

FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE

Ramon A. Rocha III, chief executive officer of OMF Literature Inc. (www.omflit.com) in Manila, Philippines, spoke to InterLit about his company's strengths and challenges.



Ramon Rocha anticipates new challenges and success for OMF Lit. this year.

OMF Lit. has grown to be one of the largest Christian publishing houses in the Philippines. What is the secret?

We remain focused on our publishing mission and vision. We channel all resources toward this focus while building competencies in the process. Our production funds are sometimes boosted by gifts from supporters, and special projects are sometimes funded by well-wishers or through interest free loans or good pre-publication orders, but we run a self-supporting company. We are also blessed to

have a young, dynamic, involved, and "not-there-for-life" board of trustees.

And have a strong brand too ...

Yes, we are working hard to guard, preserve and promote the OMF Lit. brand because of its acceptance by churches, denominations, and even the secular community. We do this by ensuring that we remain biblical, relevant, quality-conscious both in content and form, and tops in customer service.

Now we are building the "Hiyas" brand to be the top-of-mind brand of children's books that teach Christian values. Parents and teachers are already taking notice. Grace Chong and Luis Gatmaitan, two of our authors, received Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. This is the most prestigious literary writing competition—held every year—in the Philippines. This kind of recognition confirms and strengthens our campaign to promote the Hiyas brand.

Is maintaining high editorial standards a challenge?

It takes continuous improvement and development. Lindy Hope, on our staff, conducts regular editorial training to keep editors sharp and focused. Last year OMF Lit. hosted an editor's training semi-

nar for the industry. We regularly host the meetings of the Editors Association of the Philippines.

OMF Lit. has a very strong editorial team. We released 24 titles last season, but every one of them had to meet our specific standards of quality. Employees from editorial, production, sales, and marketing, as well as myself, form a publishing committee that evaluates and selects manuscripts.

What got you into comics?

Children and even adults love comics. Dark and nasty comics dominate the market. There should be a Christian alternative with characters that draw kids to Christ and the Bible. In addition, Christian comics should at least match, if not surpass, secular comics in quality of art, "action", and paper.

I saw all of those qualities in a U.S.-produced comic series called *PowerMark*. I "field tested" some initial copies with my own children and some neighborhood kids. They were drooling and crowing over the books. They pestered me for the next issue. OMF Lit. acquired rights to this product, but we over-estimated the demand and printed too many of the first issue.

Lesson: *PowerMark* is an excellent product, but needs a strategic marketing and distribution program

to maximize its sales potential. In addition, it is expensive to produce. We began soliciting ads to subsidize costs. We are getting very positive responses.

By the way, *PowerMark* received the "Best in Comic Strips" from the Catholic Mass Media Awards. This is a big endorsement for our work from the Catholic Church.

How does your company maximize distribution?

OMF Lit. staff maintain regular communication with the most important stores and chains—300 Christian and secular bookstores nationwide. Fernan Cruz, our sales manager, serves as president of the CBA Philippines chapter. Our strong relationships have resulted in a strong OMF Lit. presence in Christian and general stores. Besides, we have a lot to offer with over 500 titles in our catalog and top quality service. We make it easy for retailers to approach us. At the Philippine Bookfair last year, the largest industry event in our country, our booth won an award.

I continue to look for ways to capitalize on our membership and involvement in all major industry organizations, both evangelical and secular. We participate in government and NGO-sponsored activities and nurture good relations with churches, businesses . . . even political leaders.

We also work with other media. Last year, Hiyas Children's stories aired on a Manila radio station, DZAS. Sales of the books picked up, and we received lots of calls and text messages from parents and children who appreciated the books and the shows. OMF Lit. entered into an agreement to have more titles adapted, this time into an animated cartoon show to air on national television. All of us are very excited about this opportunity!

What of international sales?

To reach the Filipino diaspora with our literature, we have sought

out strategic partnerships with churches, organizations, and even government agencies who share the same vision. OMF Lit. has the support of reliable shipping companies for cost effective and fast deliveries.

We have also negotiated agreements to market bestselling U.S. titles, not only in the Philippines but also in limited Asian markets. These are non-exclusive contracts, but we are still able to compete in terms of price and quality. Our export sales tripled in 1999 and have grown ever since. These increased sales allow us to continue to expand our list.

Any advice for fledgling publishers?

The most common mistakes I see new publishers commit are that they lack focus, they publish mediocre products, and they engage in unprofessional business practices.

To succeed, build distinctive competencies and develop them strategically. Build a

strong list of fastsellers. Keep your mission foremost.

To publish successful cross-over titles, be politically correct. Avoid antagonism yet without any compromise of biblical truth. Have integrity.

We are trying our best to do all these. There were

tough times for OMF Lit. over the years. We had low sales, high inventory, poor collections. We couldn't help but feel tired and weary. What kept us going was our desire to please Christ, to make him known through our books.

What worries you?

That we at OMF Lit. become proud, conceited, or complacent. ❖

