

# Books by e-mail

by Sam Hine

It has become increasingly difficult to sell Christian books, but Christ's message is as relevant and necessary as ever. Fortunately, communications technologies provide new opportunities to spread that message to previously unreachable audiences—and at a much lower cost.

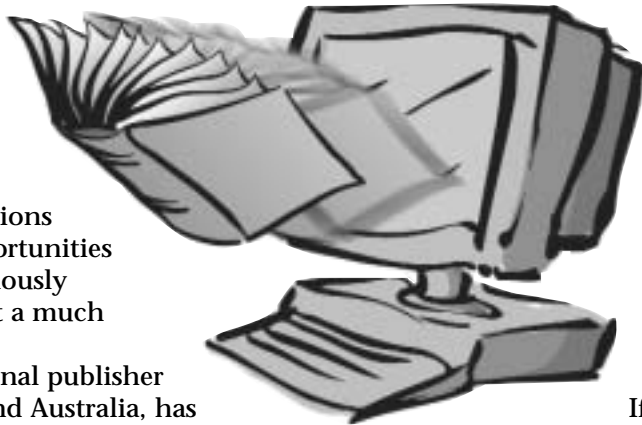
Plough, a non-denominational publisher with offices in the U.S., U.K. and Australia, has had great success serializing books by e-mail. Traditional e-books require downloading savvy as well as the correct software or reading device. Plough's system is far easier. To sign up for a title, a reader simply goes to Plough.com and enters his or her e-mail address. The reader is then e-mailed one chapter a week. There are no printing or mailing costs, no distributors or booksellers taking a cut, and no dead trees.

There is also no money in Plough's e-mail serialization, which might confound corporate publishers. However, small, independent and non-profit Christian publishers need to think in other currencies. Each new person reached has value. Many who rarely read books, especially among the young, do spend a lot of time reading online. This is an opportunity to reach beyond traditional book-buying audiences.

People are not necessarily open to religious books from an unknown source. Publishers must develop trust by allowing people to sample articles and book excerpts on the Web. And, reading articles or subscribing to chapters exposes them to the message, even if they never become paying customers.

Will delivery of free content, online, undercut sales of print editions through conventional channels? Plough's experience suggests the opposite. Its first free e-book, a PDF format edition of *Endangered: Your Child in a Hostile World*, was downloaded 3000 times before the print version's September 2000 release; it went on to sell 60,000 copies in paperback by the end of that year. During the 2001 Christmas season, Plough offered daily excerpts from *Watch for the Light*, a new seasonal devotional. Over 3000 people subscribed, and the hardcover book sold 25,000 copies in three weeks.

Publishers have long recognized that the key promotional vehicle for a new book is word of mouth.



There is no better way to get it started than placing a book into the hands (or inbox) of someone who will talk about it.

Online, this effect is called "word of mouse." If people like an excerpt, they will forward it to their friends or post it on a discussion forum.

If a book is serialized by e-mail in advance of publication, by the time it hits bookstore shelves thousands of people may have heard about it from a trusted friend. A publisher might even offer an incentive for spreading the word. For example, if five friends subscribe to a book at Plough.com, the first subscriber can earn a paper-and-ink book of his or her choice. (Adding such frills will require considerable technical expertise.)

Another component for promotion of Plough's promotions is to e-mail articles to like-minded websites and e-mail newsletters, allowing them to reprint a link to the publisher's website. This is far more effective than exchanging links. Often a chapter from a book makes a good stand-alone article.

The most important component is an e-mail newsletter. Ask website visitors for permission to notify them when the publishing house has something new to offer. There is no postage involved, and readers will return to the website through the "hot links" included in the newsletter.

Another relatively easy strategy is to invite visitors to subscribe to a "thought for the day" culled from the publisher's various books and mailed out first thing every morning. At Plough.com, the "Daily Dig" is now the most popular feature. E-mail is not only an excellent way to promote Plough's website. It also allows the company to communicate directly and personally with its readers, and to develop relationships with readers. In the end, this brings long-term rewards. ❖

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