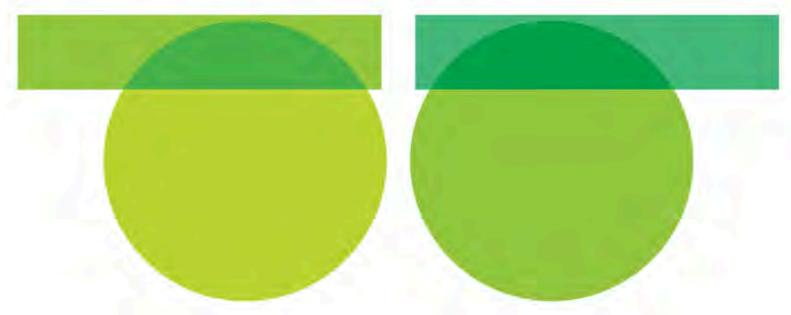


Posman Books

DBA: Design
Effectiveness Awards
Entry - July 2025

FOR PUBLICATION

Building a Retail
Brand that is
*the Opposite of
the Internet*



beardwood

Executive Summary

This is the story of how Posman Books — a scrappy independent retailer — built a bookstore chain from one location in New York City in 2016 to six locations in five cities by 2025 with a radically surprising, delightfully chaotic, design-driven brand experience that transforms your notion of what to expect from a bookstore.

Now well on the way to their goal of a national US presence, Posman's growth is especially impressive considering that thousands of independent bookstores in the US went out of business between 1998 and 2020. Bookselling is a challenging business to be profitable, and it is rare for a brick-and-mortar bookstore to be able to expand beyond one or two locations. Today, Posman Books ranks as the 4th largest brick-and-mortar bookstore chain in the US, after Barnes & Noble, Books-A-Million and Half-Price Books, based on number of stores.

Posman Books was founded in 1961 as a college textbook store, but when that business was wiped out by Amazon in the early 2000s, the brand team reinvented it as a distinctively different book and gift store in New York's vibrant Chelsea Market. When a new generation took over leadership, they partnered with a single design agency with the ambitious plan to expand Posman into a premier national specialty retailer. Naive? Maybe. Worth it? Absolutely.

Design has played a crucial role in this success. By creating a clearly defined and replicable brand identity experience that is not what you expect from a bookstore and the opposite of the internet, Posman cracked the code on what creative gift givers are looking for. Posman Books features a joyful, well-designed, highly curated product selection and an immersive colorful experience that encourages discovery, impulse buying, and general happiness.



BEFORE



AFTER

Here are Posman's Headlines:

- From 1 flagship store in NYC to 6 profitable locations in 5 cities
- +311% Revenue growth in 2024 vs. 2016
- A joyful and playful retail brand experience that is surprisingly different from other bookstores and the opposite of the internet
- Distinctive brand assets and a brand experience retail lay-out map that can be successfully replicated in multiple locations
- From 25 employees to 80
- High demand from upscale retail developers for expansion

All as part of an overarching strategy to become the bookstore brand that triggers joy, intrigue & discovery, that's the go-to destination for books and creative gifts for yourself and the people you love.



Description & Key Facts

Posman Books was founded by Gene Posman as a college book store in New York City in 1961, but that business was wiped out by Amazon in the early 2000s.

Starting in 2006, the Posman Management team reinvented the business as a book and gift store with an inventive recipe mixing together highly curated books, gifts, toys and all sorts of fun, creative discoveries in a purposefully chaotic layout. They envisioned it as the opposite of the internet, a place for discovery and happiness.

By 2016, they had two stores in two iconic NYC locations — Chelsea Market and Rockefeller Center. The Chelsea store was thriving with revenues over \$4 Million, but the Rockefeller Center store was performing so poorly, the decision was made to close it.

The Management team believed that Posman Books had potential to expand beyond New York City, but how could they ensure that any new store reflected the success of Chelsea Market and not the failure of Rockefeller Center?

They wanted to be 100% sure that they had their brand story clearly defined to win over the retail developers who select the tenant mix that drives the success of their shopping centers. They asked the Agency to help them craft this strategic story and then review and refresh their brand identity to reflect their positioning. And they sought to create a replicable formula for the Posman retail experience to guide store design, knowing that each retail store would have its own footprint, so flexibility was key.

This design work was all about increasing Posman's likelihood of success as they embarked on a journey to bring their New York City vibe to middle America.

Scope of Work

We undertook this brand evolution in close partnership with the Posman leadership team, who brought deep knowledge of and passion for the brand DNA, and customer understanding from their years working in the store and seeing what customers said and bought. We conducted a consumer research study with Designalytics to confirm that the refreshed brand identity reflected the desired brand attributes.

Together, we crafted the brand's positioning and story, designed a new logo and visual brand identity, packaging, and a retail experience map to guide how new stores could create the distinctively different Posman experience while adapting to different retail footprints. We equipped the Posman team with templates to elevate their social media marketing and to start email marketing to build their customer base and drive sales.

LAUNCH DATE

2017 brand relaunch in Chelsea Market.

STORE LAUNCHES

Atlanta, GA — 2017,
Alpharetta, GA — 2018,
Boston, MA — 2019,
Pittsburgh, PA — 2023,
Miami, FL — 2025,
Chelsea Market Refresh — 2025

DESIGN FEES

\$REDACTED + lots of free books

Market Context

Posman's ambition flew in the face of powerful market forces. With Amazon turning book shopping into the ultimate convenience, independent retailers like Posman need to give people a reason to go out of their way to shop in a physical store.

What makes Posman's expansion so impressive is that it's taken place in an environment of intense retail pressures, including a pandemic that closed the stores for 3+ months and depressed retail foot traffic for over a year.

Amazon transformed bookselling in the 2000s through revolutionary changes that devastated brick-and-mortar bookshops: selling below cost to gain market share, creating the dominant digital reading ecosystem with the Kindle, and unprecedented scale. Amazon today claims over 50% of all US book sales and 67% of US digital reading book sales.

Big box stores piled on the pain for independents: The rise of big-box retailers like Walmart and Costco, which began selling popular books at deep discounts, had pressured independent stores even before Amazon's emergence.

Growth of Barnes & Noble superstores in the 1990s to become the largest bookstore chain in the U.S. displaced many independent bookstores by offering larger selections and café atmospheres. By the 2010s, however, B&N was in free fall, with declining sales, a falling stock price and the closure of more than 100 stores. In 2018, B&N lost \$18 million and fired 1,800 full time employees.

Borders, once the second-largest bookstore chain in the United States, filed for bankruptcy in 2011 and closed all 399 remaining stores.

The independent bookstores that remain have shown remarkable resilience, but struggle to be profitable and rarely expand beyond one or two locations. According to US Census data, the number of U.S. Book Stores dropped from 12,151 in 1998 to 6,045 in 2019, a 50.2% decrease over 21 years. Economic recessions, particularly the 2008 financial crisis, accelerated store closures as discretionary spending declined and commercial rents became unsustainable for struggling independent businesses.

An in-depth study by Ryan Raffaelli at Harvard Business School, into how independent booksellers have reinvented themselves identified three key factors in their survival: **Community:** connections to local values and promoting localism; **Curation:** curating inventory for a more personal and specialized customer experience; **Convening:** promoting stores as intellectual centers, offering lectures, book signings, game nights, children's story times, and reading groups.



The downside is that the 3 C's are intensely time-consuming and labor-intensive, which is why most independent bookstores have profitability in the 2-5% range and cite cash flow and profitability as their #1 challenge, according to American Booksellers Association (ABA) data. They lack the resources to expand beyond one location, which typically costs around REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA in lease signing, build-out and inventory investment.

The Posman business model is more profitable than other independent bookstores because they invest less in events and carry only the book selections that they know people will buy, investing in new titles only when demand is evident. Still, investing REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA in a new store opening is a massive undertaking for Posman Books, and remarkable that they've been able to open five new stores in 9 years.

The pandemic was devastating for Posman, with Chelsea Market closed for over 3 months, and depressed foot traffic at all stores for well over a year. The hit on cash flow delayed their store expansion plans. Statista US research confirms the pandemic accelerated growth of online shopping by 43% in 2020.

Project Brief

Given the uniqueness of the Chelsea Market location, a one-of-a-kind retail destination in NYC, and the challenging environment for independent book stores across the country, the question was: how could we make the Posman brand magic predictable and portable to expand successfully to multiple cities in different regions?

How could we design the Posman brand to be irresistible to developers, book lovers and gift givers, and actually turn a profit outside the NYC bubble?

A key target audience for Posman's expansion is real estate developers, who employ a sophisticated, multi-layered approach to an ideal tenant mix for high-end shopping centers, combining market analysis, strategic planning, and relationship-building to create optimal tenant mixes that maximize both revenue and customer experience. Independent stores like Posman can never match the rents paid by national brands, but fit a need for unique retailers that provide distinctive shopping experiences.

Research by The International Council of Shopping Centers says these distinctive retailers "foster a sense of belonging, creating a distinct and personal shopping environment and provide unique offerings. Their products and services stand out, attracting customers seeking something different from chain stores."

Developers are looking for proven independent retail success stories that they can count on to attract shoppers and stay open for years.

BUSINESS OBJECTIVES OF THE BRIEF WERE TO:

- 01 Design a replicable and distinctively joyful and playful retail brand experience that can be successfully implemented in multiple markets beyond New York City
- 02 Launch 5 new stores in 9 years
- 03 Triple revenues of the brand in 9 years

All as part of an overarching strategy to become the bookstore brand that triggers joy, intrigue & discovery, that's your destination for books and creative gifts for yourself and others.

This led us to the brief: A brand positioning, visual identity, and replicable retail brand experience for Posman Books that is distinctively different from other bookstores and worth going out of your way for, wherever you live.

Design Solution

We delved deep with interviews of Posman leaders and in-store team to glean insights about what was working at Posman in Chelsea Market and why. None of this had ever been written down before, which is why they had failed to replicate it in the Rockefeller Center location.

We learned that people have expectations of what a classic book store will be like: Calm and contemplative, intellectual sanctuaries, events and author signings, books displayed spine out, logical categorization that makes finding specific books easy, gifts and toys confined to specific areas, with clear signage directing customers to sections.

These tropes are partly responsible for the fact that only 25% of Americans aged 18 to 29 years shopped for books at a bookstore in the past 12 months (ABA 2023). They think book stores are boring.

In contrast, Posman walls are bright green and there's upbeat music. Books are displayed in tall piles on tables, as well as on shelves. Some books are wrapped in brown paper as mystery buys with just a description on the outside.

Highly curated notebooks, journals, stuffed animals, blind boxes with random collectibles, cool toys and other finds are interspersed with books to encourage browsing and discovery. There's no section signage. You just figure it out, or ask someone for help.

Through debates and visual exercises, we nailed the brand positioning to capture what people are yearning for as the alternative to traditional bookstores and is the opposite of their fast-find on the internet:

POSITIONING

Posman Books is a surprising bookstore for book lovers and creative gift givers that *intrigues your curiosity with a multi-sensory journey designed to spread happiness far and wide.* It has characters like a book, inspires like a gallery, and sells like a store.

POSMAN'S BRAND CHARACTER IS:

*Incredibly
positive*

*Wildly
imaginative*

*Colorful in
character*

Externally-facing About Us language helped align the Posman team on how to talk about their brand to developers and in communications from their website to PR to Coming Soon posters:

FOUND: Your Happy Place. Get in and get lost.

Posman Books feeds the curious. We're a bookstore generated to fascinate and fuel your self-expression; a haven for happenstance and a wellspring of surprises.

Every book you read, card you send, and gift you give should be a phenomenal experience. That's why everything we carry has to meet our ridiculously high standards. You're bound to find a story you never knew you needed and one you just have to share.

Come. Explore our stores. They're filled with blissful chaos, tons to touch, and a colorful cast of characters all designed to make you smile.

We're the opposite of the internet. Full of the joy, inspiration, and wonder that only comes from the real world.

We distilled the brand positioning to desired brand attributes for the brand identity to express what makes Posman so different from typical book stores:

- PLAYFUL
- JOYFUL/HAPPY
- INTRIGUING
- CAREFREE
- FOR CREATIVE GIFT GIVERS

We assessed the existing brand design against the brand story and desired attributes to identify design priorities:

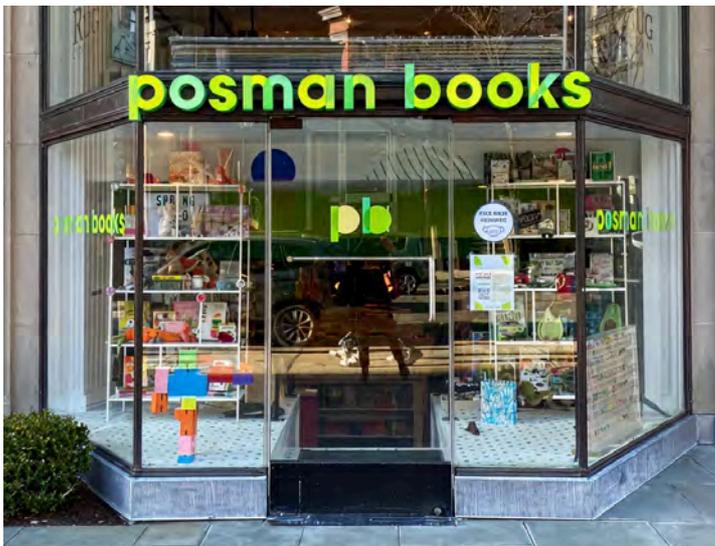
Keep & Expand: Vivid green color radiates vibrancy and "surprising book store" energy. This distinctive green and a complimentary palette of greens became the foundation of the new brand identity.

Replace: Old logo, based on a circle P that suggests a subway line had no relevance outside NYC; the black typography lacked personality. New logo design typography features playful layers of green that suggest layers of intrigue to be found inside the store. A "Spectacles Symbol" using the p and b suggests happy discoveries and magical stories you can find in the store. We designed a new pb monogram to be used in fun and surprising ways throughout the experience

Add: Much more color to ramp up the happiness and joy with a sophisticated palette of pastels and circle graphics that can be used to decorate walls and ceilings, and define specific spaces within the store, as well as in digital communications. The spectacles symbol can be used in creative ways as a wall graphic and packaging.

The new brand identity design put into action transports visitors into a world of discovery where lingering brings happiness. To build relationships with customers beyond the store, we designed, email and social templates to get the Posman team started on loyalty-building activities with Posman fans.

This brand design work took place simultaneously with a deep assessment of why the Chelsea Market store was so much more successful than Rockefeller Center, which led us to identify and design a retail brand experience map that provided the blueprint for future stores. While the Rockefeller store looked similar on the surface, it feel flat and failed to deliver the same experience as Chelsea. We identified specific areas of the store and the role they played in providing a distinctive experience that guides people through the story with layers of discovery to keep shoppers browsing.



Brand Experience Map Design

The Hook area at the entrance draws you in with local highlights and piles of nostalgic classics that catch your eye from the door.

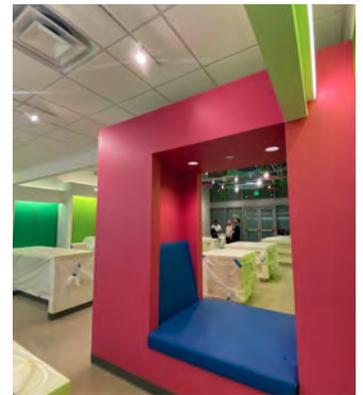
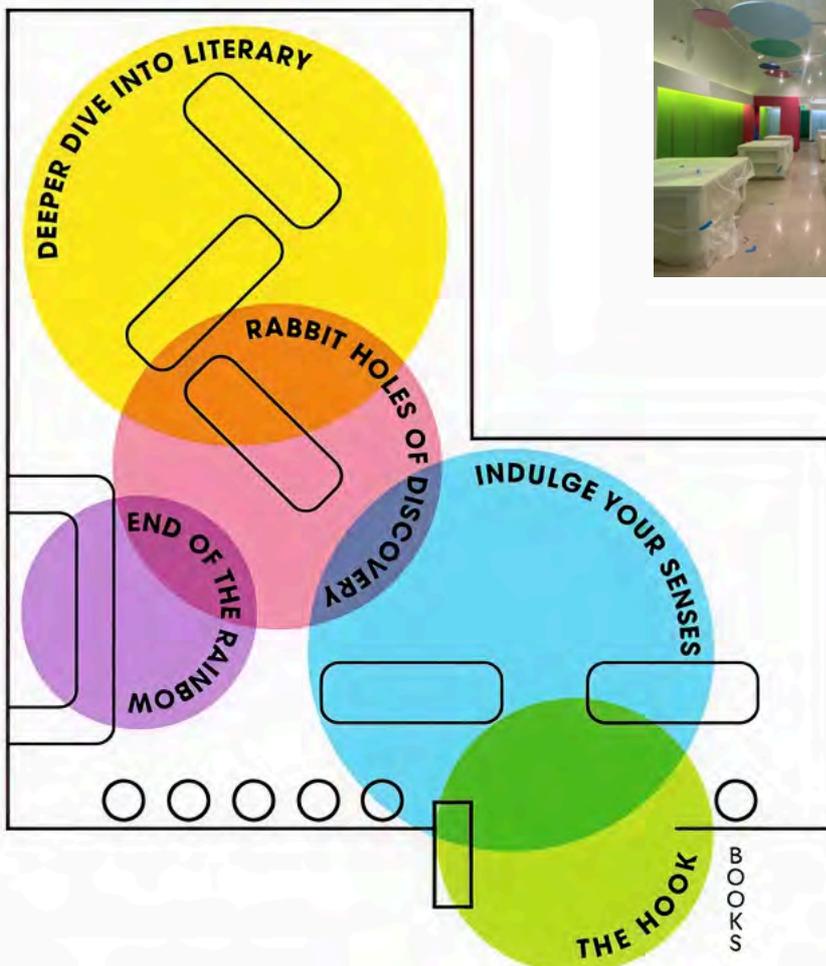
Indulge Your Senses are multi-sensory displays that delight your eyes and you want to touch: Books piled high, notebooks and journals stacked in ways you've never seen before; shelves of books interspersed with cool stuffies and stylish water bottles; cubbies filled with characters; and carousels of curated cards. Happy music has you humming along.

Rabbit Holes of Discovery invite investigation — think Alice in Wonderland meets treasure hunt. You come in for one book and leave with a temporary tattoo, three journals, and a game you didn't know existed.

Deep Dive Into Literary with a pinball-inspired floor design to keep you jumping from section to section; books and tables of books without section titles encourage discovery; lower ceilings and lighting bring focus to the books; reading nooks invite you to sit awhile.

Candy Store End of the Rainbow is a huge circular check-out packed with small add-on impulse purchases, including popular blind boxes that somehow feel essential.

The result is that each store looks and feels the same, despite completely different layouts.



Brand experience map details the store design elements that make the Posman retail experience so distinctive, identifying key areas of the store and their role, providing a blueprint that Posman store designers could adapt and flex to individual store layouts in cities around America.

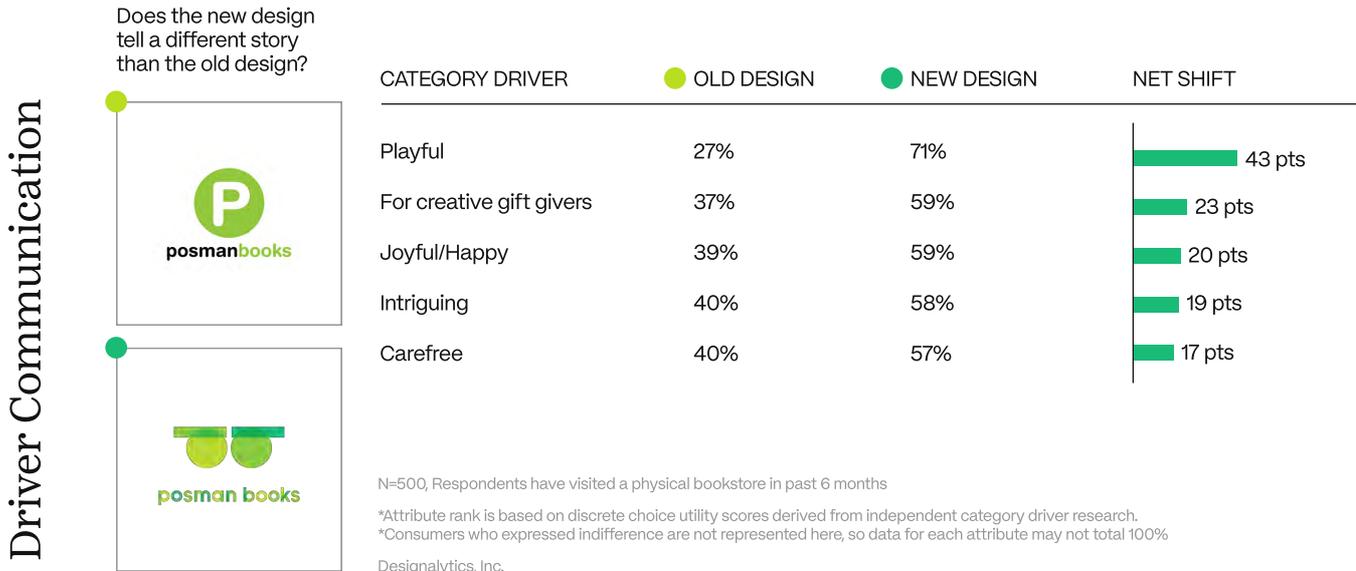
Result #1

GOAL: Design a replicable and distinctively joyful and playful retail brand experience that can be successfully implemented in markets beyond New York City

RESULTS: The Posman Books brand experience is undeniably unique. From the outside, the Posman Books logo signals a different kind of bookstore, and on the inside, the sensory experience with bright Posman green

walls, pastel ceiling circles, spectacles wall graphics and happy music are designed to be welcoming, uplifting and invite discovery.

We conducted quantitative design research with Designalytics to confirm that the new brand identity shifted the communications attributes over the old (spoiler: it worked).



The brand experience map is a true game-changer. As Robert Fader, VP of Posman Books, says: "We have total confidence in the replicability of our model, so we don't waste any time talking about it when we go to a new location. We don't need to waste any time on meetings on how the store will look, because it has all been sorted out and we can work quickly."

Result #2

GOAL: Launch 5 new stores in 9 years (starting in 2017).

RESULTS: Despite the pandemic disrupting the timeline and closing the stores for over 3 months in 2020, we accomplished the goal of opening 5 new Posman Books stores in 9 years, with a Tampa location due to open in 2026, and a web store opening in late 2025.

- 2017 - Ponce City Market, Atlanta, GA
- 2020 - Avalon, Alpharetta, GA
- 2021 - Newbury Street, Boston, MA
- 2022 - Produce Terminal, Pittsburgh PA
- 2025 - WorldCenter, Miami, FL

Posman Books is the only independent bookstore (to the best of our knowledge) that has accomplished this feat of expanding beyond 1-2 locations in the current environment. We attribute our success to the distinctive design of the Posman brand identity and brand experience that appeals across disparate markets from the Northeast to the South and the Midwest.

This expansion has added 55 new jobs, taking the Posman team from 25 to 80 employees, almost all serving customers in the stores.

Result #3

GOAL: Triple revenues of the brand in 9 years

RESULTS: It took us 8 years to achieve this goal (thanks, 2020, for the character development we didn't ask for).

- 2016 - Chelsea Market, NY: REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA (Before)
- 2017 - Ponce City Market, Atlanta, GA REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA
- 2020 - Avalon, Alpharetta, GA: COVID STRIKES REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA
- 2021 - Newbury Street, Boston, MA
- 2022 - Produce Terminal, Pittsburgh PA: REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA
- 2024 - ALL STORES: REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA = **311% growth**
- 2025 - Miami, FL

Posman has accomplished all this growth while staying profitable. As each store reaches maturity, which typically takes three years, they achieve a predictable margin of REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA so the business is increasingly profitable as the new stores get established.

Result #4

GOAL: Become the book store brand that triggers joy & intrigue & discovery, that's your destination for creative gifts for yourself and others.

RESULTS: Posman's reputation is growing. The audience that notices the brand first are developers, the shopping mall owners who compete for the most valued retailers that will bring shoppers in. They've seen the success of Posman in downtown Atlanta and in suburban Alpharetta. They're impressed that it's a proven retail model that's completely different from a traditional bookstore.

For Posman's most recent store opening, the brand earned a prime spot in the smoking hot Miami WorldCenter, an open-air urban shopping district with high-end retail, dining, art, and entertainment.

Posman is located in the highly desirable, highly visible spot next to the Apple store and opposite the Museum of Ice Cream. Posman cannot compete for rent with these national brands, but is valued for its ability to draw book lovers and creative gift givers.

Posman is now being courted by developers to expand to Tampa, Raleigh, Charlotte, Houston and Dallas.



Other Influencing Factors

Posman's success has been supported to some extent by these positive influencing factors:

Independent bookstores are experiencing a surprising resurgence after years of decline, driven by experiential and community-focused appeal, human curation and personalized service. In 2016, there were 1,244 members in the American Booksellers Association, at 1,749 locations. As of 2024, the ABA had 2,863 individual members, at 3,281 locations.

What sets Posman apart is their ability to expand to multiple locations, while almost all other independent bookstores are only in one location.

Barnes & Noble, now led by James Daunt, opened 57 stores from 2020-2024, but he admits their success is highly unpredictable. "If I visit 10 stores, five I am happy with five, three are okay, and two are horrible," Daunt said. In contrast, the Posman team is pleased with the appearance and performance of all six of their stores. All are profitable.

BookTok has emerged as a significant force in modern publishing, reshaping reading habits particularly among young women. Adult fiction has been publishing's steadiest-selling category for 2020-2024 with unit sales of print adult fiction books up 8.5% according to Circana BookScan, but it is the only category of books to post an increase during this period.

Circana BookScan BookTok Trajectory

2020: 13 million copies sold

2021: 27 million copies sold (peak growth)

2022: 47 million copies sold

2023: ~47 million copies sold (plateau)

2024: Nearly 20% growth over 2023

The "Shop Local" movement encourages people to purchase goods and services from locally-owned independent businesses rather than national chains or online retailers. The National Federation of Independent Businesses says Small Business Saturday is the most important shopping day of the season for 36% of independent retailers. However, there has not been a major increase in spending on Small Business Saturday in the past 10 years: **2015: \$16.2 billion spent** (Grasshopper article citing American Express data) vs. **2023: Around \$17 billion projected spending** (Source: U.S. Census Bureau).

The pandemic had a complex and multifaceted impact on reading habits, with 30% of people claiming to read more books, but mostly on digital readers rather than physical books. Early in the pandemic, many people turned to reading as a coping mechanism during lockdowns. Roughly, one third of people reported reading more books. But COVID also accelerated the shift towards digital reading formats as physical bookstores and libraries were closed.



CREDITS

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