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### Growing together

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# GROWING TOGETHER



*Shannon Ong and Mike Foo of Woods in the Books discuss the significance of diverse stories and the importance of growing with your customers.*

**At a time when many big-name bookstores have been forced to shutter in Singapore, Woods in the Books stands as a beacon of hope. The small, independent bookstore is frequented by a community of locals and expat customers, many who have since become regular visitors. What started as a \$20,000 experiment by Shannon Ong and Mike Foo in 2009 — both without prior industry experience — has now grown into two stores manned by a team of six.**

Shannon and Mike are a humble, soft-spoken duo. They appear bewildered by questions about policies and procedures but easily relay stories of designing book appreciation programmes and memorable customers. "Just a few days ago, a regular customer dropped off her mum and son here at the store. She had to rush off so she asked if we could book them a taxi when they were done. Later the grandma told us that the boy, whom we've known since he was a tiny toddler, had just turned eight years old the

day before. The grandparents had flown in from the States to celebrate, and when they asked him where he wanted to spend his "me time" with his grandma, he chose to come here. We don't know much about the family because we are the kind of space where we leave you alone to look at books, but it was such an honourable moment. Kids give you the most honest feedback. That he would choose to spend his precious time with us and that his mum trusted us enough to assist them — that is trust that takes years to build."



You opened Woods in the Books fresh out of school with a \$20,000 loan from family and without any experience in the trade. You signed a two-year lease for the store! Weren't you scared?

Shannon (S): Not really. We thought we would just become salaried employees if we failed!

The key for us was always to keep on trying. We didn't have much when we first started. The down payment for the rental was half of our loan so our shelves were quite empty. We had to use the money from our sales to buy new books to top up our inventory. We just knew we wanted to do something together and we've always loved picture books.

What is business like now?

S: It's not brisk but people show us support by buying books from us. Their support sustains us. At some point, the shop took on a life of its own and evolved beyond us. The children who were coming to our bookshop were growing up and we could no longer satisfy their reading needs. When we saw that happening, it forced us to consider their long-term reading sustainability and how we could keep serving their growing needs. It was no longer about fulfilling our own dreams of a picture-book store but serving the community.

That's why we increased the age group we serve with Books Ahoy!, our second store. We stock other selections like reader

books, which act as a bridge between picture books and chapter books, and non-fiction books for our older customers.

**Is your business threatened by online bookstores?**

S: Yes, definitely, but I guess we differentiate ourselves by providing a genuine experience to everyone who walks through our doors. We are physically present for them and we try to create irreplaceable personal memories that they can't get from the virtual world.

This shop is our small, experimental space. When we moved here, we wanted to use the space to create different programmes for children. Just last year we had a





Roald Dahl party. We also co-organised the Children's Street Trail along Yong Siak Street. Mike started teaching unconventional art classes where he encouraged children to explore art instead of just creating a beautiful picture, which is what some other teachers do.

But we didn't start these events because we wanted to differentiate ourselves from online stores. It wasn't a strategy to counter the online shopping trend; it was always about engaging our community and encouraging them to read. When we first started designing our programmes, we thought about how fun activities would be for our participants or ourselves and not about the sales or social media potential of the programmes.

**How would you describe your relationship with your customers? We're sure people ask for recommendations all the time.**

Mike (M): We treat our customers based on how we want to be treated. And most people go to bookstores because they want to be left alone right?

S: I personally feel uncomfortable when shop assistants seem too eager to serve me. Our store is small and homely: we treat everyone like our friends and guests, so we usually leave our customers alone and quietly observe how they're doing. We want them to take their time and not feel defensive or think we're shadowing them. Our customers know we will help them if they need assistance.

Sometimes we have extreme situations where parents believe we should allow kids to do anything because we're a children's bookstore. Some foreign parents think we are too strict with the children but often it's because of a difference in culture: we prefer to take preemptive measures to prevent children from hurting themselves. And I also think it's about mutual respect: you should respect the space and the people who keep it for you.

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*We try to create irreplaceable personal memories that they can't get from the virtual world.*

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**But don't you receive complaints of customers who interpret your manner of service as uncaring?**

S: There is a very clear difference between caring and not. I think many customers feel that service staff don't care about them because shop assistants are looking at their phones when they walk into a shop. We always greet our customers and make eye contact with them when they walk in. People know we acknowledge their presence from that short interaction. And of course we take the initiative to approach customers who look lost.

We can recognise some of our returning customers, so we know if they are the loud and bubbly sort who like to be engaged, or the type of shopper who prefers to browse quietly on his or her own. Some customers come just to browse but others come in a state of emergency because they need an anniversary present or a gift for an event. We have this one customer in his 70s who always comes in asking for recommendations. One time he walked in looking for books to buy for his niece in her 20s who had just quit her job and was looking for direction in life. We recommended a few titles to him, and the next time he came back, he told me, "Oh Shannon, my niece loved the book you recommended." He isn't the kind of customer who buys 10 books at a go, but he recognises our effort in addressing his needs. He's a happy returning customer and that means a lot to us. ✦