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## Two Stores, One Roof

Written by **Sue Masaracchia-Roberts** in *Community Today, Design & Merchandising, Featured Stories, Leadership, Retailer Stories*

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Thinking about grabbing a drink or reading a good book? Why not visit a furniture store? While stores like Restoration Hardware are working to get people into their stores and off the Internet by encouraging product interaction through their new design galleries, some independent furniture stores are adding other businesses within their buildings to increase traffic.

That's what Toms-Price Furniture in Wheaton, Ill., did. The family-owned store for mid-to high-end furniture and interior design welcomed Prairie Path Books, Gatherings & Great Reads into an existing apartment set-up within its 65,000-square-foot store.

A book lover and trained lawyer, Prairie Path owner Sandy Koropp had always wanted to open her own book shop, but found the multi-year leases that come with them too expensive. Instead she settled for hosting book events at her home or around town. One of the book events took place at Toms-Price, where Koropp was a good customer.

Furniture store owner Scott Price had originally leased out about 1,800 square feet of the store to a local builder. "It was synergistic and dove-tailed well, but they closed due to the recession," Price said.

Koropp began hosting book events at the store this past spring. "As I took her around the store, I showed her this [empty] space and suggested she try a full blown book store," said Price.

When Price showed Koropp the model apartment at the back of the store, she was blown away. "[Price] is an amazing community outreach model," said Koropp. "He offered the space to me rent free. It was one of the most amazing moments of my life."

Price's offer was more strategic than philanthropic. Koropp gets a place to fulfill her dream while Price gets more customers walking through his front doors.

"We like the traffic," Price said. "It's not like the grocery business. This helps get people into our store and gives increased exposure to the brand and products we offer—accessories, furniture, mattresses. Sometimes [people] didn't realize we sold those

things. They didn't realize the full breadth of our offering.”



*Toms-Price Furniture added a bookstore inside its Wheaton, IL location creating a stronger sense of community*

The store-within-a-store concept is nothing new. Department stores like Macy's and Nordstrom sub-let retail space to cosmetic companies, who, in turn, provide their own employees. Best Buy's arrangement with Samsung was instrumental in helping boost the store's sagging sales. Struggling retailer J.C. Penney is taking the concept to the extreme, offering its entire stores to separate branded spaces.

However, the furniture industry, for the most part, has kept to itself. That is starting to

change.

Although Koropp knew nothing about opening a bookstore, timing was on her side. She found a consultant in Florida who helped her determine inventory and bought more books and bookshelves from a Michigan bookstore that was going out of business. Prairie Path Books is open only during Toms-Price store hours, making it accessible seven days a week. Koropp also partners with Whole Foods, which conducts a series of wine, cheese and liquor seminars.

“We wanted to have an impact,” said Koropp, “and increase [human] contact and polite discussion, sharing ideas on issues while listening to a cellist or violinist and sitting on Stickley furniture that still has its price tags.” Koropp and her partners have 18 direct reports, including managers, volunteers and interns. Each serves a specific function from running point of purchase systems and book-buying to training staff and creating events. “We are a team—and we are part of the community.”

Koropp said, “The designers are delightful, even making signs for us, and the customers are the same mix as theirs. Our sales achievements have been higher than our projections.”

Price’s store also has a large room where groups—not just book lovers—can hold special events. “We like for the community to be part of the store,” he said. “We like the traffic. Furniture is a business that most people need only every seven years or so. Having the bookstore on-site [enhances] brand exposure.”

Toms-Price manager Cathy Manock agrees. “We knew it would look nice, but it is better than I imagined. It’s creative and inviting as they can sit on our furniture. I’ve heard

comments from people about the great looks of the store and people have been coming back. It's a slow start, but I think, over time, we will see more benefits."

In Florida, John Washburn, needed a way to introduce people to the trendy, eclectic, imported furniture offerings of his Washburn Imports stores in Orlando and Sanford.

A slumping housing market in the state was hurting sales. "I was trying to figure out how to make things work," said Washburn, who tapped into in his previous life as a bartender. Washburn built the Imperial Wine Bar in his Orlando store. "We'd serve beer and wine, and inspire people to hang out," he said.



*Florida retailer John Washburn, owner of Washburn Imports in Orlando and Sanford,*

*added bars to his stores to increase foot traffic.*

About 18 months ago, Washburn opened a bar in the larger Sanford space. Due to the limited number of county liquor licenses, he decided to offer a full bar. A general manager oversees both furniture stores, and another oversees both bars.

Washburn said, “The bars and the furniture stores have a good symbiotic relationship, although, at times, the staff has a hard time understanding how to avoid stepping on the toes of the other business.” However, Washburn added, “the negatives are so minor they are far-outweighed by the positives.”

To avoid furniture damage, “We keep furniture that can withstand abuse in the bar area,” said Washburn, “but problems are almost nonexistent because we attract a more mature crowd that likes to enjoy a really good beer in a relaxing atmosphere.”

A one-hour time overlap exists between the two businesses, during which people can get a glass of wine and walk around the furniture store. Half the showroom closes when the bar section opens.

The stores are built differently and, therefore, are configured differently; there is a separate entrance for the bar in each store. In Sanford, private parties can be given private areas accessed by the store door.

So far Price and Washburn are happy with the increased traffic they’ve seen in their stores. Despite his wife’s initial skepticism, Washburn says the bars “definitely have increased business in our stores.”

Price will re-evaluate Prairie Path’s sales benefit to his store in the next six months to a

year. To date, neither he nor Washburn see any negatives.

Price says the bookstore's atmosphere mirrors that of his furniture store. "You can go and browse, read, and linger there," he says. "We want our furniture store to be like that. You can come, linger, hopefully make a purchase, but always feel welcome."

### **Finding the Right Partner**

When furniture store owners Scott Price and John Washburn went looking to add a store within their stores, not just any business would do. The key, both men say, is finding a business that provides overlap in your customer base.

Price says the idea of a bookstore within his Illinois store resonated with him because the two businesses share similar qualities. "They are educating people, recommending books to read, providing high-touch, high-service, and that's very much what we do in furniture," he said.

"We are both seeking out the customer interested in good service, quality products and a good, high-touch experience," he says. "Theirs is a store for the book aficionado and ours is the furniture store for people who love their homes. There is a nice synergy in terms of the customer base."

Price recommends other retailers find a business that will generate a similar type of customer their store already attract, like a coffee shop. "Anything that draws customers and makes them part of a community but also a place people want to go to and go to visit," he says.

At the book store tucked into a corner of his furniture store, "you can go and browse, read, linger; we want our furniture store to be like that. You can come, linger, hopefully make a purchase, but always feel welcome."



Washburn, whose two furniture stores in Orlando and Sanford, Fla., include bars, says bringing two businesses together under one roof “has to be a good symbiotic fit—somewhere people want to hang out.”

“Keep people interested,” he says. “Make it a lifestyle experience that will drive people into your store. It can be coffee, mahjong or whatever.”

*Currently a freelance writer, editor, and public relations consultant based in suburban Chicago, Sue Masaracchia-Roberts has more than 25 years of experience in public relations and writing. Her specialties are the fields of manufacturing and small business, healthcare, and natural and alternative medicine. Her writing has appeared in a number of newspapers and magazines, including RetailerNOW, the Chicago Tribune, NorthShore Living, Vital Times, the Business Ledger, and What’s Happening?*



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