?

Typing www.Libris.nl in your web browser will take you to the Libris Blz e-commerce platform landing page. On this site the customer can browse through and purchase books from the entire catalogue of books made available on the Dutch market, that is some 40 million books, through the main wholesaler and distributor in the country: Centraal Boekhuis (CB).

Moreover, the platform is also a portal that allows customers to search for independent bookshops, either in the search bar or through an interactive map that, with the help of geo-localisation, shows all the Libris Blz affiliated bookshops in the customers vicinity and in the entire country. The interactive map also provides an interesting feature: the customer may search for a title and have the map locate which bookshops have that book in stock in real time, which also helps driving customers directly into the physical shop. At the moment, not all bookshops have provided information on real time bookshop stock to enable this feature, but it is an outspoken goal of Libris to have all bookshops join as soon as possible.

How to order books through the platform

The Libris Blz website offers the customer two different shopping possibilities: either they can shop directly from the main Libris.nl page, or they can shop from a particular bookshop's page, which is hosted by the Libris platform. When shopping from the main Libris.nl website, customers may select any of the affiliated bookshops to purchase from upon checkout. They may choose to pick up their order at the bookshop or have it delivered to their home. The order goes straight to CB, i.e. the main wholesaler/distributor in the Netherlands, to process, but the profit goes to the bookshop of the customer's choice, even if the customer opts for home delivery and never sets their foot in the shop. If the customer does not select a particular bookshop, Libris automatically assigns the order to the bookshop closest to the customer's address.

Additional features

To have their webshop hosted on Libris.nl, bookshops need to pay a standard "internet fee" as well as a fee corresponding to the type of website they wish to set up through the platform. Libris.nl can host bookshops' websites in two different ways: either as a white label page, where the bookshop uses its own domain (www.yourbookshopname.nl), or as a so called "shadow site" to the main Libris page, though with their own URL (www.libris.nl/yourbookshopname).

The shadow site version has the same red-and-white visual layout as the Libris main page, but with the bookshop's own logo in the header. In addition to the e-commerce feature, a bookseller's shadow site also displays two distinct types of content: centralised/national and local. The national campaigns and promotions that are an integrant part of the main Libris landing page will also be found on the bookshop's shadow site. This content is managed centrally by Libris. In addition to this generic content, the shadow site displays local promotions and events, which are managed through the bookshop's own content management system (CMS), i.e. through an admin dashboard in which the bookseller can enter the information. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the shadow site can display the books that are currently in the bookshop's own stock in real time, while also offering the customer the possibility of searching for and ordering books that are in stock at CB.

The white label website version offers the same features as the shadow site, to the exception that it allows the bookshop to use its own domain and further customise the page layout to fit the style of the bookshop. This addition makes the page look as a completely standalone website, at a slightly higher cost for the bookshop.





Libris.nl

Zoek op titel, auteur of ISBN [Inloggen](#) [Winkel](#) [Winkelmandje](#)

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  **Een prachtige ode aan vriendschap. Inspirerend cadeauboek voor jong en oud.** [➔](#)



Paperback € 20,99

VERSCHIJNT 5 SEPTEMBER

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At Libris, we firmly believe that an e-commerce platform is an integral part of a bookshop



JAN PETER PRENGER

Purchasing Manager, Libris

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Payments and delivery

Libris offers secure payment processing through an external payment service provider and customers have multiple payment options (credit card, iDEAL, PayPal, gift cards, etc.). Deliveries from the warehouse to the customer's address or to the bookshop of their choice is sorted by Centraal Boekhuis (CB) and their delivery service providers, DHL and PostNL. Thanks to CB's efficient logistics, any titles in stock ordered through Libris are guaranteed to be delivered either to the customer's home or in their bookshop of choice, within two working days. Shipping is free for orders of new books above €17. For orders below that price and for second-hand books and other non-book products the shipping fee is €2.95.



Impact and reception

It is perhaps not surprising that Libris Blz bookshops' online sales skyrocketed during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially since the country's first lockdown was imposed just before Christmas in 2020. For this reason, the e-commerce platform was for many bookshops a life saver. Moreover, booksellers were supported by the Stichting Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek (CPNB), i.e., the Dutch bureau for literature and reading promotion. CPNB set up a massive marketing strategy and campaign to get people to buy books from their local bookshop online while the lockdown kept them at home. The campaign had a direct impact on Libris sales numbers and raised public awareness on the fact that it is possible to shop online with local bookshops. As an example, in 2022, Libris.nl recorded 6 million unique visitors, an all-time high and a notable figure considering that the total population of the Netherlands is 17.9 million.

During the lockdowns, Libris affiliated bookshops could also make use of another feature when processing orders for home delivery: selling from their own stock instead of letting the order pass directly through them to the distributor, CB, which is the standard procedure at Libris.nl. This feature allowed the bookseller to claim the order and simply go and pick up the book from the bookshop shelf, create an invoice, wrap it up and send it to the customer. That gave them better margins while allowing them to sell off their own stock at a time when no customers could enter the physical shop. As a bonus, the book could arrive to the customer already wrapped in gift paper, accompanied with a personal message from the bookshop.

As the pandemic ended and customers could return to brick-and-mortar shops, online sales declined, though they remain higher than in pre-pandemic times, confirms Jan Peter Prenger, Purchasing Manager at Libris. The sales statistics vary greatly from bookshop to bookshop, though, Prenger informs us, as an average, 8% of Libris bookshops' overall turnover are from online sales.

Reflecting on the role of e-commerce and online sales in the bookselling trade of today, Jan Peter Prenger tells us:

"We at Libris firmly believe that an e-commerce platform is an integral part of a bookshop.

It's the cash register that's available 24/7, even when it rains heavily, there is construction works on the street, or a customer doesn't have the time or the possibility to go out to the physical bookshop. They both benefit the same small business and therefore the same community that the physical bookshop is part of.

It's also important to emphasise that all profits [from Libris] go to the individual bookshops: the more a bookshop invests in marketing for their own webshop, the more they will profit. [Finally,] it's very hard to invest in your own webshop all by yourself. It's not just the money, but it's also the time and energy. [We] work together to develop a good webshop, and make sure that all the profits go to the members."

Looking ahead, Prenger notes a couple of features that are in the works and that Libris hopes to invest further in to meet the always changing demands of the consumer, as well as the bookseller. The first is to allow more personal curation of the site, so that the books that a bookseller finds important should be highlighted not only in the shop, but also online. The second wish is to have all bookshops connect and display their real-time stock on the platform, so that the customer can find books that are currently in stock at the bookshop through the interactive map mentioned above. Lastly, Libris is looking into improving the platform's search function to make it easier for customers to find new books. "We will always work on our e-commerce platform," Prenger says, "Not just for the convenience of the customer and the bookshop, but also to meet with the [changing] demands of the consumer."



Todostuslibros.com

<p>WEBSITE www.todostuslibros.com</p>	<p>PLATFORM LAUNCHED 2020</p>	<p>TYPE OF SERVICE Centralised e-commerce platform and whitelabel (under own domain name)</p>
<p>MANAGED BY The Spanish booksellers association (CEGAL)</p>	<p>4.1 million BOOKS OFFERED THROUGH THE PLATFORM</p>	<p>CONNECTED/AFFILIATED BOOKSHOPS IN 2023 700</p>

Todostuslibros.com is an e-commerce platform run by the Spanish Booksellers Association (*Confederación Española de Gremios y Asociaciones de Libreros, CEGAL*) for its members. The platform facilitates the dissemination of culture through three functions: firstly, it is a service that allows customers to consult and browse through a large catalogue of books online. Secondly, it is a contact point that allows independent booksellers to interact with the public and, lastly, it is a point of trade for the Spanish book sector.

CEGAL had already anticipated the launch of Todostuslibros.com before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but the process was expedited and the launch pushed forward as a response to the health crisis' devastating implications for the Spanish bookselling trade. With the support of the General Directorate of Books and Reading Promotion and the Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sports, Todostuslibros was launched on Bookshop Day, 13 November 2020. As it is a platform that boosts the digitalisation of the trade, while facilitating the dissemination of culture, Todostuslibros could later benefit from Spain's national plan for recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic and thus receive a grant from the European Union's post-pandemic recovery fund, NextGenerationEU, to develop certain tools and features of the website.

How does it work?

All content and technical support of the Todostuslibros e-commerce platform is centrally managed by CEGAL's Todostuslibros team. It is a centralised platform that also provides white label options like Libris.nl. The main platform allows the customer to shop by picking a bookshop to cater for their order upon checkout. The platform may also, upon booksellers' requests, also provide links to the bookshops' own websites. The centralised platform is available in all Spanish languages, i.e., Castillian Spanish, Catalan, Galician and Basque.

To be able to register and process orders through the Todostuslibros platform, bookshops need to be members of CEGAL. The CEGAL annual membership fee covers the Todostuslibros service fee, except for bookshops with stores in multiple locations; these must pay an additional fee for each physical shop. Once the bookseller has created an account for their bookshop on the platform, they can add and manage content such as bookshop events, choosing a designated distributor to cater for their orders, among other things, through an additional dashboard menu that appears as they log in to their account.¹ From the point of registration, the bookseller needs to provide

data on a daily basis on the sales and stock availability of their shop by sending information from their stock management system through the software and online tools approved and used by CEGAL.² When they share this data, bookshops receive data on overall market shares and sales from CEGAL and the platform in return.

Todostuslibros sports many functions that make it easy to shop with local independent bookshops. At the top of the platform's landing page, the customer finds a large search bar where they can search for specific books through title, author, ISBN, publishing house or even synopsis of the book they are looking for.

Once the customer has identified the book they want, the platform allows them to see in which shops in their proximity it is currently available, thanks to a geo-localisation feature, an interactive map and the live in-stock feedback and data sharing from the bookshops affiliated to the platform. In addition, the platform also works with live data from more than 70 distributors, which allows it to show whether a book is available on the market, even if it is not in stock in any of the affiliated bookshops. Such books appear on the platform with slightly longer delivery time.

How to order books through the platform

The customer may proceed to reserve the book of their choice in the shop where it's available to pick it up later, or, if the book is not in-stock in that particular shop, have it delivered straight from the distributor to pick up in two to three working days in the bookshop of their choice. Should the customer wish to have the book delivered to their home, the platform automatically assigns the order to the bookshop closest to the customer's address and adds a standard delivery fee of €3.99. However, if the customer wishes to support a specific bookshop with their order, they may override this function and pick any bookshop to cater for their order and receive the profit.

The bookseller may, by logging into their account, choose which type of payment service they would like to offer on the backend of the site. They can choose to only allow the platform to accept customer orders to pay and collect at the bookshop. Or, if they create an account on the payment gateway platform, STRIPE, a company which offer secure online payments,

they can receive orders and payments through the Todostuslibros platform. STRIPE can also be used to sell gift vouchers via the platform, which can then be exchanged at the bookshop.³

Additional features

The platform offers many different types of book recommendations, for example through reading lists. Below the search bar at the top of the landing page, the customer's eyes are drawn to the many book covers appearing in the multiple reading lists displayed on the front page: lists of bookshop recommendations, children's books and comic books, as well as the 100 bestsellers in Spain fill up the homepage.

Another complementary feature of the Todostuslibros platform is the possibility to interact with the affiliated bookshops and other customers. By creating an account, customers may design their own "bookshelves" with the books they wish to read, rate the books they have read, subscribe to the Todostuslibros newsletter and pick their preferred bookshop to process all their orders.⁴ Both customers and booksellers may also write reviews which will appear on the book's page on the Todostuslibros platform.⁵

In addition to its e-commerce function, the Todostuslibros platform also advertises events that take place in the affiliated independent bookshops all over the country, thus serving as a contact point between booksellers and customers. The customer can access all events from the menu at the top of the page, but a ribbon of the closest upcoming events also appears on the Todostuslibros landing page as the customer scrolls down. From there, a link forwards the customer to a complete list of all upcoming events in the affiliated bookshops across the country.

Finally, the platform has a feature which remains unknown to the regular customer: the inter-bookshop market, which allows for the sale of books between bookshops connected to the platform. Bookshops may choose to activate or deactivate this feature in the settings of their account. If they choose to participate in the bookshop-to-bookshop market (B2B), they commit to sell any book that appears as available in their bookshop on the platform to any active bookshop in the B2B system at 88% of the retail price. The buying bookshop then bears the shipping costs.⁶



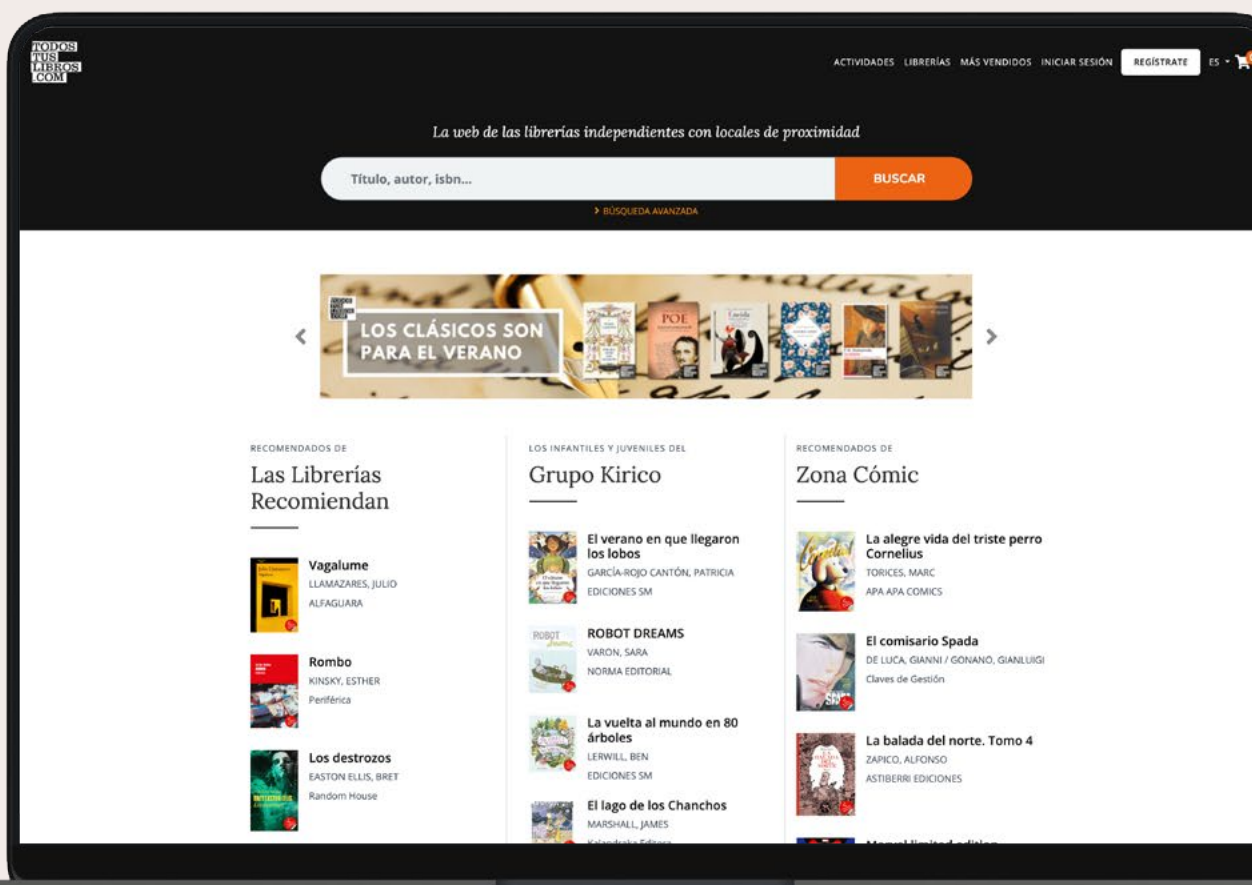
Impact and reception

Launched on Bookshop Day, 13 November 2020, Todostuslibros could arguably not have been released at a better time, as the global COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns had forced booksellers to close their shops for months. Those bookshops that had not set up their own webshops prior to the onset of the health crisis were completely deprived of almost any possibility to conduct business and connect with their customers. Instead, the market was left to those large tech companies that already had established themselves on the Spanish online market before the start of the pandemic. These realities were clearly demonstrated in a report by the Spanish Publishers Federation, which showed that, for every ten books purchased in Spain during the months of lockdown in early 2020, seven were bought online. Of those sales, 47% were made through Amazon, and only 6% reached bookshops' websites.⁷

18 months after the end of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Spanish online market plummeted to almost half of its size compared to during the health crisis. Online sales on the Todostuslibros platform, however, have remained stable, showing that, since its launch, Todostuslibros has established itself as an invaluable contact point between independent bookshops and their customers. Not only is it a point of retail, as previously mentioned, but

it also fosters the diffusion of culture through the extensive bibliographic and cultural content, such as the catalogue of over 4 million books and the possibility for bookshops and customers to interact through book reviews and bookshop events that are posted on the site. It has also played an instrumental role in the digital transition of the Spanish bookselling trade.

Pondering the progress and future challenges for the platform, Jesús Trueba, founder of La buena vida bookshop in Madrid and Director of the Development Office of Todostuslibros, highlights that a few of the platform's features might call for reflection and further development in the years to come. For instance, through a tool called La Trastienda, the platform allows bookshops to designate between one to six distributors of their choice to cater for all their orders. The bookseller may choose its preferred distributors in order of priority for order management, according to the commercial conditions established for each of them. This option tremendously simplifies the work of the bookseller and expedites the ordering process as orders go straight to the distributor, though, Trueba notes, the other side of the coin is that this feature may put bookshops in a state of dependency on a small number of suppliers. However, it is worth noting that the platform does not require the bookseller to limit themselves to a select number of distributors, it is an option, but the bookshop is free to make the choice themselves.





Moreover, Trueba notes that, currently, there is no budget to promote Todostuslibros, as CEGAL does not take commission on the books sold through the platform. Therefore, finding sustainable ways to invest in the promotion of the platform presents another challenge for the future progress of Todostuslibros. However, Trueba asserts that the association is working on finding a viable solution.

At the frontstage of innovation, having launched a platform that allowed many small independent bookshops in Spain to take the plunge into e-commerce and hybrid bookselling, CEGAL is firmly committed to the continuous development of the platform, and the trade as a whole. As they write on their website:

"[...] there is a need to face the new challenges of a sector undergoing change, for which CEGAL is committed to the modernisation of bookshop structures and the continuous training

of its members. To this end, it offers services that allow members access to training seminars, advice on issues related to bookshop activity and promotional materials, among other advantages."

In 2023, just under 700 bookshops have connected their business with Todostuslibros. In a country with a total of 1,500 bookshops, that is a significant number, showing the impact that Todostuslibros has on the trade.



IndieCommerce

WEBSITE www.indiecommerce.com	PLATFORM LAUNCHED Newest version in 2021 (older versions date back to 2000)	TYPE OF SERVICE White label (under bookshop's own domain)
MANAGED BY American Booksellers Association (ABA)	14 million BOOKS OFFERED THROUGH THE PLATFORM	AFFILIATED BOOKSHOPS IN 2023 approximately 600

IndieCommerce is a successful e-commerce platform launched by the American Booksellers Association (ABA) to the benefit of the independent booksellers in its membership. Since 2001, the ABA has run and managed multiple website platforms for indie bookshops, IndieCommerce being the newest edition providing their members with all the necessary tools and features to run an efficient online shop. Today, due to the platform's success and its essential role in supporting US indie bookshops with their e-commerce activities, the ABA has a dedicated e-commerce department, including full time staff developers, customer support and systems administration, as well as a team of freelance developers and outside contractors that all contribute to the development and maintenance of the platform.

How does it work?

The ABA is a not-for-profit trade organisation representing independent booksellers in the USA. Since IndieCommerce was launched and is run by the ABA, the platform has a not-for-profit status, meaning that the monthly fees bookshops pay for having their website hosted by IndieCommerce (i.e. \$50 or \$175 per month) is reinvested into technical support and further development of the platform. The platform offers features such as secure payment processing and customer data protection, order and inventory management, customer relationship management tools, point of sale (POS) integration with multiple bookshops' POS systems, and access to a catalogue of over 14 million titles, provided by Ingram Content Group, the main distributor of books in the USA.⁹

IndieCommerce is a platform that provides "white label" solutions, meaning that the websites it hosts appear under their own domain, e.g. www.yourbookshopname.com, and can be customised by the bookseller with their own look and feel for a personalised touch for each bookshop. Apart from the main e-commerce function, the website also offers

booksellers the possibility to add other features such as a section on upcoming events, blog posts, staff reviews and other content necessary for the daily functions and promotion of a bookshop. It is also possible to access google analytics to track traffic and sales data. Finally, IndieCommerce websites are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), meaning that the interfaces are accessible to customers with disabilities.

For customer visiting different bookshop websites that are hosted by IndieCommerce, each experience is unique thanks to the possibility for bookshops to customise their own sites. In general, the landing page shows them a banner with the logo of the bookshop at the top of the page, followed by a menu of options ranging from book catalogues and reading lists to events and other services. There is always the option to search for a particular title through a search bar on the landing page and to create an account to expediate the ordering process and interact with the bookshop. Typically, the

landing page also shows the shop's opening hours, physical address and links to their social media channels. Moreover, it provides a list of upcoming events and clickable stickers advertising the bookshop's curated reading lists or newsletters.

The IndieCommerce software is designed to fit indie bookshops' needs, with an easy, user-friendly admin dashboard to build and manage the website, meaning that managing the website does not require advanced technological knowledge or skills in coding and can be done directly by the booksellers themselves. Worth noting is also that the ABA's IndieCommerce team offer regular workshops and trainings on how to manage the website. This team also functions as the customer support team, which the booksellers can reach out to at any time, should they need assistance.

Indie bookshops that have their websites hosted by IndieCommerce pay a monthly subscription fee. They can choose between two types of subscriptions for their website:

1. **\$50/month** guarantees a basic package with all e-commerce essentials mentioned above and among other things:

-  Mobile-friendly, customised layout
-  Access to an offer of more than 14 million titles
-  Multiple payment methods (credit card, PayPal, pay at shop etc.)
-  Possibility for the customer to search books by title, ISBN, author or keyword
-  Website compatible with google analytics
-  Offer customers multiple shipping methods, in-store or off-site pick-up

2. **\$175/month** in addition to the features of the basic package, this subscription offers more powerful marketing tools, including:

-  Possibility to sell membership subscriptions (monthly book boxes, membership programmes, etc.)
-  The possibility to upload/sync the shop's local inventory
-  Integration with gift card vendors (e.g. Givex)
-  Manage and process bulk orders
-  POS integration
-  Possibility to list multiple outlets on the same website, for bookshops with multiple physical shops⁹

A third type of subscription is currently being developed; this subscription will offer the possibility to, through consultation between bookshop and IndieCommerce team, further customise the website according to the bookshop's particular needs.

To speed up the management of online orders, bookshops may connect IndieCommerce website with their point-of-sale (POS) system. Instead of manually fulfilling online orders in the POS system, booksellers can save a lot of time by integrating their stock management system with

IndieCommerce, to see in real time as orders come in through the website, and automate the process. This allows the website to show online customers, in real time, the titles that are currently available in the bookshop, which is a highly appreciated feature as it seems to also drive customers from the website into the physical shop.¹⁰



Impact and reception

IndieCommerce seems to be here to stay: since 2020, bookshops on the IndieCommerce platform have experienced a 580% increase in online sales, which amounts to a \$200 million increase in online revenue. Moreover, since the launch of the new and improved IndieCommerce, 600 new independent bookshops have signed on to the platform.¹¹

The ABA's annual report surveying and mapping their member's profitability, productivity, and financial management – the ABACUS financial report – shows that in 2021, roughly 30% of the surveyed bookshops' sales revenues came from online sales. These are remarkable figures in comparison to 2018, when online sales on average represented just 1.3% of an independent bookshop's revenues. More than anything, these numbers prove that booksellers truly benefit from being present online and that customers are consciously looking for alternative shopping options to Amazon. What it also shows is that hybrid bookselling – i.e., bookselling with both physical and digital stores – works, and that it is a business model to be reckoned with in the future. Customers want to purchase from independent bookshops and these bookshops have a natural place in the online sphere.

It is safe to assume that the COVID-19 health crisis created an unprecedented boost for online sales for the American bookselling sector, as it did in other countries at this time. However, it is noteworthy that though this surge in online sales was expected to decrease post-pandemic – as COVID-19 restrictions lifted and customers could return to in-store shopping as in pre-pandemic times – it did not. As scores of people have discovered and are discovering the webshops of independent bookshops, the popularity of shopping with indies online shows no sign of declining. As an example, in 2022, IndieCommerce websites reported online sales of \$42M, which is a massive increase compared to \$12M in 2019. Moreover, online sales continue to make up a significant percentage of independent bookshops' revenues.

Just as customers seem to appreciate the websites hosted by the IndieCommerce platform, so do booksellers appreciate the platform itself. In the words of Kimberley Patch, bookseller and co-owner of Rozzie Bound Co-op in Roslindale:

“ABA has done a great job of making a feature-rich website available to independent booksellers and, just as important, they've made it relatively easy to set up and use. It's also ADA compliant. And the regular webinars that step you through the process and leave room for questions and feedback are well done. Kudos!”

As a final note, Phil Davies, Director of indieCommerce at the ABA shares his thoughts on the benefits and impact of the platform to the American bookseller community:

“IndieCommerce is a truly unique e-commerce platform for booksellers. The ABA is the only not for profit retail trade organization in the U.S. that builds and manages ecommerce enabled websites for their member bookstores. Over the 20+ years of its existence, bookstores have guided the features and service offered on the IndieCommerce platform.

IndieCommerce is built on an open-source CMS called Drupal and the e-commerce component is built on Drupal commerce. This business model is unique and keeps our operational costs down. Unlike proprietary, 'for profit' e-commerce platforms, all fees that members pay into our service go back into their trade organization and the upkeep and development of the platform.”

“

Over the 20+ years of its existence, bookstores have guided the features and service offered on the IndieCommerce platform



PHIL DAVIES

Director of IndieCommerce,
American Booksellers Association

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Discussion

This section provides a concise summary of the above text by highlighting what the three e-commerce platforms have in common, but also some specificities that tell them apart, as well as the positive impact they have had on the trade and the challenges they face in the future.

How the Covid-19 pandemic turned the tables of choice and necessity

Setting up an online shop is not as easy as it sounds. As we have seen, it often requires technical skills and legal knowledge, not to mention the money and time it takes to launch and maintain the site and online shop. For this reason, many booksellers made the choice to fully invest that time, money and effort into their brick-and-mortar business, creating a unique customer experience in their bookshop.

When the pandemic hit, everything changed and most of these bookshops found themselves isolated from their customers and the community they served. These unprecedented circumstances brought about new challenges and the need to adapt quickly. Thus, the online shop became a necessity rather than a supplemental feature, and in many cases the only shopfront that could stay open.

While online sales had previously made up a modest share of the average indie bookshop's total turnover, they skyrocketed during the numerous lockdowns of the pandemic. Early figures from post-pandemic times show that, while online sales have declined overall, they remain much higher than in pre-pandemic times. This shows that the online shop has now become an integral part of the bookselling business and that hybrid bookselling, i.e., selling books in the physical shop and online, seems to be a business model that is here to stay.

Hybrid bookselling

Online and physical sales are not mutually exclusive, nowadays they complement each other to the benefit of many small businesses. Like Jan Peter Prenger, Purchasing Manager at Libris outlined above, the online shop is the cash register that is open 24/7, regardless of external factors that are beyond the booksellers' control, like traffic, road blockage or sanitary crises. Through personal customisation, the online shopfront can be made to display the books, events and other local initiatives that reflect the personality and preferences of the bookseller, who of course knows best what their community appreciates.

Additionally, having a webshop is also about visibility, it is about taking up space in the online market. To put it frankly: if you do not own your space, someone else does it for you. Up until recently, Amazon and other tech giants' complete dominance in the online bookselling market was virtually uncontested. Little by little, however, this dominance is now being challenged, as more and more independent bookshops join the online competition.



A newly discovered, and growing, popularity of shopping with indies online

As people were forced to stay at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, bereaved access to city centres, high streets and favourite shops, a new appreciation for these aspects of normality and everyday life seemed to take root in the general public.

Moreover, during the pandemic, many trade organisations, local businesses and individuals participated in awareness raising campaigns to highlight the importance of local commerce and the impact of the lockdowns. Thanks to these campaigns, a general understanding of the effect that people's spending habits have on the local commercial landscape seemed to spread. People started to realise that the money they spend locally has a real added value, as it is reinvested within their own community, to the benefit of all. As more and more consumers decided they wanted to shop locally, they wanted to do so in the way that was accessible to them at the time: through online shops.

Consequently, independent bookshops sold books online like never before – quite literally for those that had just started their online business. Of course, no one had any idea whether this newly discovered appeal for local shopping would last and what would happen when the pandemic ended, and people could return to the physical shop.

Therefore, the first post-pandemic sales figures have been reassuring to booksellers and booksellers associations alike: they show a positive trend and confirm that even though online sales have decreased, they are still much higher than in pre-pandemic times. In sum, this shows that customers have discovered, and developed a taste for, shopping online from independent bookshops.

How the e-commerce platform model benefits all

What all three platforms discussed in this paper have in common is that the fee bookshops pay to have their webshops hosted by the platform is always reinvested into the platform. Concretely, it pays the staff that works full-time on the maintenance of the platform, as well as the developments they make to the features that enhance the customer experience, as well as the booksellers' experience, of the platform. This aspect makes it even more beneficial for booksellers to have their webshop hosted by the platform, as it means that even if another bookshop makes a sale rather than them, they still benefit from it as their colleague's fee also pays for the development of the platform's features. Therefore, the more bookshops advertise the platform, the more they benefit from it, both directly – in terms of sales – and indirectly – in terms of other bookshops' fees collected for the maintenance and development of the platform.

The added value of booksellers associations

While booksellers join their national trade associations for different reasons, this paper concretely shows an example of the added value that they bring to the table. Two out of the three platforms covered in this paper were launched by and are directly managed by booksellers associations. All platforms covered allow small independent bookshops to join the online market by using relatively little means themselves, they give them visibility and a chance to compete on the online marketplace which they may not have been able to do on their own due to time and economic constraints. Moreover, they give booksellers time to focus on what they do best, i.e., bookselling, rather than learning the ins and outs of website development and management. Perhaps most importantly, the different e-commerce platforms discussed in this paper show that, in the e-commerce world, where large market players have been playing and ruling the game for decades, small players like independent bookshops are much stronger together.

Conclusion

Today's bookselling business can no longer be summed up as a solely off-line activity. The COVID-19 pandemic heralded an immense interest in shopping online with local businesses, including independent bookshops. To stay up to date and cater for their customers' constantly changing needs, modern bookselling has had to become a hybrid profession: booksellers now need to have one eye on the physical, brick-and-mortar shop, and the other on the digital shop window.

This new aspect of the trade inevitably brings new challenges – e.g., the need for technical skills and legal expertise on how to conduct e-commerce – which are not always solved intuitively. Lots of small independent bookshops needed help to take the plunge into the online – help which was in many cases provided by their trade association or other bookseller collectives in the shape of a common e-commerce platform. The creation of these platforms has shown that what may seem impossible when on one's own, is perfectly feasible together.

As was shown in this paper, there is a continued interest in shopping online with independent bookshops, even after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that e-commerce is not only for those large market players and big tech companies anymore: there is a specific place and role to play for independent, local bookshops.

Endnotes

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