

PUBLISHING IN AFRICA:

A Case for Self-Sufficiency

by David Waweru

Approximately 60 percent of Africa's potential reading public is pre-literate and lives under economic hardships. Only a few of the educated elite read for leisure after their formal education. Even within institutions of learning, most reading is limited to recommended course books. Some say Africans derive more pleasure in oral and performing arts than from reading. Many factors that have militated against the emergence of a strong reading culture in Africa.

However, reading trends in Kenya and in Africa are changing. Each month books from the United States, Canada and Europe enter the local retail market. Christian distributors and booksellers are on the increase, with networks extending to rural areas. Distributors are busy searching for more titles to meet consumer needs. Price, though still important, is no longer the primary concern it once was. More people are buying relevant, quality books.

What does this portend for local publishing initiatives? Though many believe Africa cannot sustain local book publishing on a commercial basis (except for educational publishing), there is potential for commercial success for Christian publishing in Africa.

Taking the plunge

When I decided to set up a new publishing house in Nairobi, Kenya in early 1999, the main challenge was selecting the target market, what kind of books to publish, and in what language(s). In my context it did not seem prudent to me to focus on a specific audience with a specific line of products. I therefore determined to publish for "children" and the "general public" in order to capture "most" of the Kenyan market. The company's mission statement was all-inclusive. Upon conducting research among book distributors and retailers, and especially after Cook Communications Ministries' International Christian Publishing Institute (ICPI), I realized my approach would not be viable in the long run.

The challenge: staying focused

In contrast to a generalist approach, a narrower focus for my enterprise would give direction, thrust, and identity. Where I had thought the most important matter was how many titles we would publish, I chose instead to produce a few focused titles with deeper distribution. I had to go back to the drawing board and

clearly define our target audience and the products we would develop to meet their needs. The entire mission statement had to change, along with the business and strategic plans. Four key issues that any entrepreneur should consider are: knowing your audience; developing a product positioned to meet their need; creating effective distribution channels; and of course, having a targeted marketing plan.

Partnerships in distribution

We had assumed distributors would be interested enough in our titles to desire to stock them. ICPI, however, emphasised that distribution is key to successful publishing operations. I have since sought to identify where and how our target audience can most effectively be reached at an affordable cost. This has been profitable as it has led us to strategic distributors with whom we are currently discussing partnerships.

We learned that distributors have identified areas of need that publishers are not fulfilling adequately. For example, there are few books on the many men and women who through obedience to God made immense contributions to the development of the Church and of society in Africa. This prompted us to begin developing a series of biographies of Africa's heroes and heroines of faith, and the list is growing. Thus, we are meeting a need few other local publishers, if any, are addressing.

Towards self-sufficiency

I determined not to begin the venture on borrowed capital or donor funds, but rather to raise the start-up capital through equity and then build up funds for publishing through other services. I created an independent subsidiary of the company which will provide Christian organizations and the corporate sector with services in editorial development, graphic design, and production and print marketing. A percentage of our monthly net income from services is set aside for the publishing program. In this way, we hope to make our venture self-sustaining within two to three years. ♦

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