



AFRICA

BOOK SELLING THRIVES ON AFRICA'S STREETS

Lawrence Darmani, of Step Publishers in Accra, Ghana, describes the strategies that freelance booksellers are employing to sell books in Africa.

Some people term it “aggressive marketing.” Others call it “assertive selling.” Whatever the terminology, the meaning is the same: determined freelance booksellers are taking books off the traditional book shelves (where most of them gather dust) and are pushing them along busy streets of African cities like other general goods.

“Why not?” asks Kwame Bonsu, an active street bookseller in Accra, Ghana’s capital. “Football, sports shoes, dog-chains, clothes, even furniture is sold on the street. Why not books?”

Location is everything

“If you want to do good business, you must choose your spot carefully,” says Bonsu. Booksellers on Africa’s streets choose their places of business strategically. Bonsu’s is adjacent to a Barclays Bank at the city center. He hardly lacks customers. Bonsu confirms that he does a good business every day, but refrains from quoting his daily sales. “At least I get my daily bread,” is all he says.

In Uganda’s capital, Kampala, one “aggressive” street seller positioned his table near a major book shop to grab spill-over shoppers from the book shop.

In Zimbabwe’s second largest city, Bulawayo, street sellers pitched their “tent” near a busy supermarket. Many supermarkets do not carry books. Shoppers who are also fans of books stop by the displays just outside the door. These booksellers have little trouble with the shopkeepers because they are not viewed as competitors.

For many of these street booksellers, a small table or kiosk is enough. Kwasi Mensah, operating a book table in Accra’s Opera Square in Ghana, boasts he “can fit into any available space.” He has no need for a huge structure with electricity bills or staff. Over a month’s time, Mensah talks with hundreds of prospective buyers. He reports “daily sales are not bad.”

In Accra and other African cities, however, pedestrian walkways are taken over by street hawkers. Every so often, the officials, backed sometimes by police force, conduct inspections. To prepare for such times, Bonsu admonishes that proper permission be sought and the

necessary tolls paid before selling books on the streets.

Variety counts

Bonsu’s book table is full of a variety of books. “That way you capture a variety of people’s needs,” he says. His best-selling titles are those written by local charismatic speakers on subjects such as deliverance from the powers of darkness and the blessings of God.

The Bible, however, is street vendors’ all-time best-selling book. Most of them receive their supplies from Bible societies. “But this is never enough,” said one itinerant seller. “You have to

booksellers. It is typical to find plaques, posters, leather bags for carrying Bibles, key-holders, and other gift items.

Used books

“Rare books are like gems when you find them,” said a University of Ghana graduate student whose search for a textbook led him to an aggressive street used-books dealer. Beaming, he seemed smitten by the street vendor’s competence in finding him a book he could not find in regular book shops.

On a busy street in Nairobi, Kenya, one seller carried a wide array of fiction, science textbooks, novels, children’s



Women at the market may be good prospects for some African booksellers.

have a big capital to make a deposit, which I don’t have.” So, she purchases only a few at a time.

Books are not the only wares carried by the street

books, tattered Bibles, and even a concordance. Used books are good for selling on the streets. People stop to peruse them and often go home with a title and a