



Book buyers do not think about publishers' distribution strategies.

by Kim Pettit



A Consumer's Point of View

Where did you last buy books? Since I live in the United States, I can buy books from a variety of sources. While the following list reflects this country's realities, perhaps it will give you ideas for distribution strategies you can use.

In the past three months, I purchased books from a Christian bookstore, a general trade bookstore, two Web sites (one secular, one Christian), a used bookstore, a book table at a church event, and from an author.

Even though these were the only places I bought books, I had exposure to them in many more venues. I had opportunities to purchase books at the supermarket, at a drug store, and at a parachurch organization. I received catalogs in the mail and saw advertisements, book reviews and recommendations in print and on-line periodicals. I preordered a children's title through a toy store. My elementary school-age daughter brought home a book and software package I could purchase to help her keep up her math skills during summer vacation. I also had the chance to purchase titles from both Christian and secular publishers, a convenience store, and from a specialty store affiliated with a museum. A writer's conference and an event for educators included several book tables.

I listed nearly 20 different sources for books, but a quick survey of my office mates yielded still more: a mass market retailer, a Christian book discount, a secular Web site that disposes of overstocked merchandise, another that sells used books, and an airport bookstore. And if I were to survey book buyers in other parts of the world, they would likely add book clubs, street vendors, newsstands, bookmobiles, colporteurs, concerts, evangelistic and denominational events to the mix. The publishers might use additional ways to reach buyers, including telemarketers, cell phone text ads, billboards, newspaper advertisements, church bulletin inserts, and more.

Exposure counts

Word-of-mouth is by far the biggest factor that sends me in search of a book. If a family member, a friend, or a leader I trust recommends the book, and tells me what he or she got out of it, I listen. If people around town are talking about the book, or if it is mentioned on the radio or on television, it might be worth a look. I—and others I know—pay attention to bestseller lists, awards, and print and on-line reviews.

I am an avid book buyer, but I hardly ever make book purchases on impulse. My time and money are limited. The exception for me, with impulse buys, comes primarily with children's titles and fiction. Often, I borrow a friend's copy of the book, or request it as an interlibrary loan and read it prior to deciding to buy my own copy. (I can hear publishers groan as I write this!)

In my brief survey, selection, convenience, and price were the criteria cited most. A few mentioned they prefer to buy books from Christian retailers—but their bias was not set in stone. If they did not have a specific title in mind prior to going to the bookstore, but knew they wanted inspirational or Bible reference material, they browsed the shelves at the Christian bookstore. If they knew the book they wanted was available from both Christian and general trade sources, most sought the best price or most convenient supplier.

Bottom-line for buyers

As a consumer, I never think about a publisher's distribution arrangements. It makes not a whit of difference to me what discount you offer to particular retailers, nor whether they have an exclusive distribution contract with you, or if distributing books in a particular channel is more difficult and expensive for you than through another. Your Herculean efforts to get your books premium placement in the market are invisible. I have no idea what lengths your sales people had to go to in order to convince a wholesaler to stock a title, or to persuade a chain store buyer to give an author a chance. What's more, I don't care. What does matter to me is that I can find the book I want, when I want it, at a reasonable price.

I may not be your publishing house's ideal consumer, but the fact is there is a target reader you want to reach with your books. In editorial and sales meetings at Cook, a question often asked in times past was "Would Molly buy this?" Molly was our target consumer. She was the person we hoped to reach with our books.

Who is *your* ideal book buyer? Know your target well. Study his or her buying habits. Manage your distribution channels with that person in mind. ❖