

Amazon hiring for bookstore in San Diego

E-commerce giant eyes expansion of brick-and-mortar business.

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Customer Michael Wallenfels looks at children's books with his son Henry, 2, at the opening day for Amazon Books, the first brick-and-mortar retail store for online retail giant Amazon, Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2015, in Seattle. *Elaine Thompson, AP*

Amazon is coming to town. But instead of catering to couch potatoes, the company is targeting people who prefer to browse or shop in actual stores.

The e-commerce giant is hiring store managers, booksellers and gadget enthusiasts for an Amazon Books retail store in the "La Jolla or San Diego area," according to multiple job listings posted online earlier this week.

The job posts signal Amazon's growing interest in the offline world, thus far a mostly untouched region for the company where it can extend its customer service prowess to face-to-face encounters, create shelf space for its growing lineup of hardware products and more efficiently handle returns.

To date, Amazon has only publicly announced one brick-and-mortar bookstore, a Seattle location spanning 7,500 square feet, with approximately 5,500 square feet of retail space. The Amazon Books store opened in November of last year at University Village, an upscale, outdoor mall.

The singular bookstore, which sells a limited selection of the site's most popular and best-reviewed titles, doubles as a showroom for Amazon gadgets, including its Kindle, Fire TV, Fire tablets and Echo, the always-on speaker that can handle a variety of voice-based commands.

The company's broader brick-and-mortar ambitions became a topic of debate this week after Sandeep Mathrani, CEO of General Growth Properties, said in a conference call with investors that Amazon's goal is to open between 300 and 400 bookstores. General Growth Properties owns, leases and manages various retail locations across the U.S., but Mathrani is not directly affiliated with Amazon. After the comments garnered widespread attention, the executive backtracked from his original statements.

John Mutter, editor-in-chief for industry trade publication Shelf Awareness, believes Amazon is more likely targeting around a dozen physical locations to open in the next year or two.

Amazon's exact plans for San Diego are unknown, as the company, when reached for comment, declined to discuss its intentions for the area. The local job postings, however, suggest that the online bookseller is already in the staffing stages for at least one store in the region. The positions currently listed for the "La Jolla or San Diego" Amazon Books store include Store Manager, Assistant Store Manager, Books Lead, Books Associate and Device Lead.

"Amazon Books is a physical retail store that offers a curated selection of books and an array of Amazon devices. We've applied twenty years of experience of online bookselling experience to build a store that integrates the benefits of offline and online book shopping," one of the San Diego job posting's states. "As a member of the Amazon Books team, you will have the opportunity to work with a stellar team that provides best-in-class customer service to anyone visiting the store."

In an email exchange, Reg Kobzi, senior vice president for commercial real-estate brokerage CBRE, indicated that Amazon had been looking for local retail space, but would not comment further, citing a confidentiality agreement.

Should the e-commerce juggernaut open up shop in town, customers can expect an unusual twist on the book-buying experience. Titles, chosen based on online appeal, are all displayed face out, emphasizing cover appeal instead of maximizing selection. That means familiar books in many genres may not make the shelves. This isn't the store for aficionados of fine literature. And in a seeming nod to Apple's retail strategy, Amazon's Seattle bookstore displays its name-brand gadgets front and center for shoppers to pick up and play with.

"For the amount of space Amazon has, (the Seattle store's book selection) felt kind of skimpy," said Mutter. "Any other bookstore of that size would have five to 10 times the number of books."

News of Amazon's foray into storefront book-selling comes as independent bookstores are enjoying something of a resurgence after years of decline. Over the last six years, the number of bookstores has grown each year, surpassing 2,200 in 2015. That compares to just 1,400 in 2009, based on membership numbers provided by the American Booksellers Association.

Equally heartening, says the association, is the 10 percent increase in sales reported last year by independent book sellers.

That growth, though, doesn't make up for the costly impact that Amazon's continued expansion has had on small business and jobs, concludes a report released last month by the booksellers group. The report, titled "Amazon and Empty Storefronts," found that the shift to online sales has led to a decrease in demand for retail space of more than 100 million square feet, the equivalent of 30,000 traditional storefronts employing 136,000 workers.

"This unprecedented study makes abundantly clear the deleterious effects on the American economy resulting from Amazon's strategy of retail dominance," said Oren Teicher, CEO of the American Booksellers Association. "It's our hope that the facts included in this report will help policymakers and the public better understand the need for more diversity in the marketplace, and recognize the potential long-term costs of the loss of healthy local economies."

San Diego has clearly suffered its share of casualties in the book-selling arena with the growth — and then decline — of large chains and the subsequent rise of internet sales. Wahrenbrock's, Book Works, Esmeralda, Grounds for Murder, John Cole's, William Burgett's are all no more, as is the Borders chain. After declaring bankruptcy in 2011, it closed all of its stores, including three in San Diego County.

San Diego's Mysterious Galaxy is a long-term survivor in the local market, but that doesn't mean co-owner Maryelizabeth Yturralde isn't concerned about the arrival of Amazon on Main Street.

"Anything that Amazon does is something that needs to be viewed with concern because of their predatory business model," said Yturralde, whose store operates in the specialized niche of mystery, suspense, science-fiction, fantasy and horror. It's been in business for nearly 23 years. "They operate in the Walmart mode where they don't add any value to any community they move into."

Adrian Newell, book buyer at Warwicks, a family-owned bookstore in La Jolla, has a similar view of the e-commerce titan's business practices. She's not thrilled about the prospect of having Amazon as a neighbor, and anticipates the company will go after the only book-business it can't tackle online: meet-the-author events.

"That's the one thing they haven't been able to duplicate," she said. "Otherwise, why would Amazon take on the additional costs of leasing space?"

Mutter of Shelf Awareness attributes the recent resurgence of independent bookstores, in part, to their efforts around emphasizing in-store perks, such as author events, that Amazon hasn't been able to copy. Amazon's brick-and-mortar business plans, then, are sure to make the company even less popular with this group.

"In the book world, Amazon is an evil empire," Mutter said.

Not everyone is afraid.

Justine Epstein just opened a bookstore in North Park that specializes in used books and new titles from local authors. Amazon's interest in brick-and-mortar outlets, she said, could be a harbinger of good times ahead for bookstores in general.

Powell's Books, a Portland, Oregon-based chain, with five locations, also is not overly concerned.

"We did check out the store in Seattle, and found their model not very compelling to us," said co-founder Michael Powell, whose 70,000-square-foot flagship store has an inventory of a million volumes.

"I'm not in any panic mode. We've survived Barnes and Noble, I think we can survive Amazon."

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