

“A GOOD THING SELLS ITSELF”

Lawrence Darmani, of Step Publishers in Accra, Ghana, describes the marketing of devotional literature in Africa.

A good thing sells itself,” says a Ghanaian proverb. But in Africa today, it takes much more to get their products sold. Interviews with publishers and distributors in Ghana and Nigeria revealed five practical lessons for marketing devotional books.

Good packaging sells

Scripture Union (SU) produces *Daily Guide* (for adults) and *Daily Power* (for youth and children) and distributes them in schools, colleges and universities. Before new devotionals entered the market, *Daily Guide* and *Daily Power* enjoyed wide patronage.

“Scripture Union has enjoyed a monopoly,” says Djane, a member of the SU’s national executive committee. “To maintain it, we must do something drastic about our design, layout, and content.” One improvement is full-color covers for these devotionals.

At the Family Heritage Ministries office in Akure, Nigeria, co-director Iyabode Okoro says years of experience have led her to conclude that packaging is critical to success.

“The days of monopoly are over,” says Okoro. Her bookshop carries *Every Day With Jesus*, *Daily Guide*, *Daily Power* and *Our Daily Bread*. Buyers abstain from low quality devotionals.

Good content sells

Content is crucial for devotional books whose role is to draw people to the Lord and help them in their prayer and Bible reading. One example in Africa is *Our Daily Bread*, published by the US-based ministry, Radio Bible Class. Many thought its popularity was due to years of free distribution. Now that this book is for sale, it still has a following. *Our Daily Bread* is highly patronized in Africa because of its content. Every article has a story in it, and Africans are story lovers.

Good promotion sells

In order to introduce *Our Daily Bread* to new readers, the Ghana agents, Challenge Enterprises, arranged with a radio station to slot into their morning program a “Quiet Time” using the book. The campaign paid off—*Our Daily Bread* is one of the most widely read devotionals in Ghana today.

SU’s experience has also proven that promotion sells. “Scripture Union does more than just sell devotionals,” says Jude Hama, SU’s General Director, “we promote their use.”

Scripture Union relies heavily on its members to buy the books. Regional Directors, who act as agents, carry them to the schools and SU fellowships. To introduce the year’s devotional book to their people, they organize large meetings where they launch the booklets and promote their use. Large quantities are sold at such meetings.

Timing sells

Devotional books are often dated and must be sold before or within the early part of the period they cover. In Ghana around November, December, and the early days of a new year, devotional books are kept close to the counter where customers will not miss them. Imports, such as *Our Daily Bread* and *Every Day With Jesus*, arrive several months early.

One factor warring against effective marketing of devotional books is late printing, a phenomenon that plagues many African publishers.

Djane, of Scripture Union, suggests that products for the coming year should be out by September or October. Last year, Scripture Union warned its printers that unless the devotional books were delivered on time they would be rejected, as they have been in the past. Late publication results in large returns.

Yeboah Mensa, of Asempa Publishers, producers of the popular *Light for Our Path* devotional, agrees.

“After the first quarter of the year, we are forced to reduce the prices of our annual devotional,” he says.

Enthusiasm sells

What Ghanaian devotional book producers and distributors lack in printing, they make up with enthusiastic selling. The moment the books are released from the press they hit the streets. It is not uncommon to find devotional notes sold along busy streets, from car to car, office to office, and house to house in the same way that newspapers are sold. A woman who goes to the market is likely to encounter someone selling books.

“Sales are not bad,” says Asempa’s Mensa, “but they are not so good either, and we must do more.” The cities are choked with books but villages are deprived. Mensa has turned his attention to rural areas though “this means additional costs in transportation and vehicle maintenance.”

Asempa publishes *Light for Our Path* in three local languages. “Our local editions are the most suitable for readers and churches there,” says Mensa. By diversifying into vernacular editions, Asempa has widened its readership. Mensa wants more diversification, such as the production of devotional notes on audio cassettes.

A good thing sells itself

All publishers and distributors of devotional literature agree that this category of products is a good thing.

“Devotional books,” says SU’s Hama, “encourage people to read the Scripture, making daily Bible reading easy, exciting, and meaningful. This leads to victorious living, and fruitful service to the church and society.” ♦