



*Can Christian publishers
in non-Western countries
penetrate lucrative
international markets?*

by David Mehlis

Approach World Markets Strategically

Many publishers around the world would love to see their books published in Western countries. Penetrating these markets could greatly increase their revenues. Why is it so very hard to sell rights to publishers in the United States and other developed countries? Even Cook, despite its commitment to international partnerships, finds it difficult to publish books from abroad.

First, the book markets in these countries are already crowded. If you visit a bookstore in the United States, you will find dozens of titles on every subject. Most U.S. bookstores carry less than one third of the available Christian books.

Second, markets are extremely segmented. There are different Bibles for women, for men, for teenagers and for Charismatic Christians. All these are attempts by Bible publishers to reach specific market segments. A book developed in another culture may be too general to adequately target the needs of any of these segments. Occasionally, a book appears that effectively crosses cultures and speaks to the needs of one of these segments, but there are few such titles.

A third barrier to international titles entering markets in developed nations is that publishers are already inundated with manuscripts from established authors. Publishers buy rights to close editorial gaps in their programs. But in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and other Western countries, publishers are already over-publishing and need few additional titles. Foreign titles are a bigger risk, and they may not fill gaps in the publisher's product line.

Finally, in some Western countries, particularly the United States, there is a tendency toward celebrity publishing. Books by leaders, well known pastors, and radio and TV personalities are more likely to do well in the market regardless of their message. A book on prayer or on marriage by T. D. Jakes is more likely to do well than one on the same topic by a little-known church leader from another part of the world. This celebrity orientation makes it harder to get new titles into these markets.

However, difficult does not mean impossible. One strategy for publishers overseas to penetrate the markets in developed nations is to approach small publishers serving niche markets. A niche publisher in the United States that targets the Chinese American church is more likely to consider a title from Hong Kong. The publisher will be interested because it matches their mission and targets a market they know and can reach. If you approach a publishing firm similar to yours in size, the costs and opportunities you each see for the product at hand are likely to be much closer. There is an incentive to work together in a mutually beneficial partnership.

Once you show that your titles have had success with smaller publishers in developed nations, and that given more resources, they could be even more successful, you may get the attention of bigger publishers. Breaking into these markets would not only increase revenue, but would also allow Western Christians to be enriched by insights and experiences of the Church around the world. ❖

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