

Grand Vision and Specialisation Bear Fruit

How to Survive and Prosper Against the Larger Competition.

By Yuri Bolotin, Principal, Design Portfolio Pty Ltd



I first met Clare and Christine Cannon (a mother and daughter team) over a cup of coffee in the City some 18 months ago. At the time, they were operating a bookstore in Pennant Hills called Portico. At that meeting they told me they wanted to open a small bookshop in the CBD. This scared me quite a bit – how would their small store be able to survive against such giants as Kinokuniya, Dymocks, Borders, Angus and Robertson – with their extensive ranges and (perceived) cheaper prices? I visit bookstores frequently, and so have personally observed with sadness the demise of many a ‘small bookstore’. I felt even more scared when shortly after I visited their existing store – a small, tired,

non-descript space crammed to the ceiling with books, deep in a featureless suburban shopping arcade. Transporting this into the City would surely be a certain failure.

Unless...rather than trying to compete with the big guys for range and prices, you decide to specialise - focus on a small market sector and do it really well. Things started to look much more positive when the clients told me this is exactly what they wanted to do. Their vision in fact was to create the best little bookshop dedicated to learning and spirituality in Sydney. Wow! This was turning to be really exciting!

But first they needed

to find the premises in the CBD for their shop. It was some months and several unsuccessful locations later that the right location turned up, in a building on the corner of York and Jamison Streets. The building was called... Portico – which was a pure co-incidence, being the same name as their existing bookshop in Pennant Hills.

The building, noted for its striking sandstone façade, is heritage listed. It housed the Scots Church years ago. This gave us a fantastic opportunity to work within the heritage fabric of the building interior. With a brief for a store dedicated to spirituality, we couldn't ask for a better setting! The tall windows facing the

street and the park opposite provided us with beautiful daylight and glimpses of blue sky and trees, the tall ceilings inside made it easier to create a feeling of spaciousness, and the sandstone arches at the building's entrance became the direct inspiration for the new logo of the business.

Inside, the books (most of them are personally selected by the principals) are attractively presented on blond timber gondolas and wall shelves. Wide aisles and clear signage designed by us make it easy for customers to locate the right section. There are a number of ‘thinking’ and ‘reading’ spaces, including a rocking chair and a comfortable couch by the window framed



by two pendant feature lights. Environmental graphics created as part of the branding concept for the space convey a sense of timelessness of the pursuits of reading and learning. The service counter façade features striking tall plywood shapes, lit from within, that resemble books. Its super-contemporary framework is balanced by old-fashioned wallpaper prints and elaborate lights.

The new fine stationery department is a successful

business extension. It specialises in beautiful personal stationery.

Downstairs, in the dungeons of the old church, we created a space for seminars, discussions, book launches as well as for administration and storage.

All elements of the environment and branding are strictly controlled. You don't have to be a giant corporation to have a strong brand – you

just need the discipline. The in-store graphics, carry bags, business stationery, book marks to give away - were all designed by us as part of the overall concept.

The overall grand vision, as well as the specialisation strategy of the clients, have paid off. Rather than trying to compete with much larger stores, Portico is successfully capturing customers' hearts and minds by focusing on learning and spirituality and

providing an environment that is both inspiring and relaxing, stimulating and comfortable. With only 100sq.m or so of the retail space, this is one of the smallest bookshops in the CBD, but certainly one of the prettiest and most enjoyable to visit.

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