

A PUBLISHER'S SALES FORCE

Kevin Engel (kengel@tpg.com.au), international Christian publishing consultant in Sydney, Australia, discusses how to manage and train an effective sales staff.

Every person who is engaged in the sale of Christian books has a very special ministry. Their work can be quite satisfying and rewarding, but it calls for dedication and determination.

Product knowledge

A publishing company's sales force has a narrower focus than a bookstore's. The publisher's sales force can concentrate on a limited number of titles. These will fall into

Every sales person brings his or her unique personality into the work.

two groups: new titles and the back list, which includes older titles and reprints.

Every sales person should know the main features of each title. An easy way to learn about the characteristics of each book is a simple five-finger exercise. The fingers of a hand represent the main features of each book: title, author, subject, publisher, and price. A publisher's sales representative should know the audience for whom a particular book is suitable and the benefits or value to the customer in buying this book.

The sales staff should not just know their own publishing house's titles, but be aware of similar titles published by others. They need to know and be able to explain the differences, special features, strengths or benefits of their titles when compared with the competition. Pick up the books, look at them, learn about them until they become good friends.

Presentation

The publisher's sales force will follow the simple steps described below. Every representative must be trained in these techniques. Even if the sales person has a degree in marketing, he or she still needs training according to the systems, style and products of the publishing house which they now represent.



"Bookselling is a rewarding and satisfying ministry," says Kevin Engel. He presented this material at a 2002 Cook publisher workshop in Seoul, South Korea.

1. Prepare thoroughly. Select samples of new and backlist titles to be taken to the bookstores. Also take along supporting material such as catalogs, photographs, artwork, advertising aids.

2. Be considerate in setting appointments. Visit at times that are convenient for the bookstores—not just at your convenience. Do not try to have appointments at busy times of the day.

3. Arrive on time. Telephone and advise the buyer if you are delayed by traffic. Be prepared to wait if he or she is busy. Know the buyer's name. Have business cards ready.

4. *Be polite.* Restrict the presentation to the period of time allowed or indicated by the bookstore.

5. *Have facts and figures ready.* Do not just bring the catalog. Be ready to provide delivery dates, times, prices, trade discounts, and special offers. Know what has been advertised and all the details about these special items.

6. *Be professional.* Do not just display a title, but put it into the hands of the buyer. Direct their attention to any special features. Take care not to be offensive in the sales presentation.

7. *Close the sale at that time.* But if this is not possible, leave suitable materials and make arrangements to call later. Offer e-mail order facilities if available.

8. *Be organized.* Have order forms, or a laptop computer system, ready to write orders.

9. *Be thorough.* Be sure to keep any promises made for follow up, especially with sales campaigns or promotions by the bookstore.

10. *Be pleasant.* Take care to observe local cultural patterns when greeting and leaving. Remember that the personal interaction that takes place between people meeting face to face is vital. Do not just provide detailed information, but seek to build good relationships.

Outreach

It is often impossible to visit all potential customers. However, the sales force should develop a list of key people who are kept in touch with the organization. This can also be done by phone, e-mail, regular mail or other means. In addition to bookstores and distributors, the sales representatives should stay in frequent contact with ministries, parachurch organizations, institutions, schools, key pastors, and even community leaders.

The rules outlined above also apply to a publisher's outreach program: preparation and a selection of appropriate items are essential.

Look for ways to help your clients to do their work more efficiently. Be of service. The sales

agent should communicate that the publishing house wants to help others in their ministry, to equip them in their personal and professional lives.

The human factor

Management must recognize and respect that every salesperson has a unique character. They can all be trained in the same techniques, in the ministry and purpose of the publishing house, but each person brings his or her own personality into the work.

Individual gifts, abilities and characteristics are a great potential asset, and should be taken into consideration when designing training and allocating tasks within the sales force. Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each person in accomplishing the publishing house's ministry, and help them to persevere for long-term success. ❖

POINTERS FOR BOOKSTORES

Salespeople in a Christian bookstore are not just "check-out clerks." There is a world of difference between the customer *buying* a book and the staff *selling* that book. Wherever possible, the staff should not only help customers, but remember that the business of the bookstore is to sell books.

Staff must know the inventory. Set a daily target of 20, 30 or 50 books, and become familiar with them. Computer records at the point of sale will help but the staff should know where all the titles are and be able to either take customers to the book required, or direct them where to find it.

The selling staff also needs to learn how to achieve "add-on sales." For example, a customer wants to buy a Bible. The salesperson explains and demonstrates the different editions and bindings available and a selection is made. Now, there is an opportunity for the "add-on." Does the customer need a Bible cover? What about a nice bookmark? Do they follow a

Bible reading plan? Are they interested in Bible study helps? Would they like to be on a regular mailing list? All this can be discussed in a pleasant, relaxed and respectful manner. It may not produce a sale, but it will always help the customer to know what is available and that the bookstore staff can help with future needs.

Use visual merchandising. Arrange products so as to grab the customer's attention. Use lighting, location in the store, bright colors, neat signs at eye level, feature displays. Observe the way customers enter the bookstore. Do they come straight to the sales point? Do they move to the right? Or to the left? Arrange displays according to this pattern.

Advertise. There are plenty of occasions during the year when advertising of special titles will attract customers. Use all types of advertising—print, radio, television, e-mail and displays as appropriate and affordable in your situation.

—Kevin Engel