

BOOKSELLING THIS Week

Booksellers Seeing Well Above the Treeline

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Through a new partnership between the American Booksellers Association and [Above the Treeline](#) (ATL), ABA member booksellers can now subscribe to ATL's online software product -- designed to help bookstores improve finances by optimizing inventory selection -- at a discounted rate and without the initial set-up fee. In announcing the new arrangement [last week](#), ABA CEO Avin Mark Domnitz noted, "Since Above the Treeline was introduced several years ago, we have heard glowing reports from users about how valuable and instructive a product it is." Bookselling This Week recently spoke to several booksellers who are currently using the software, and the reviews ranged from "remarkable" to "great." Said Mary McCarthy, VP and COO of Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops in Milwaukee, "I can't even begin to tell you how worth it [ATL] is."

Simply put, by connecting to a bookseller's POS system via the Internet, ATL creates an online information-sharing network, while maintaining individual retailer anonymity. Booksellers can analyze their own near real-time sales and inventory information, as well as information from all subscriber stores through highly visual charts and graphs, making it much simpler to make informed stocking decisions quickly. ATL is currently in use at over 75 ABA member bookstores, which have combined annual revenues of over \$220 million. ATL does not disclose an individual store's information to any third party without the express consent of the store.

Booksellers who are already subscribers attest that ATL has made inventory management much simpler and less labor-intensive. Diana Cohen of the 4,200-square-foot Books & Company in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, said her store has been using the software for about six months. "I think it's great," she said.

Cohen noted that she is pleased with the "Treeline Top Sellers" function, which, among other things, provides booksellers with the ability to quickly see what bestselling titles they may be missing from their inventory and matches the list directly with the store's own inventory. "For me, once a week, I get a report that shows the top-selling titles," she said. "Once in a while I'll see a title catching on that we're not aware of." She added that other times she may see a title in stock is doing very well in other stores, so she'll "get more in stock or put the book face out on the shelf."

Moreover, with ATL, Cohen said, she can see what her store's strengths are compared to the other independent bookstore subscribers. "We are much stronger in the Young Adult/Early Teen category than I realized," she reported.

Overall, said Cohen, ATL "is alerting me to titles I should be carrying, not keeping enough of, or the reverse --that I have too much on hand."

Mary McCarthy of Schwartz Bookshops said that she's been using ATL "seriously for a little over a year, but we're still just scratching the surface." She uses it primarily to "fill

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in gaps on basic backlist and for returns."

The reason McCarthy turned to ATL is because "we had a certain [hunch] that we were missing some basic [titles from their inventory].... We had all this knowledge about what sells but we couldn't tie it all together." But ATL could, she said. "We can just look and see what's selling at other shops and other areas. It's so fast. It's so easy to hone in on exactly what the problem is. It's a super-duper Excel spreadsheet."

When Schwartz opened its fifth bookstore in July, McCarthy said the business used ATL to stock the new store. Two employees were able to choose stock for the entire store in less than a week, she said.

ATL has also drastically reduced the time and labor involved in the returns process, McCarthy reported. With ATL, "all our shops are doing their own returns.... We simply put in our parameters and [each store] gets an Excel spreadsheet with just what to return." The store used to do returns a few times a year, now its done monthly. "Cash flow has increased because we're not sitting on returns."

At Boulder Bookstore in Boulder, Colorado, Arsen Kashkashian explained that the store had begun using ATL in late spring of last year, and he finds it particularly helpful for times like now when "the frontlist buying season has begun. I find it useful as an extra source of information on titles," he said.

For instance, ATL allows him to gauge whether or not to bring in a paperback title by showing how the hardcover format performed in other independent bookstores. "Since stores don't take a lot in hardback, it gives you more information" with which to make buying decisions.

Overall, he said, "It's very interesting -- things like finding out what other people are selling, and you might be missing. It's enabling the independent bookseller to break out of our small view of bookselling by seeing what other bookstores are doing. It gives you a much better view and that much more data."

Through the partnership between ABA and Above the Treeline, all ABA member bookstores that are new subscribers to ATL will have their set-up fee (around \$1,500 on average) waived. Above the Treeline will cover 50 percent of the fee, and ABA will cover the other half of set-up costs for members. In addition, all current and future ABA member bookstores that subscribe to ATL will receive up to a 10 percent discount off the standard monthly subscription fees (between \$50 and \$350 based on store size).

Booksellers interested in learning more about Above the Treeline should note that ATL's founder, John Rubin, will be appearing at ABA's first annual Winter Institute in January in Long Beach, California. In addition, demonstrations of Above the Treeline will be provided at ABA's regional programs or a demonstration can be arranged by contacting Above the Treeline at info@abovethetreeline.com. --[David Grogan](#)