Powell’s Books:

A Successful Integration of Global Expansion and Localist Goals?

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**Abstract**

In this report, I evaluate how, and to what extent modern independent businesses can balance the goals of growth via global expansion, and localism, which emphasizes local ownership and community stewardship. In order to make this evaluation, I examine the works of David J. Hess, Henry Ford II, and David Fleming and Stephan J. Goetz and apply their viewpoints to the evolving business model of Powell’s Books, an independent bookstore chain in Portland, Oregon. Overall, Powell’s current business model is a good one, but it is not perfect. By prioritizing growth, the business has been in a better position to help its community, but at times it has done the former at the expense of the latter. Thus, Powell’s provides a working model that might be improved upon by other independent businesses. From this, I conclude that it is possible to balance localist and global expansionist goals by following the Powell’s model, but this model can be improved, and the size of a business, rather than its ownership alone should also be considered.

**Introduction**

Powell’s Books is a large, independently-run used and new bookstore chain with locations in and around Portland, Oregon. Its cornerstone is Powell’s City of Books, the world’s largest new and used bookstore.1 Powell’s also buys and sells books online. Powell’s Books is locally owned by the Powell family, but it since was founded in 1971, the business has expanded into global markets.

Powell’s Books represents an intermediate between two forms of business model: “the local and the global.2 The local model fulfills the goals of localists, who seek greater local economic control and sometimes also expect businesses to address social issues. The global model describes businesses with multiple absentee owners that serve a global audience.3 In this report, I will discuss how Powell’s Books has balanced localist goals with the economic benefits and solidity that global expansion often brings and analyze the extent to which this balance is ideal for both the business and the community. In order to make this assessment, I will examine the work *Localist Movements in a Global Economy* by David J. Hess, three speeches given by Henry Ford II in 1969 as compiled in the book *The Human Environment and Business,* and a paper by David Fleming and Stephan J. Goetz entitled “Does Local Firm Ownership Matter?” Through this analysis, I hope to demonstrate how and to what extent modern independent businesses can successfully reconcile the goals of localism and global expansion and provide another way of viewing the conflicting interests of independent businesses in our modern society.

**Method: The Ideal Independent Business Model: Local Control, Global Expansion, or Neither?**

Hess and the Case for Localism:

In his paper, David J. Hess supports the idea of localism, which maintains that businesses should be locally owned, and have some social and ecological responsibilities.4 According to Hess, there are many benefits to local ownership. A locally-owned business gives community members more control over their own local economy, can respond better to local needs, and can create more jobs in a given locale.5 Furthermore, localism acts as a force against globalization, a growing trend of economies dominated by faceless multinational corporations.6 Global companies, according to Hess, generate a lot of wealth, but also income inequality and other social issues.7 Additionally, these large corporations often hold large amounts of power within individual communities, diminishing the abilities of local citizens to control their own economic or political landscapes.8

However, Hess admits that localism has its limitations. For Hess, an ideally localist business has four key traits. First, products are locally sourced. Second, goods are produced by locally-owned businesses. Third, sales are made through locally-owned organizations, and fourth, the goods are marketed and sold only to locals.9 While these traits are ideal, Hess concedes that meeting all of these qualifications is unrealistic in an increasingly global world. Therefore, he establishes a more realistic bare minimum to define a modern, “hybrid” localist business: at the least, a business should be locally owned and serve local clients.10

In terms of a business’s responsibilities to society, Hess believes that while a local business has a responsibility to its community socially and ecologically, it can’t solve all of society’s problems independently.11 Introducing more elements of localism into existing independent businesses is a good idea, but not a cure-all for the ills of society. For Hess, localism is a complex and varied movement, some elements of which are more successful than others.12

An element of localism that Hess finds particularly promising is the idea of an “alternative global economy.”13 In this business model, local businesses from all over the world would buy and sell only from each other, creating a more socially responsible version of globalism.14 Hess believes that local businesses are a better unit for building global markets because they are more responsive to the needs of the citizens in their communities and give local economic control to communities rather than to powerful corporations.15 Additionally, these community-centered networks would be better at addressing issues of “sustainability and justice” such as the socioeconomic inequality that Hess claims globalization exacerbates.16 Overall, according to Hess, a business should prioritize social good and local ownership over profit in a strategic way that involves the cooperation of other small businesses.

Henry Ford II on the compatibility of local investment and growth

Henry Ford II offers a different point of view. In his speeches, he agrees with Hess that businesses can bring about social change, but adds that the scope of their abilities is limited.17 He claims that businesses can only help a community in terms of employing citizens and assisting economic growth.18

Ford II also argues that profit and social good are not mutually exclusive goals, and that there are negative consequences for leaning too heavily in either direction. According to Ford II, sacrificing profit in the short-term to benefit communities was initially a good strategy for earning long-term customer loyalty and local acceptance. However, due to rising expectations for social involvement, businesses can no longer afford to make this sacrifice.19 Instead, they need to create a symbiotic relationship with communities in which they meet social expectations without sacrificing their own growth.20 Businesses, especially smaller businesses, rely on citizens to provide them with income.21 Thus, they must serve the people in order to be profitable, and citizens have some power to prevent businesses from neglecting their needs.22 However, businesses that put profits first to grow and become stronger are better able to bring about social change than those who sacrifice for the public good and then fail before having much of a positive impact.23 Thus, prioritizing both profit and social concerns can result in positive long-term results for both companies and communities.

Fleming and Goetz: Ownership May not be the Biggest Issue

According to Fleming and Goetz, whether a business is locally-owned or absentee-owned may have some effect on communities, but the more important issue, at least in economic terms, is a business’s size.24 For instance, Fleming and Goetz agree with Hess that local businesses are more likely to respond to local needs.25 The authors also acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of large, global businesses. On one hand, big businesses create jobs and can innovate by investing large amounts of money into research and development.26 However, large global businesses may stifle worker productivity and creativity over time and can damage the local economy by luring both workers and customers away from smaller local businesses.27 Through their own analysis, Fleming and Goetz come to the conclusion that small local businesses bring about the greatest economic benefits. Medium and large locally-owned businesses, on the other hand, have as little effect on local incomes and standards of living as a global corporation.28 The authors do not go into detail about social impact, but economically, they say that it is size, not ownership that really matters.

**Results: How Powell’s Books has Reconciled Globalism and Localism.**

Powell’s Books has grown significantly since 1971, from a small used bookstore to a chain of five businesses, and a website that serves customers from all over the globe.29 Initially a primarily local institution, Powell’s has become increasingly involved in global markets. In this section, I will describe Powell’s various business models as they have evolved over the past four decades, and discuss how these models have aligned with the goals of localism and global expansion.

1970s-1980s: Walter Powell and the beginnings of Powell’s Books

When Powell’s Books was first founded by Walter Powell in 1971, it clearly fell into the category of a small, local business. It only had one physical locationthat only sold used books.30 In many ways, the business model of the 1970’s fit Hess’s definition of “pure localism.” As a local store, Walter Powell’s target audience included mainly residents of Portland. As a family business, Powell’s also met the crucial localist requirement of being locally owned, and all sales took place exclusively through the store. The only violation was the source of Powell’s products. Many of the used books that Powell purchased came from suppliers in the Pacific Northwest31, but the used books themselves were not necessarily produced there. At some point, they were new books that may have come from large, multi-national publishers in a variety of locales. It is uncertain how socially involved Powell’s was at this point in time, but Fleming and Goetz would say that this early version of Powell’s was the ideal model for promoting the local standard of living.

In the later 1970s, Powell moved to a larger location and introduced some elements of global expansion.32 For example, Powell introduced the mixed used and new book mixture that continues to make Powell’s unique today.33 According to Powell, he purchased new books from publishers to better meet customer needs and help the store to survive.34 Powell’s also shipped thousands of books to Vietnam soon after the end of the Vietnam War in 1973, 35 but the business did not firmly establish itself in international markets until the mid-1980’s.36 Here, we can see the beginnings of the local bookstore’s growth and global involvement, but for the most part, the Powell’s of the 1970s was a local business.

The 1980s, Michael Powell, and Physical Expansion

Powell’s Books continued to expand throughout the 1980’s. While still mostly local, the bookstore began to lean more heavily towards global expansion, building more locations in Portland and establishing customer bases in foreign locales.37This model sought to increase profits, but still benefitted Portland residents. Meeting Hess’s minimum requirements for modern localism, Powell’s remained family-owned, and continued to serve local clients.

In the mid-1980s, Michael Powell began to add new locations to his chain of bookstores as a global business might.38However, he refused to open stores outside of the state out of a desire to keep his business local39, and stocked these stores using the company’s own trucking fleet.40 Additionally, Powell’s Books used some of the profits gained from expansion to benefit local social and political causes, such as education and freedom of speech. In 1987, Powell’s books donated 250 books to a local library for its “Books for Kids” program.41 In 1989, Powell’s donated an additional 350 books42 and co-sponsored a local celebration of Banned Books Week.43 Here, we see examples of Powell’s Books using its growth to give back to the community that supports it, as Ford II suggests. However, this growth was not universally well-received.

In a 1989 *Oregonian* article, writer Steve Duin shares a more negative view of Powell’s expansion. He admits that Powell’s has benefitted Portland by attracting more customers, tourists, and commerce.44 However, he worries that the bookstore steals customers and profits away from smaller booksellers, calling Powell’s Books a “great white shark” that “has more appetite than conscience.”45 Duin praises Walter Powell, and his friendly, community-oriented business model, but condemns Michael Powell as a cold businessman, worried more about profit and his own image than the welfare of the Portland community or customer satisfaction.46 The small bookstore owners that Duin interviews do not seem as concerned. Instead, they see the additional customers that Powell’s has attracted as an opportunity to find their own success by developing niche markets that the larger bookstore may not be able to fill.47 Thus, Duin sheds light on some possible drawbacks of Powell’s growth, but also offers ways in which it may benefit the local economy.

1990s: The Internet, Unions, and Controversy

In the 1990s, Michael Powell continued to expand his store both physically and digitally. This may have further enabled Powell’s to contribute to its community, but the company also made controversial decisions as it learned further towards a model of expansion and profit.

One instance of expansion was the company’s transfer to an online market. In 1994, Powell’s Books went online for the first time with its technical books.48 By 1996, its entire inventory was online49 and in 1999 10% of all sales were made virtually.50 This may concern localists because According to Hess, expanding to a global market reduces a business’s reliance on local customers, thus reducing the customer’s power to control the business. Also troubling was Powell’s partnership with Amazon Books, a large, global corporation.51 Through this company, Powell’s could, and still does, advertise and distribute books to a wider, global audience.52

Even so, Powell’s has made its online operations local to a certain extent. Since the 1990s, all books sold online have been kept in a large, Portland warehouse that employs local workers.53 Powell’s also packs and ships its own books.54 Furthermore, a 1999 *Oregonian* article argues that online expansion and cooperation with international businesses, as well as physical growth, are necessary defensive strategies for independent businesses to stand a chance against large bookstore chains and online booksellers.55 However, rather than partnering with a global business like Amazon, Hess might have preferred for Powell’s to band together with other independent bookstores as some other bookstores have.56

Another major concern of the decade was Powell’s treatment of employees. In the 1990s, Powell hired a team of managers to help run his expanded business.57 This reduced workers’ autonomy and led to two major attempts at unionization. The first attempt took place in 1991, after the bookstore suddenly fired several of its employees.58 This attempt was unsuccessful, as not all employees wanted to join the union, but resulted in better working conditions.59 A second, larger push took place in 1998, after management restructured the roles of employees in a way that limited their authority over company operations, and reduced raises to 0-3% annually depending on employee performance.60 While workers had been previously content with their work environment61, many were now frustrated that they had no say in management decisions, that the criteria for “good performance” were not well defined, that raises were not sufficient to keep up with inflation, and that management largely ignored their complaints.62 Thus, they spent the next two years fighting for union membership. Management actively opposed unionization, and after the pro-union employees successfully gained the support of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and began contract negotiations, management disagreed with many of their proposals.63 This led to months of meetings, protests, and disagreement.64 Michael Powell refused to attend contract negotiation meetings, and claimed to be unaware of employee demands.65 He opposed unionization and paying higher wages, he claimed, because he feared that his business would be unable to afford the additional costs.66 However, both employees and ILWU president Brian McWilliams were skeptical about this given that Powell had recently spent millions of dollars to expand his stores.67 Here, a desire for profit and expansion led to some neglect of local needs. But, in support of what Fleming and Goetz claim, it also seems that size was a major problem. The management that Powell hired to manage his growing business served as a barrier between him and his staff.

Thus, by adopting an expansionist model, Powell’s Books strayed further away from Hess’s model of ideal localism, and even his adapted version of modern localism. It may even be said that Powell went beyond Ford II’s model of growing in order to invest in the public good, instead focusing mainly on growth for the sake of the business itself. However, it wouldn’t be fair to say that Powell’s abandoned public good altogether.

Despite its shortcomings, Powell’s Books continued to give back to the Portland community. In 1992, Powell’s actively opposed Measure 9, which would have made it illegal for libraries and bookstores to house any books concerning homosexuality.68In 1998, the bookstore donated a portion of its profits to Portland school libraries during a time of economic hardship.69

Powell’s in the 2000s and today: An Improved Model of Growth?

Throughout the 2000s and today, Powell is still a massive entity, but it continues to be locally owned and fulfill localist social goals.

Worker relations have improved, and in the forward to his 2010 interview with Michael Powell, journalist Jeremiah Chamberlin lauds the fact that most employees are unionized and automatically enrolled in a 401(k).70Those who choose not to join a union still pay dues, but these are donated to a local charity of their choice.71 These changes are thanks to the contract agreed to in in 2000, which also increased wages by 18%.72 There have been sporadic conflicts between management and workers, such as a protest in 2003 and a contract disagreement in 2007.73 Powell’s has also had to reduce its workforce,74 but relations have been amiable otherwise.75 Thus, a focus has been brought back to employee welfare through the efforts of the workers themselves and a union. Ford II might point to this as an example of the people themselves helping to regulate the actions of businesses when they fail to meet local needs.

Aside from a few renovations, there hasn’t been any additional physical expansion since the 1990s. However, his daughter Emily Powell, the bookstore’s current owner, is considering Michael Powell’s plan to expand online sales.76 In 2010, Michael Powell stated that his company works not only with Amazon, but also other online retailers such as Alibris, Ebay, and Abebooks.77 Powell’s now also works with foreign wholesalers in Europe and Germany in order to reduce shipping costs to these countries.78

Overall, Powell’s continues to serve its community, and thanks to employee involvement, has been amended to better serve local needs. However, it has also maintained the international involvement and size that it reached in the 1990s, satisfying global expansionist goals. As Emily Powell expands the business online, the bookstore may lean even further towards global expansion, but the potential cost to localist goals as a result is currently unclear.

**Discussion: Should Powell’s Brand of Hybrid Localism be used as a Model for other Independent Businesses?**

Overall, the example of Powell’s Books in Portland, Oregon demonstrates, as Ford II asserts, that global expansion and localism are not mutually exclusive goals. Powell’s has actively sought growth and profit, but has also invested a portion of this profit into local causes, thus forming a positive, symbiotic relationship with its surrounding community. It may not be a perfect model, and there may be other models that better serve local interests. For example, journalist Kevin Smokler mentions the self-promotion efforts of other independent book-sellers, which have included hosting public events, asking authors for their support, banding together with other independent booksellers in a Hessian fashion, and advertising through the American Booksellers Association as well as local venues.79 Community activism has also helped to save struggling businesses. However, these businesses have not had the same strength and solidity as Powell’s during tough economic times.80 Perhaps businesses can take inspiration from both of these business models as well as the model of Powell’s Books to create an even better model that incorporates both localist goals and global expansion.

Alternatively, as Fleming and Goetz suggest, perhaps we shouldn’t consider ownership alone when we evaluate ideal, socially responsible business models. Size, as demonstrated through the actions of Powell’s growth, and strained relationship with employees in the 1990s, is also an important factor to consider. In agreement with Ford II, this example also shows that businesses alone may not be able to adequately meet their own needs as well as social needs. Citizens must also use their power to guide the actions of businesses. In future research, I may wish to investigate the extent to which local ownership and size allow citizens to do so.

Notes

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3. Ibid., 3.

4. Ibid., 2.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 7.

7. Ibid., 3.

8. Ibid., 7.

9. Ibid., 11.

10. Ibid., 12.

11. Ibid., 14.

12. Ibid., 17.

13. Ibid. 15.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 16.

17. Henry Ford II, *The Human Environment and Business,* (New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc., 1970), 30.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 55.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. David Fleming and Stephan J. Goetz, “Does Local Firm Ownership Matter?” (University Park: The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, 2010), 2, accessed March 5, 2016, <https://bealocalist.org/sites/default/files/Does_Local_Firm_Ownership_Matter.pdf>.

25. Ibid., 3.

26. Ibid., 3-4.

27. Ibid., 4.

28. Ibid., 8-9.

29. “The History of Powell’s Books,” *Powell’s.com,* accessed March 6, 2016, http://www.powells.com/info/history

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31. Janet Filips, “The Book Stops Here,” *The Oregonian*, (Portland, OR.), August 7, 1988, accessed March 6, 2016, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/0EB08512F10C5E1D?p=AWNB>.

32. “The History of Powell’s Books,”

33. Ibid.

34. Gabrielle Glasser, “Powell’s Turns Pages,” *The Oregonian*, (Portland, OR.), September 8, 2005, accessed March 6, 2016, http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/10C80352F872CE40?p=AWNB

35. Sarah Skidmore, “A Voluminous Store with a Tale to Tell,” *Los Angeles Times*, (Los Angeles, CA), June 6, 2006. http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jun/06/business/fi-powell6

36. Filips 1988. In this article, Filips mentions that Powell’s became particularly popular in the Philippines during this time.

37. Ibid.

38. Chamberlin 2.

39. John Balzar, “A Novel Method to Sell Books,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA.), August 7, 1998, accessed March 6, 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1998/aug/07/news/mn-10924

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45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid. Booksellers interviewed include Lynn Parkinson of the Great Northwest Bookstore, Steve Holland of Holland’s Books and Preston McMann of the Old Oregon Bookstore.

48. Gail Kinsey Hill, “Powell’s Boldly Goes its Own Way,” *The Oregonian,* (Portland, OR), August 15, 1999, accessed March 6, 2016, http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/0EB08BAC58155F41?p=AWNB

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52. Hill 1999, Chamberlin 2.

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56. Kevin Smokler, “Indie Stores Face Uphill Battle, *Poets & Writers,* November 1, 2006, accessed March 5, 2016, http://www.pw.org/content/indie\_bookstores\_face\_uphill\_battle

57. Kristin Russ, “No Decisions About Us Without Us: A History of a Bookstore Union,” *ILWU Local 5*, accessed March 6, 2016, http://ilwulocal5.com/?page\_id=46.

58. Ibid. This wave of lay-offs was informally known as the “Christmas Massacre”

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. Roxane Farmanfarmaian, “Powell’s Employees Vote to Unionize; Negotiations Begin,” *Publishers Weekly* 246, no. 20, (1999): 14, accessed March 6, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/197033362?pq-origsite=summon>. Russ’s article also demonstrates positive employee attitudes towards Powell’s even before unionization.

63. Russ.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Gail Kinsey Hill and Jeffery Kosseff, “Rules Change as Powell’s Contract Signed<The Owner of the Independent Bookstore Says He Will Have to Change Some Business Plans as His Labor Costs Increase,” *The Oregonian*, (Portland, OR.), August 15, 2000, http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/0EB08C7DC84F54E8?p=AWNB

67. Ibid.

68. Chamberlin 4. For more information about Proposition 9, see the 2012 article “The Story of Oregon’s 1992 Measure 9”: http://www.glapn.org/6010Measure9Background.html

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70. Chamberlin 1.

71. Russ

72. Ibid.

73. Skidmore 2006

74. Elliot Njus, “Owner, new CEO of Powell’s Books see strength in brick and mortar,” *The Oregonian,* April 25, 2013, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.oregonlive.com/business/index.ssf/2013/04/owner_new_ceo_of_powells_books.html> This source says that some employees were fired in 2011 order to reduce workforce, but Michael Powell claimed in his 2010 interview with Jeremiah Chamberlin that he refused to fire employees, instead waiting for positions to become vacant, and then not filling them.

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76. Skidmore 2006. At the time this article was written, Powell’s was already making 33% of its sales online.

77. Chamberlin 2.

78. Ibid.

79. Smokler 2006

80. Ibid.

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**Post-Mortem**

For me, this was a very challenging project in many ways because so much of it involved using new skills. For example, I have not used the IMRAD structure for non-scientific papers before, and throughout middle school and high school I only used MLA format for citations. Thus, I think that I learned a lot through the process of adapting the IMRAD structure in a different way. I also think that it was helpful to learn about different citation methods, and the situations in which it would be best to use them. Additionally, I appreciated learning new research skills in class, such as how to get the most out of the Dartmouth Library’s website and how to access various online databases. This helped me to find both a higher quantity and quality of sources. Again, organization was a big problem for me, especially given the new format, but both the conference and going to an RWIT session helped me with this. My tutor helped me to identity my main claims and to organize my paragraphs, especially in the Results section. I still think that I need to work on ensuring that each paragraph has a central claim and ends in a transition to help my paper to flow more smoothly and support my argument more clearly, and I plan to improve on this for future writing assignments.