



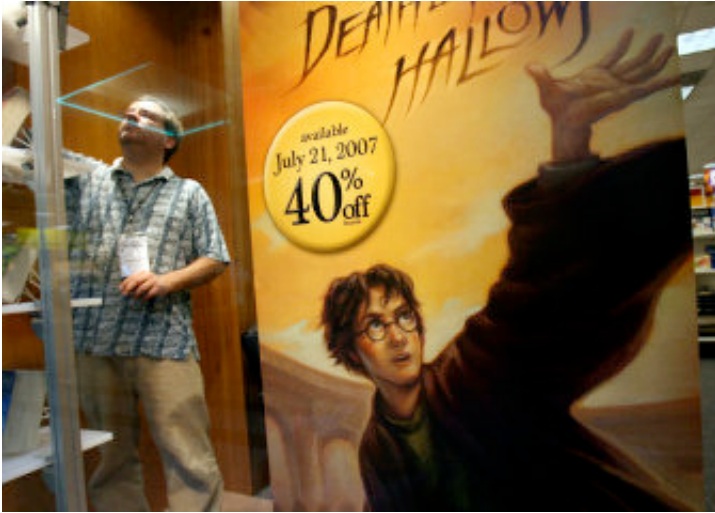
Sells Like A Charm

Rhode Island news

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By Paul Grimaldi

Journal Staff Writer



Keith Metcalf, manager of Borders Express bookstore at Swansea Mall, displays the Harry Potter books — all six of them — in anticipation of the release of book number seven today at 12:01 a.m. Wristbands were to be handed out last night beginning at 9, he says.

The Providence Journal / Bob Thayer Bob Thayer

This morning's release of the final installment of the Harry Potter books will reveal which of the wizards and witches in the seven-part series meets a dark end.

And as sales of the last book expand over the coming weeks, bookstores and other retailers will bring to an end their battles for the allegiance of millions of Potter fans.

As J.K. Rowling's series about the boy wizard grew during the last decade into an international phenomenon, the competition over book sales grew more inventive and more intense.

By the release of the third book — The Prisoner of Azkaban — midnight book-release parties, costumed reenactments, trivia and travel contests became standard marketing tactics for independent booksellers and retail chains alike.

So did the brutal pricing practices that once again have some retailers selling the book near, or even below, cost. For those businesses, the intent is to attract Potter fans with a low-priced book in the expectation that they'll buy one or more pieces of Potter-related merchandise, or even unrelated books, which will probably be more profitable.

"Skillful retailers might use the Harry Potter event to sell more profitable tie-ins and/or generate additional non-Harry traffic," said Mark Lilien, a consultant with the Retail Technology Group and contributor to marketing Web site RetailWire.

It's not the book, it's the Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans where the real money is made.

Online retailer Amazon.com is selling the last book, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, for \$17.99, about half the list price of \$34.99. Traditional chain retailers Borders Inc. and Barnes & Noble Inc. are selling it for \$20.99, 40 percent off list price. Independent bookstore Barrington Books carries it at 20 percent off list, its standard price cut for bestsellers.

"The whole point of a loss leader is to draw customers in and generate traffic in your store to sell other, high-margin, goods," said George Anderson, RetailWire's editor-in-chief. "It's really no different than the free turkeys or the weekly special on milk and eggs" at a supermarket.

"They need the add-on products to generate profits."

All those midnight sales events last night weren't as likely to generate profits as much as they were to generate some "cachet as a fun place to shop," Anderson said.

BARRINGTON BOOKS was among at least 10 Rhode Island retailers that hosted events that started late last night and ended after midnight.

"The real challenge is making sure we have a really interesting evening for people," Tony Allen, owner of Barrington Books, said this week.

Among other things, the store brought in a cast of young, amateur actors to portray Potter series characters.

Deanna Borges, owner of All Booked Up, in West Greenwich, used the sixth book in the series, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, to introduce customers to her store, which was fairly new when the book came out in 2005.

"It was a good way to get people to see what we were about," said Borges, who specializes in used books.

Staffing is always an issue for such blockbuster events, Anderson said.

"Checkout is one of the biggest complaints any retailer receives," Anderson said. "If people are waiting 15 or 20 minutes in line, some of the shine is lost in the process."

Borges brought in some trusted workers last night to staff her small store on Nooseneck Hill Road.

"I'll be here, and I have my family helping me out," she said this week.

Along with all the marketing schemes, retailers have had to worry about just how many Potter books to

carry at any one time. Order too few, and they risk angering Rowling's fiercely loyal fans. Order too many, and they bear the cost of sending all those weighty tomes back to a book warehouse. Deathly Hallows is 759 pages.

The Borders Express in Swansea Mall had taken 965 "reservations" for the book, the mall's marketing manager said.

Barrington Books took 414 reservations, Allen said, and ordered 750 books — split among three different distributors to ensure that at least some would get through in time for the start of sales today at 12:01 a.m.

"You just don't want to run out," he said.

Like many independents, Borges runs a tiny shop, with about 1,600 square feet of sales space and 400 feet of storage.

"The back room is pretty full most of the time," she said. "I rarely order that many — only Harry Potter. That way I can sell out right away."

She made room for 100 copies of Deathly Hallows.

"When things like this come out, we carry them," said Borges, a former Borders store manager.

Even though the last book in the Potter series is out today, booksellers such as Borges will make room for Rowling's tomes for years to come.

The fanfare around the last book "spurred a lot of people to start the series," she said.

She predicts that people will do the same this time, and book lovers will hunt down used copies years from now as they introduce a new generation of young readers to the trials and tribulations of Harry and his peers.

"There really is not a series that has captured so many people's attention," Borges said.

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