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Online Retailers Won as Market Grew in Italy in 2020

By Ed Nawotka | Feb 02, 2021

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Online and digital booksellers gained market share last year in Italy, as lockdowns shifted sales away from bricks-and-mortar bookstores, according to the official report of the Italian Publishers Association.

Despite being hit hard by the pandemic in March and April, overall sales for the industry were up 2.4% based on revenue, which was calculated at €1.54 billion of books sold based on the retail price.

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E-book sales saw 37% growth, equal to €97 million sold, and audiobook sales were up 94%, to €17.5 million in value sold. Combined e-book and audiobook sales accounted for 7.4% of the overall market.

Online retailers, which are dominated by Amazon, increased their share of the overall book market from 27% in 2019 to as much as 43% in 2020. It is now estimated that Amazon accounts for 30% of all book sales in Italy, followed by a consortium of online bookstores, including IBS, Libraccio, and Feltrinelli, who account for 10%.

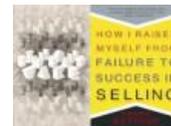
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"What's interesting," said Alberto Ottieri, managing director of Messaggerie Libri, among Italy's top book distribution and warehousing companies, "is that when there were lockdowns and customers shifted to ordering online, the consequence is that they saw some slow deliveries and turned, instead, to ordering from their local bookstore instead."

One important factor that helped spur more book sales, Ottieri told *PW*, was the move by the government to loosen fixed book price laws and allow retailers to offer up to a 5% price discount. The government also bolstered the sector by continuing to support the 18app initiative, which gives every Italian citizen €500 to be spent on "cultural experiences"—including books—when they turn 18.

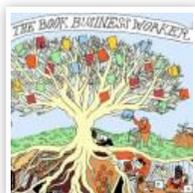
"One interesting consequence of the pandemic is that people fell in love with bookstores and booksellers again," said Ottieri. "We have all appreciated how efficient e-commerce is, but there was also the realization that competition from Amazon and other companies, was going to kill bookstores. So people have been coming up with new ideas on how to support bookstores"

One example of this was the September launch of the website Bookdealer.it, which enables customers to order books online and have the order fulfilled by their local bookstore.

"It is working quite well," said Ottieri, who said that the changes in the sector have impacted Messaggerie Libri as well. "As a company we offer 330,000 titles from 800 publishers 24 hours a day, which can be delivered anywhere in the country in one or two days. Booksellers have discovered just how efficient we can be as a company and as their e-commerce business goes up, so does our wholesaling business, which has been going up too."

For his part, Ottieri is sanguine about the future and the company is investing some €50 million in a new logistics platform to enable faster and more efficient deliveries. The industry's concerns about the future have shifted from worrying about the future of small booksellers, to wondering if there is a business model for large-format city center stores. "Can those stores survive in the future when there is reduced foot traffic and where the commercial rents are high? They need hundreds or thousands of customers a day and it looks like it is going to be some time before that might happen again," he said. "That is the big question I have about what comes next."

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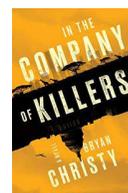
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