

Focus on Distribution

by Benjamin Gnanamanickam

In a country like India, where the literacy rate is not very high and the percentage of Christian community is very small, problems in distribution are many. They include lack of purchasing power, an expectation for subsidized prices, lack of interest in books. There is not an efficient, commercial network of distribution on the part of Christian publishers and there are few trained and enthusiastic booksellers.

Distribution is the most difficult part of publishing. It is disastrous to assume that distribution already exists. Too many books have been left to rot on warehouse shelves because of the failure of the publisher to take into account the possible areas of distribution. Authors may come forward to sell their books in their own meetings and churches, but distribution is more than that.

Some possible methods of distribution are established Christian bookshops, independent religious bookshops, bookshops run by churches and secular bookshops. If bookstores are your main outlet, have you talked to/contacted the bookstore manager to determine his or her attitude toward your book? Each bookstore manager will respond to your book in a different way. A manager who belongs to another church or Christian denomination may be biased and inclined not to stock your book. Another manager may give you some helpful suggestions.

If bookstore venues are limited, what then? Who else will distribute your book? You may use independent sales agents, colporteurs, or a book mobile. Maybe it can be sold by students and volunteers on vacations, at church conventions, at public meetings and at trade fairs. You might work on distribution to secular and university libraries, or focus on church libraries and Christian reading rooms.

Perhaps mail-order and book clubs work well in your country. You may want to contact general stores and secular outlets to see if they would be interested in stocking your book, before you publish the book.

Be prepared to spend money on advertisement and promotional literature. You cannot afford to sell your book if you are not prepared to spend money and time

on promoting your book. Send copies to book reviewers. If your publishing house is fairly large, appoint a liaison officer. Send copies to public libraries.

Remember, though, that however attractively the book might have been printed and however useful it might be, the price of the book plays a vital part in quicker and wider distribution. Some publishers think that if the book is priced high, it may enhance and complement the content of the book and the book itself will be easily saleable. Others think the cheaper the book is priced, the faster the sale will be.

Be realistic in fixing the selling price. Plan to make a profit on each book you publish. The profit margin may vary according to policy, nature of the book, the local market and economy. Also, distributors and retailers expect discounts to be factored in to your prices. Discounts are fixed by local custom or publisher's policy. Trade discounts are based on retail price. In many areas, discounting between 25 and 40 percent is a normal practice.

Some other factors that influence the buying public are the author and/or the publisher's prestige and the timeliness and importance of the subject. In addition, sales to bookstores, retailers and other distributors are affected by discount and credit policies, the return privileges you allow, and the service and promotions you offer to support your products.

Because publishers take the financial risk of producing books, they should find ways to obtain the widest possible distribution for their products. ❖

Benjamin Gnanamanickam is the General Secretary of the Evangelical Literature Service in Chennai, India.