

Books Are NOT Sacred



*A view of the future of
Christian publishing
and technology.*

by David Mehlis

Literature and book publishing is being challenged by sound bites. A person in the U.S. can't get elected to a government post unless he or she is able to speak in sound bites, those little snippets that catch people's attention. Therefore, we have to do a much better job of communicating. People are not going to take generalities, they want a very focused presentation. Readers want literature that specifically meets some need that they might have.

Don't provide literature based on your perception of the public's need, but rather on what they communicate as their need. In *Managing for Results*, Peter Drucker writes, "The customer doesn't value your product—you do. The customer values what it does for him." No one pays for a "product"—a book. Instead, people pay for satisfaction.

Some fear books will become obsolete. Publishers bemoan the death of books as though they were sacred. But, what is inherently Christian about a book? Until Gutenberg, virtually no one had literature, and the church survived very well. Before the printing press, publishers existed as the communicators of the message. There were monks, but there were also storytellers. It is not the format that is Christian. The message is what matters. Repentance, reconciliation and response is our message. A publisher's products

try to communicate those truths. Christian organizations work to take the message of faith to where the needs and people are.

Technology will push publishers to focus the message. The public's sound bite orientation means publishers are no longer going to be able to get someone to read those 900 page systematic theology books. We may have to respond with shorter books. Right now the economies of scale almost require that a product have something that looks like 180 pages. But even in books that have 180 pages, the margins are bigger and the type is bigger.

Publishers are using print formats less. Literature doesn't necessarily have to be in just a book or magazine form. It can be on websites or even electronic publishing. The web allows us to publish 20 or 30 pages more cost-effectively, so we must be much more specific.

Many think about the future of Christian publishing on the basis of technological changes—but whatever medium is used, Christians will still have a message to communicate. No matter what the format of the work might be, when we at Cook publish a product, we always ask, "Are we sure God's words are coming through?" If we focus on our readers and point them to Christ, the format is important only as a means to good communication. ❖

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