Indies First 2026:

A Q4 Holidays Planning Guide









About

Indies First, a national campaign of activities and events in support of independent bookstores, is held every year alongside Small Business Saturday, the Saturday after Thanksgiving. In this guide, you'll find **resources, tips,** and **ideas** for planning for Indies First and strategies on getting the word out!

The goal is to plan so that customers see indie bookstores as a main stop for holiday gift shopping throughout the holiday season.

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FAQs



2026 INDIES FIRST BOOKSELLER FAQS

*To make sure you receive all the essential information, please sign up for Bookselling This Week (BTW) through the Member Dashboard. This is the **MAIN** way we keep in touch with bookstores. Updates will also be added to the Indies First BookWeb page.*

Q. What is Indies First?

+A. On Small Business Saturday — a day dedicated to supporting the local businesses that help create jobs, boost the economy, and preserve neighborhoods — independent bookstores host activities and events to kick off the holiday shopping season. Indies First is a collaborative event among authors, publishers, retailers, and readers to celebrate independent bookstores and local communities.

American Express began Small Business Saturday in 2010 as a way to highlight local brick-and-mortar stores of all kinds at the start of the holiday season and as a counterpoint to Black Friday and Cyber Monday, which have always featured big-box stores and online sales, respectively. Over the years, American Express has invested heavily in the event, advertising it widely (and sometimes featuring bookstores!), and Small Business Saturday has become a major part of American Express' Shop Small Movement. American Express offers small businesses like indie bookstores a variety of suggestions for expanding marketing, operations, and more. It also has a Shop Small Map on which bookstores can be listed.

Q. When is it?

+A. Indies First is held every year in conjunction with Small Business Saturday, the Saturday after Thanksgiving. This year, Indies First is on Saturday, November 28, 2026. Although it refers to the one day, Indies First is also a campaign for the holiday season in its entirety. From University Press Week through Kwanzaa and Epiphany, there are numerous gift-giving occasions through the season that starts with Indies First.

Q. Why should we participate?

+A. This is another opportunity to rally your customers, drive sales, utilize publisher discounts, and optimize media attention. Your store's participation helps convey the narrative that indie bookstores are vital and growing. ABA shares the participating store map as a resource for the media as well as a tool for readers and consumers to plan their Indies First stops — during travel for the holiday weekend or in their own neighborhood — and pitches the Indies First story to the media.

Q. Who can participate?

+A. Any current, dues-paying member of the American Booksellers Association (ABA) may participate.

Q. How do we sign up?

+A. Stores who wish to participate, receive digital marketing materials, be added to the Indies First store map, and be included in ABA's media pitches for Indies First can sign up through the Participation Form from August 19 until October 28.

Q. What is the timeline for sign-ups?

+A. Here's this year's timeline:

- **August 19:** Indies First 2026 Participation Form Opens
- **October 28:** Indies First 2026 Participation Form Closes
- **November 2:** Indies First Searchable Map goes live on IndieBound

Q. Are there any special offers or discounts on titles?

+A. Yes! In the weeks leading up to the event each year, publishers big and small coordinate special offers on their titles to support independent booksellers. Available to download in early September — for logged-in ABA member booksellers only — is a spreadsheet of promotional terms publishers are offering in honor of Indies First and Small Business Saturday, and to help with restocking during and after the holiday season.

Q. Are there any Indies First items?

+A. Yes! We have the "Shop Small for a Big Impact" and the newest "Shop Indie" shirts on Bonfire.com.



Q. What other ways can bookstores kick off holiday shopping?

+A. ABA partners with the American Independent Business Alliance (AMIBA) as a sponsor for the Shop Indie Local Season campaign. The goals are aligned in terms of inspiring our communities to shift their holiday spending to Indie Locals (locally-owned and independent businesses). The campaign includes

additional indie-focused shopping and support days over the weekend such as Plaid Friday and Cider Monday. More on these days can be found on their respective pages in this guide. Sign on to become a Shop Indie Local Partner and get access to additional tools and resources.

Q. Can an individual store produce something special for sale in that store only?

+A. Yes. Some stores print posters or create merch for sale or as giveaways for Indies First. This is completely up to each store. Regional associations may also produce special items.

Q. What else do stores need to do to participate?

+A. Indies First is what you make it! Compared to Indie Bookstore Day, one challenge is that all other businesses (small, large, corporate, etc.) will be competing for customers as the holiday gift-giving season kicks into high gear.

As with most events you host and titles and merchandise shelved in your store, make Indies First your own!

This guide offers tips on how to make the most of Indies First with examples from stores and event collateral like signs and posters, national publicity, and an online map listing all participating stores.



Kramer Books, Washington D.C.

Dates + Holidays



AUGUST:

August 19: Indies First 2026 Participation Form Opens
August 20: ShopTalk: Indies First Featured Topic

SEPTEMBER:

September 16: ABA Winter Marketing Campaign and Assets Launch

OCTOBER:

October 14: Indies Choice Book Awards Longlist Announced
October 28: Indies First 2026 Participation Form Closes

NOVEMBER:

November 1-December 31: Shop Indie Local
November 2: Indies First Searchable Map goes live on IndieBound
November 4: Indies Choice Book Awards Shortlist Announced
November 8: Diwali
November 9–13: University Press Week
November 25: Indies Choice Book Awards Winners Announced
November 27: Plaid Friday
November 28, the Saturday after Thanksgiving: Indies First
November 30: Cider Monday

DECEMBER:

December 4–12: Hanukkah
December 24: Jólabókaflóð (Icelandic Book Flood)
December 25: Christmas
December 31: New Year's Eve
December 26–January 1: Kwanzaa

JANUARY:

January 1: New Year's Day
January 6: Epiphany

Indies First Holiday Shopping Season

Preparing for the holiday shopping season can be overwhelming as stores consider what they want to stock, how much to stock, what events to host, who to partner with, and more, all while getting into the holiday spirit and attracting holiday shoppers.

In addition to sharing what each event and campaign is and how to find more information and assets for them, we've also included event ideas from booksellers to help you brainstorm. Note that none of these are requirements! Work with what makes sense for your community and is feasible for your store and staff.

We encourage you to attend the **ShopTalk: Indies First Featured Topic on Thursday, August 20 at 3:00 pm ET** (or catch the replay through the Education Hub) to hear from booksellers who've participated in the past.

LEAD UP TO HOLIDAY SHOPPING

Providing a teaser of what holiday shopping will look like for your store gives customers a chance to plan and know what to expect throughout the season.

- Lay out what Indies First weekend has in store like The Pumpkin Cottage, The Bookworm and The Open Book shared, including promotions, hours open, and relevant details.
- Consider extended or special shopping hours for customers who may have accessibility needs, anticipating that the store's regular hours will be more crowded than usual with holiday shoppers. Main Street Books created Low-Sensory Shopping nights throughout December.
- Share the impact of shopping indie for the holidays and what it does not just for the community but for your store specifically, to be able to keep your doors open and serve customers all year. M. Judson Booksellers shared a "Thank You" message ahead of time and had this time of year be a celebration of a strong community.
- Connect with local authors. Announce a call for authors on the store's social media and newsletters and talk to your reps to see which authors might be interested in partnering!
- Consider a holiday exclusive for your best customers!



Old Town Books, Alexandria, VA

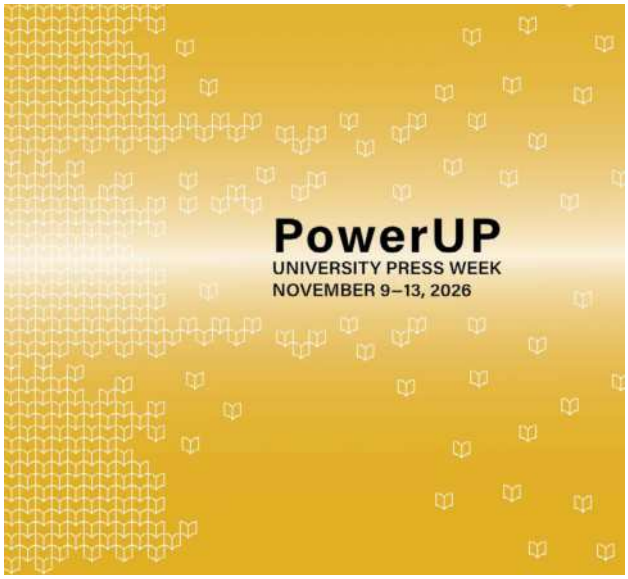
UNIVERSITY PRESS WEEK

This year, **University Press Week will be held November 9–13**. University Press Week is an annual celebration of university presses and their contributions to the larger publishing world.

You can visit the University Press Week website to learn how your store can participate in this celebration! Additionally, download social media assets, reading lists, and more on their website. Many university presses are also offering terms for Indies First.

Here are other ways to join in and promote University Press Week:

- If not already, sign up for the Weekly Independent Press Top 40 Bestsellers from the Independent Publishers Caucus! Both the fiction and nonfiction lists have titles from university presses.
- East City Bookshop and Prologue Bookshop showcased University Press titles they recommend and show their support for the global impact university presses have.
- Connect and collaborate to showcase where university presses, scholarly publishers, and their authors advance knowledge and foster understanding, like University Press of Florida and the University of Arizona Press. Check for any university presses local to you!
- Check out the Association of University Presses Bookshop.org collection.



PARTNER PROMOTIONS

Be sure to be on the lookout for promotions from a variety of partners who lead campaigns overlapping with Indies First and benefit independent shops.

Both Libro.fm and Bookshop.org offer holiday promotions such as free shipping, sales, membership offers, and featured titles for gifting! Learn more through their respective Bookseller hubs in early Fall as well as through *Bookselling This Week* (*BTW*).

Through American Express, stores can visit Shop Small to download marketing materials for Small Business Saturday or order a Shop Small Kit. Additionally, add your bookstore to the American Express Shop Small Map for an easy way for readers to find you!

PLAID FRIDAY/BLACK FRIDAY



Plaid Friday celebrates the diversity and creativity of local and independent businesses. It was created in Oakland, CA to bring back the times when shopping for friends and family was a pleasurable leisurely activity. It's a fun and enjoyable alternative to the big box store "Black Friday" consumer frenzy. **This year, Plaid Friday is on November 27.** So, plan to wear PLAID the day after Thanksgiving!



Here are some ideas on how to celebrate:

- Encourage your staff (and customers!) to wear plaid. Consider offering perks for customers who show up and shop wearing plaid like Paper Pages Bookstore who offered giveaway entries for those who wore the most plaid!
- Create a display featuring locally made items and use plaid ribbon or tissue paper as part of gift wrapping.
- Lean into the high energy and preparedness of old school "Black Friday" shopping such as An Unlikely Story getting ready and Napa Bookmine, with the tried and true Mariah Carey throwback as a nostalgic way to kick off the "official" start of the holiday season!

INDIES FIRST/SMALL BUSINESS SATURDAY

Be sure to sign up by October 28 to be on the participating store map on IndieBound.

The big day for small businesses around the country. A time for shoppers to join readers nationwide in celebrating indie bookstores, the heart of our communities. From bestselling titles to hidden gems, there's no better way to shop small, give big, and spread bookish joy for the holidays. General assets like posters and social media graphics are available on Bookweb.org.



Each year, we select an Indie Bookstore Ambassador who serves as a champion for independent bookstores all year long. We are thrilled that **Hanif Abdurraqib is the 2026 Ambassador**, whose first major indie bookstore event is Indies First! Assets are available to share as part of promoting Indies First across social media, in store, and through newsletters.

Here are some ideas to celebrate Indies First at your store:



Napa Bookmine, Napa, CA

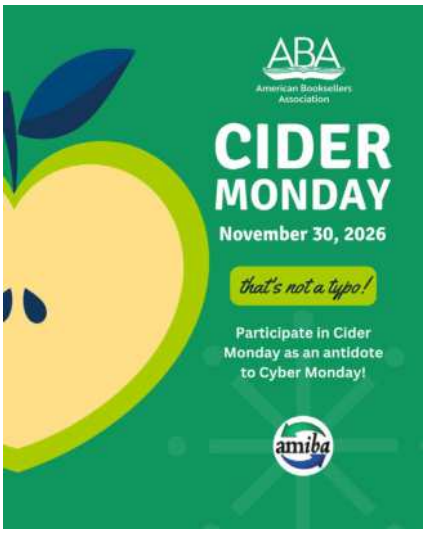
- Partner with local musicians, authors, eateries, charities, other local businesses (maybe even neighboring indie bookstores)! It's about showing up for the community, so why not work together? Here's how Napa Bookmine, Kona Stories and Call and Response Books celebrated. In terms of authors, The Bookies Bookstore hosted the 20+ author Great Holiday Book Fair for children and YA titles!
- Going to the movies is a big activity this time of year. Are there any book adaptations coming to theaters or streaming services over the weekend? Last year, Focus Features worked with indie bookstores in cities like Chicago and Philadelphia for a *Hamnet* bookstore crawl. Even if this type of promotion isn't possible, look for creative ways to lean into any new releases inspired by books!



Thunder Road Books, Spring Lake, NJ

- Collaborate with local artists for exclusive merch! Thunder Road Books debuted a beautifully illustrated holiday card. Some stores create their own exclusive merchandise (prints, t-shirts, bags, bookmark, etc.) for the season!
  - Booksellers often use Canva to customize ABA's social media marketing assets, which can be found on BookWeb.org. Canva has an option to upload images into social media-friendly templates.
  - Resources:
    - ★ Graphic Design For Promotion, Branding, and Signage (Bookseller Panel)
    - ★ Technology Meetup – Canva
- Offer beverages and passive activities (adult- and kid-friendly!), like Two Friends Books.
- Set up holiday-themed displays, both winter season reads and merch like Browseabout Books, plus best books to gift!
- Last year, Chicago launched their inaugural Chicagoland Bookstore Trolley with various dates and routes throughout the holiday season. If you can't go this all-out, is there an opportunity to partner with nearby fellow indie bookstores on a creative holiday crawl?
- Once the dust settles at the end of the day, express your gratitude like Page and Pine Bookshop and Neighborly Books Maryville. Share customer impact, just like Between the Covers.

CIDER MONDAY



Cider Monday (no that's not a typo) is the antidote to Cyber Monday, a day when online merchants offer special deals. Willard Williams, co-founder of the Toadstool Bookshops in Keene and Peterborough, New Hampshire, dreamed up this event as a new, cozy tradition. **This year, Cider Monday lands on November 30.** Williams shares, "Stop in for a free cup of cider and a snack, see some real people, and have a good time checking out what's in our stores. It's sure to be a heartwarming experience."

- Offer complementary cider while customers shop! And other baked goods, possibly from local bakeries. Provide an explainer of what Cider Monday is like Imprint Bookshop.
- This can also be a chance to encourage online bookshopping through your IndieCommerce, Libro.fm, Bookshop.org, or general store website, like Harvey's Tales.
- Share why Cider Monday matters compared to online giants. (Source)
- It's a cozy shopping day! Encourage bookshopping in pajamas and have analog activities available either partnered with local artisans or as passive/drop-in experiences. The Book Tavern offered crafts and a local artist pop-up.



Innisfree Bookshop, Meredith, NH

Gift-Giving Holidays and Observances Strategies

After each of these dedicated shopping days, there is still time left before the gift-giving holidays themselves. How can you use the momentum to keep going through the holidays?

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SPECIAL PUBLISHER OFFERS

Starting in early September, don't forget a range of special publisher offers shared just for you. Available to download for logged-in ABA member booksellers only is a spreadsheet of promotional terms publishers are offering in honor of Indies First and Small Business Saturday, and to help with restocking during the holiday season. Please check back periodically; some publishers are still confirming their terms, and the spreadsheet will be updated as applicable.

JÓLABÓKAFLÓÐ (ICELANDIC "BOOK FLOOD")

Invite your customers to make Jolabokaflod (Icelandic "Book Flood") their new holiday tradition. Inspired by Jólabókaflóð (pronounced "Yo-la-bok-a-flot"), this Icelandic tradition roughly means "flood of books".

During World War II, Iceland faced shortages like the rest of the world, but paper wasn't rationed, making books one of the few accessible gifts. The Icelandic people, who had recently gained independence from Denmark, leaned into this, gifting books and creating a treasured national tradition. The result? A country of passionate bookworms and an annual book-giving fest.

Since 1944, the Icelandic book trade has mailed a catalog to every household in November, just in time for the Reykjavík Book Fair. Families flip through the catalog, pick out books, and gift them to friends and family on December 24. After opening their gifts, everyone grabs a mug of hot chocolate, gets cozy, and dives into their new reads!



Browseabout Books, Rehoboth Beach, DE

We have Jólabókaflóð (Icelandic "Book Flood") assets, marketing tips, and a list of fun ways you can join in the flood of books!

- Host a Book Flood event like Pete & Freddy's Pages Aplenty or Patchouli Joe's Books! Set the mood with hot chocolate, mulled wine, or Iceland's traditional jólabland — a fizzy combo of orange soda and cola (or add brown ale for an adult twist!).

- Team up with local artisans of all things cozy! Think warm blankets, fluffy socks, handmade candles, and artisanal chocolates. The Book Worm and Grand Gesture Books partnered with their local cafes for a cup of hot chocolate. Host a holiday market with these vendors, so customers can pick up everything they need for the perfect December 24 book night.
- Curate a stack of short stories or novellas that are the perfect length to read in one night. Highlight your booksellers' favorite short reads!
- Keep holiday shopping easy with a dedicated display and explain what the holiday is like Rediscovered Books and Browseabout Books!
  - Create ready-made kits featuring a pre-wrapped book, a cozy pair of socks, chocolate bars, a bookstore mug, and a book-themed candle.
  - Let shoppers pick up a full kit or mix and match for the ultimate reader's gift. The Bookshelf curated a special customizable Jolabokaflod (Icelandic "Book Flood") box!
- Partner with a local shelter, children's hospital, or nonprofit like Children's Book Bank to collect and distribute books to those in need. For every book donated, enter customers into a raffle to win a cozy Jolabokaflod (Icelandic "Book Flood") gift basket!

INDIES CHOICE BOOK AWARDS

New for this year, the Indies Choice Book Awards* season lands during the Fall/Winter! These awards celebrate the best Adult Fiction, Adult Nonfiction, Indie Press Fiction, Indie Press Nonfiction, Children's Picture Books, Middle Grade, Young Adult, Debut Adult, and Debut Children's voted by indie booksellers. The longlist is created from the titles nominated on the Indie Next List, Kids' Next List, and Indies Introduce list in 2026.



The shortlist announcement on November 4 will include a downloadable excel spreadsheet of titles, marketing assets, and a how-to guide for adding them to your Bookshop.org website if applicable. The winners will be announced on November 25 as part of the Indies First weekend celebration of indie bookstores and the knowledge and passion they bring to readers.

Sharing which titles from the shortlist and winners will be available to purchase or order can be as simple as Book People RVA's post as part of the holiday shopping season.

Member booksellers have a chance to win a waived Wi2027 registration fee if they vote for the shortlist AND finalists!

Spreading the Word: Marketing and Promotions

In addition to in-store posters, shelf-talkers, and eye-catching window displays, we've got plenty of additional resources to help you make this year's event a success.

ADVOCACY

This is a great time to remind customers that locally-owned businesses generate substantially more economic benefit to the local economy than chain or online businesses.

It can be a message similar to Napa Bookmine or Two Friends Books about supporting local businesses rather than corporate giants, a Small Business Rising or AMIBA reminder for customers to share with loved ones of where they would like their gifts purchased, or what happens when customers shop locally, like Arvida Book Co.

Showing the real people behind the business and why this season matters goes a long way! Share your booksellers and the personal impact of customers supporting your store, as Back Again Bookshop and Wellesley Books did!



Arvida Books Co., Tustin, CA

SOCIAL MEDIA



Wellesley Books, Wellesley, MA

Use your social media channels to remind everyone about the importance of shopping local. The more creative the better, such as The Book and Cover tying in those Thanksgiving dinner table conversations!

Promote any unique events, guest authors, speakers, games, etc. through a series of teaser posts on social media. Make sure to include photos (or videos!) via website, newsletters, and social media platforms (using the hashtag #IndiesFirst). If setting up as a pop-up or

mobile, post sneak peaks on social media leading up to the event. We'll be liking and reposting as much as possible on IndieBound's Facebook and ABA's Instagram.

AMIBA also provided a Canva Template to customize the Shop Indie Local graphics for your store!

PRESS

Have you reached out to your local media yet? Now's the time to let your community know about your plans! Reach out to newspapers, bloggers, and radio stations to see if they're covering any local holiday events. Make sure they're in the loop! Also, don't overlook interacting with local media outlets on Facebook, Instagram, Threads, or other platforms by commenting and sharing your store's plans.

Consider **sharing with the media in the first two weeks of November** so they have enough time to follow up and craft their coverage if needed.

We've created a press release template for you to download, enter your specific bookstore information, and you're ready to send it off.

Consider these tips to help stand out to media:

- **Share a story, not a calendar.** Instead of opening with a list of events, begin with what makes the holiday season unique in your community.
- **Focus on experiences, not transactions.** Readers will remember moments more than discounts.
- **Highlight you and your staff's expertise.** Remind readers that indie booksellers are curators.
- **Include quick, quotable facts and stats.** Journalists appreciate easily digestible information.
- **Consider a "Holiday Press Kit."**

A press release that feels less like an announcement and more like an invitation into your store's holiday atmosphere is far more likely to resonate with both journalists and readers. It should leave people thinking not just *"There's an event happening,"* but *"I want to experience that."*

If your store's budget allows, look into paid advertising for the holidays, including an ad on local radio stations or a print ad in local newspapers.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND WORD OF MOUTH

Your neighbors, loyal customers, and community members are just as important for getting the word out! Their personal experiences with the store and booksellers helps, especially when friends and family are in town for the holidays.

Here are some ways to activate already engaged members of your community:

- Work with local authors/friends of the bookstore to post about Indies First.

- Are there any local content creators that frequent your store who could help promote the event to their followers?
  - As with many content creators, it takes time, energy, and creativity to produce content. Consider what kind of compensation, discount, books, or gift cards you are able to offer.
  - Check out the Wi2026 session: Beyond the Shelfie: Partnering with Bookstagram and BookTok Creators to learn more!
- Think about recurring events like Book Clubs or if there is a local Silent Book Club chapter!
  - What better way to read the new books picked up on Indies First then together with other readers?
  - Host the next meetup at the store, where readers can purchase books and then meet in the store or nearby to read for an hour!

For all general questions about Indies First, contact Courtney Wallace, Senior Marketing Manager, at indiesfirst@bookweb.org.

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