

Edit for Readers



*Edit for readers so
your products will
minister.*

by Kim Pettit

From that day forward," says writer Lucius Shepard, "she lived happily ever after. Except for the dying at the end. And the heartbreak in between."

Did you have to re-read that? I know I did. A quote like that provokes editors. It made me do a double-take, then choke with laughter. It made me want to grab that writer by the collar to ask, "What were you thinking?!!" How could he say she lived happily ever after? What was the heartbreak? How did she die? Shepard's quote reminded me that an editor's prime concern is the reader.

The interesting thing is, the public (and often even editors themselves) imagine editors as persons whose primary concerns are spelling, grammar, facts and minutiae in manuscripts. If "a writer is a man walking down a street thinking how he would describe himself as a man walking down the street," as author Theodore Morrison puts it, an editor is even more removed from reality. Editors are pictured as solitary souls, who delight in rewrites, revisions, corrections and other forms of torture. Editors would rather wrestle with words and ideas in silence than talk to living, breathing human beings. They are consumed by deadlines. They are focused on *products*—articles, newspapers, magazines, books, curriculum, and so on—rather than *people*.

A reporter, a photographer and a newspaper editor are walking on the beach. They find a magic lamp, and a genie issues forth to grant them each a wish. The photographer's wish is granted first. She is sent to a paradise. The reporter also disappears, to another idyllic location. And the editor? He promptly says to the genie, "I want them back here, right now!" He gives no thought to his coworkers' preferences. His focus on deadlines and products is his overriding concern.

Does this ring true for you? I must admit I am like that newspaper editor. I too am concerned with product, process, proofs—in short, with publishing. But in my own defense, and that of my peers, I confess editors think about people too. Each one of us wonders: "How will

the material I am working on affect readers? What effect will it have on the audience? Will the readers laugh, cry, learn something? What questions will they have? Does the book tell the whole story? Will this book help them? Will they like it? Will it meet their needs?"

An editor's prime concern is the reader, that invisible person who is not present during our product planning sessions, editorial meetings, production schedule discussions and marketing strategy summits. That *other* person is key to everything we do. Without readers, our work is worthless.

And that fact, that inescapable and unalterable concern for readers, brings me to my next point. *To minister*, says the dictionary, is "to attend to the wants and needs of others."

To edit with our readers in mind is to engage in ministry. If we want Christian books and magazines to be effective,

to change people, to capture their imaginations, enlighten their minds, stir their hearts, and move them to action, we must attend to their "wants and needs." How do we do this?

"Explain how in 200 words or less," my alter ego says. "I dare you." As an editor, I am reminded there is limited space for this column. There is no way I can do justice to such a question within the brief space allotted here. So to my chagrin, I write "... from this day forward, live happily ever after. Except worry about the readers at the end. And the process in between." ♦

***Attention
to readers'
wants and
needs is
essential.***