

“Challenges and strategies for developing an English-language bookshop in a French-speaking country: the case of ‘Le Bookshop’”

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## **Introduction**

During my studies in Montpellier, France, I did an internship at Le Bookshop. In this essay, I will answer the following question: How can an English-language bookshop thrive in a French-speaking country? In the first part, I'll explain the company's history and its place in the local, national and potentially international economy. In the second part, I'll focus on the culture of the bookshop and my role and responsibilities. In the third part, I'll describe what I've learned during my internship, particularly with regard to my future career aspirations and the essay question. In the final section, I'll explore the opportunities that could be pursued to position the bookshop in an international market.

## **Company History and Economic Situation**

The story behind the creation of the bookshop is very interesting. I had a one-to-one conversation with one of the bookshop's owners, Salomé, who explained that before this, the bookshop was originally a café that opened in the mid-1990s called “As You Like It” . This café was owned and run by a Scottish couple, who intended to create a “pub” atmosphere for the store, with an emphasis on conviviality. Another feature of the store was that the owners collected and received donations of second-hand English-language books for customers to read during their visit. Gradually, the store became a place where Montpellier residents could come to chat in English and meet other English speakers.

In the early 2000s, the Scottish couple decided to sell the store to a bookseller who, inspired by all the books collected, decided to transform the café into a bookshop called “The Book-In-Bar”. The aim of the store under the bookseller's leadership was to transform it from a café into a complete English-language bookshop, enabling local English speakers to find books they couldn't find in other French libraries. The business proved successful, and the decision was made to open another store in Aix-en-Provence. This store is still in business today under the same name, but has been expanded to include coffees, desserts and other beverages.

In 2008, the name Le Bookshop was born when the bookseller decided to sell The Book-In Bar in Montpellier to a French-Dutch couple. The store's ambience remained the same under their management, with an emphasis on buying English-language books. In 2015, Marin, one of the store's current managers, began an internship at the bookshop to fulfill her degree requirements. She returned for a second internship and shortly afterwards became part of the management team responsible for running the store. In 2017, another one of the current managers, Salomé, began an internship, and the staff looking after the store was made up of a team of interns who loved and cared for the store. The Franco-Dutch couple who owned the store decided to sell it after almost ten years of operation to an American businessman by the name of Leif Morgan. Leif Morgan was a very experienced businessman with other businesses all over the United States, and he was delighted to add the bookshop to his list of properties.

As for the store itself, Leif had the idea of creating a “cultural center” in the town, not just a money-making business. He wanted to retain the comforting, open atmosphere of the previous owners, and so combined the two concepts of café and bookshop. However, he needed a team to help him run the business, as he had no intention of staying in France. The previous owners pointed him in the direction of Marin, their intern for the past two years, who agreed to take over the business as manager, provided she had a team. Salomé and Manon were hired to work alongside her, and have been running the business ever since.

Today, the bookshop is a unique business whose customers are mainly Montpellier residents, foreign exchange students and tourists from neighboring European countries. Although it is an independent store that lacks the appeal of chain bookshops such as Barnes & Noble or Gibert Joseph, its niche market in literature enables it to attract a new population to Montpellier, which has an impact on the local economy. Legislation such as the Lang law or “prix unique du livre”, passed in 1981, which established fixed prices for books and put an end to extreme discounts, helped small shops like Le Bookshop to compete with large corporations that could afford such marketing tactics. This and other laws protect the diversity of the literature market, which is crucial to the survival of an English-language bookshop in a French-speaking country.

### **The Culture of Le Bookshop and My Role and Responsibilities**

Today, the bookshop still operates under the name Le Bookshop and has distinguished itself as the “English bookstore” of downtown Montpellier. Under current management, the overall brand of the bookshop is a place where English speakers in France can buy books in the English language. Leif Morgan's decision to combine the ideas of the previous owners into one business has enabled Le Bookshop to evolve into a warm and welcoming bookshop-café where people from all walks of life can sit and enjoy a book and a cup of coffee while buying books by English-speaking authors.

During my conversation with Salomé, I asked her why she and the other managers had decided to create the specific atmosphere of the store. She explained that they had a very clear vision: they wanted Le Bookshop to be a place where they would have wanted to go and be themselves when they were fifteen. She went on to explain that she and Marin had grown up in very small towns on the Côte d'Azur, where the population was predominantly elderly. For this reason, it was very difficult to be themselves as young gay women interested in travel and literature.

When they took over the store, they made sure that Le Bookshop is a place where young people can come and feel comfortable in all areas. They place a strong emphasis on the inclusion of women, LGBTQ+ and people of color. That's why the bookstore carries many books featuring different authors from these groups, as well as non-fiction books dealing with these topics on a

large scale. The store also places great emphasis on working with young people to keep in step with the expectations and desires of the new generations. Part of this initiative involves introducing young writers, organizing weekend workshops on local literature and offering internship opportunities to local students.

The university which I studied abroad with has been working with Le Bookshop for many years to offer students the chance of an internship, and I was lucky enough to work here for a semester. As an intern, my role was to shadow the owners, get a behind-the-scenes look at the day-to-day operation of the store and carry out the tasks assigned to me. Unlike many companies that have a very hands-on role for interns, Le Bookshop was much more lenient and relaxed in comparison. My daily tasks included preparing and serving drinks to customers, organizing and unloading books onto shelves and displays, stocking the kitchen with ingredients, packing the week's Date-With-A-Book items and updating new books on the bookshop's website. As my internship progressed, I realized that the purpose of my internship was to give me a realistic insight into the daily routine of running a business.

As the only intern for the semester, I had the opportunity to do a bit of everything in terms of service, marketing and logistics. Some days the work was very repetitive, especially when the weather wasn't great and we didn't have many customers, but there were also days when the store was very busy and my shift consisted of dozens of coffees served, lots of conversations and questions, quick runs to the store for supplies, and much more.

As I got to know my managers, I continued to develop immense respect for their work ethic, customer service skills and knowledge of the store and literature itself. It's not easy running a store with just three people, so I'm very grateful that I was able to give them the support they needed during my time with them.

### **My Internship Experience and its Application to Future Career Aspirations**

Since I've been working at Le Bookshop, I've gained direct experience as an “employee” of the company. Before I started, I already had an idea of what I was going to do as a business student. I thought I'd be doing things related to my major, like marketing on social networks or organizing different events. However, my experience was very different from what I thought. I'd got into the habit of coming into the store and cleaning the dishes left in the sink by customers who'd come before me. Afterwards, I would greet my managers and put away any books that were out of place.

Finally, I was working on what's known as a “rendez-vous with a book”, i.e. a book taken at random, packaged in such a way that you couldn't see what it was about, with key words about the book written on the outside. The books were left outside the store, where passers-by could stop and decide whether or not to buy them. It was also a way of drawing attention to the store. Occasionally, I'd talk to customers about whatever was going on in town, answer their questions or be the person with whom they could practice their English.

Without realizing it, I was learning how to interact with potential customers and how to maintain a coherent store, which is very important for the longevity and reputation of a company. From a personal point of view, even though the store is English-speaking, I was able to listen to conversations in French and learn vocabulary I didn't know before. I also had the opportunity to learn how to upload new books to the store's website, which enabled me to decide how certain books should be marketed based on keywords, genres and authors.

My time here has given me invaluable experience of what it means to own a business to which its owners are deeply committed. As someone who is interested in the possibility of owning her own business in the future, and who values passion in everything she does, seeing my bosses put their heart and soul into the library was very inspiring and motivating. It showed me that, whatever your level of preparation or education, you always have to put your heart and soul into whatever you do, and that you have to be passionate about what you do. Working at Le Bookshop also prepared me for the job market by giving me experience in customer service, organization, interpersonal relations and leadership.

As my daily tasks always involved talking to and serving customers, I was able to develop my skills in professional conversation and maintaining a helpful, polite attitude as part of my job. Keeping the bookshop organized was also very important, as we had hundreds of books in stock and had to help customers search for books in the store and online. I was also able to hone my interpersonal skills by constantly communicating with customers and my managers. The majority of the customers we received spoke at least two languages, including French or

English, and using my understanding and knowledge of both enabled me not only to interact with customers and help them during their visit, but also to build relationships with the regulars who came to the store every week.

Finally, I acquired leadership skills, as I had to work alone and solve problems when management was busy. Even though I wasn't part of management, the emphasis was on the ability to be independent and take initiative, whatever the task.

Returning to the main question, I believe that Le Bookshop is able to continue to succeed because of its ability to present a different language in a culturally digestible and educational way. My experience of living in France has taught me that French culture emphasizes the importance of conversation, especially over a meal or a cup of coffee. La Librairie, because it's run by native French speakers, understands and appreciates this sentiment, so the store is set up to make conversation comfortable and natural. I also believe that the French are more inclined to want to understand other cultures and languages than their own, especially when it comes to the English language, which students learn from an early age. Most of the French people I met spoke at least two languages, and even if they weren't fluent in English, they were able to hold an intermediate-level conversation.

As mentioned above, Le Bookshop is a small, local business based in Montpellier. Although it sells books by international authors in-store and online, its clientele is limited to people who are physically in the Montpellier area, or to those in France who know about the

store and buy books online for delivery. Personally, I don't think Le Bookshop has any intention of becoming an international business or operating outside France, especially with only three people running the whole store. I also think that conversation with Leif Morgan is important, to see if he's interested in expanding the store outside Montpellier.

However, in terms of market expansion, I think the first step should be to start by opening new stores in France. Le Bookshop's marketing appeal lies in its niche sector, particularly the demand for English literature, the mix of traditional French experiences with English literature and more modern, progressive ideas, and its online presence. In order to increase overall sales, the most realistic and conducive approach would be to focus on developing its online presence and partnering with larger networks to reach demographics other than those physically available.

For example, on the Le Bookshop website, it is possible to buy a book and collect it in-store or have it delivered to the address of one's choice. Deliveries are limited to France, and I don't think it would be advantageous for the bookshop to ship books abroad when its customers have the option of buying books in other English-speaking countries or on websites that are closer and potentially cheaper. Instead, offering an option to download the book electronically, either through the store itself or in collaboration with an e-book company such as Kindle Amazon, would enable them to make more profit without having to worry about having to increase the total price paid by the customer to account for international shipping costs.

Another idea that could not only set them apart from other stores in their market is to create genre-specific subscription boxes that can be offered both physically and online. Customers could choose the genre they wish to subscribe to and receive a combination of English-language books from many different countries. This idea would enable Le Bookshop to benefit from international delivery, as customers would receive books by different English-speaking authors, not just those specific to their country. Not only would the store benefit from greater exposure, but thanks to the potential exposure of lesser-known authors, Le Bookshop would attract a whole new demographic of people interested in reading less mainstream books.

Another long-term international marketing strategy that would enable the bookshop to have more regular international business would be to make the bookshop a tourist destination in Montpellier or, more broadly, in the south of France. If the owner and management of the bookshop were to agree to build another store in an English-speaking country, the marketing strategy would have to be slightly different from that in Montpellier. I think they could retain the general idea of the business as a bookshop and café, but the fact that many of the books sold would now be available to the new demographic in other local bookshops and bookshop chains would force Le Bookshop to incorporate a strong business differentiation factor. For example, the company could emphasize French culture by selling the idea of “a cup of coffee and a book” as two simultaneous things, emphasizing that the business is for customers who buy a book and a

drink while taking the time to sit and enjoy it, or by offering traditional French pastries and desserts alongside the drinks menu.

Another marketing strategy would be to sell books translated into English by French authors, as well as a few original copies for those who speak French. I think this idea would be the more unique and sustainable of the two, as many bookstores today are associated with café chains (such as Barnes & Noble and Starbucks) or cafés that offer a selection of books to read inside the store. Whichever route a bookshop takes, it's clear that it has plenty of options when it comes to deciding how to enter an international market, should management wish to do so in the future.

### **Conclusion**

The Bookshop has a great history, built around a multitude of ideas and a love of coffee and books, all rolled into one idea that has remained strong to this day. Its continued success, despite several different managers, has shown that the idea of an English-language bookshop can really succeed in a French-speaking country. The mix of cultures in a diverse city, where many different people come and coexist, will make the bookshop a place to visit for many years to come. I've loved having the opportunity to be part of the inner workings of this store, even for a short time. It's very motivating to see how my managers, who have been in my shoes, have taken an idea and turned it into reality. Their passion, dedication and knowledge have made the bookshop what it is today and will continue to inspire me as I pursue my own life goals after

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graduation. Le Bookshop has become not only a bookstore, but also a place of culture and social acceptance, where everyone can truly enjoy themselves and be themselves.

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