



Food for Intellectuals

Robinson Malkomes offers insights from his work as academic editor for Vida Nova (www.vidanova.com.br) in São Paulo, Brazil.

The image that comes to mind when I think of Christian publishing for academics is that of a waiter. Whenever I go to a restaurant for lunch, the first thing I do after finding a comfortable table is to fervently wish for a good waiter—because waiters can truly be the difference between “heaven” and “hell” for customers. Some aspects of an academic editor’s responsibilities resemble what a waiter should do. How do I apply this metaphor? Like a waiter, an editor must remember what customers look for: tasty, well-presented intellectual food. The academic editor is the bridge that brings the chef’s ability from the kitchen to the table. Editors serve words, they do not make them. This simple fact brings some crucial truths to mind.

A top-level menu of authors

Waiters will be at a loss if the chef in the kitchen is able only to prepare bread and butter. The menu of authors must be as professional as that of the famous chefs of haute cuisine. Even publishers who cannot afford an all-star menu should seek authors who are well-versed in their fields. Intellectual food consumers will judge what is brought to their tables. They will not tolerate any lack of expertise. Publishing for academia is synonymous with cooking for

and serving the best gourmets. Editors have no choice but to choose the best authors in their areas of knowledge. Who are the top-level authors? Where are they?

The past is present. As editors read church history, theology, and philosophy, 20/20 vision is indispensable. In a sense, church history is a by-product of theological and philosophical thoughts. It was in the cradle of ideas from which practices, groups, and movements grew. Great minds of the past should not be overlooked. Critical thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards, Locke, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Barth, Pannenberg, Bultmann, and many others influenced the societies in which they lived and continue to influence our 21st century world. Publishers seeking to reach academic audiences must make known, and interpret, the legacies of the great minds of the past. Academic editors cannot afford to leave them out of their publishing plans.

The present must have a voice. Recent years have brought a dramatic increase in the number of good manuscripts received. Developing nations, like Brazil, are becoming far less dependent upon translations. Cultivating relationships with professors, researchers, librarians

and post-graduate students is a valuable way to stay on top of market needs, expectations, and trends. The academic editor must be an insider in the circles where scholars gather. Most will not be found behind pulpits, but teaching at theological schools, attending conferences, and contributing articles to journals and magazines.

Prepare for the future. Prepare the ground for a new breed of authors, using writing contests as an inexpensive tool. Pay attention to master’s degree theses and doctoral dissertations, which can often be reworked into books. People who live within the academic sphere, even without being noted authors, may be gifted in detecting needs, trends, and fresh ideas. They may be the nouvelle cuisine chefs. Stay in touch with them and seek new ingredients to keep the menu relevant, fresh and tasteful.

Use peer reviews to screen proposals

Academic writing is by nature highly specialized. Editors as a rule may not be scholars. Few are the editors who, for instance, master the intricacies of Hebrew syntax and at the same time are experts on patristics and well-acquainted with the maze of bioethics.



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Therefore, editors should consider peer reviews as part of their publishing program, knowing that this will require a healthy amount of political savvy. Given the considerable number of works sent to editors for evaluation, along with modest budgets for peer reviews, plus the complexity of academic texts, editors must be wise enough to count on a large, solid, and reliable network of experts to adeptly evaluate prospective manuscripts.

Editors should also keep in mind that they have the final decision on publishing a given manuscript. They may wish to keep the reviewer's identity a secret. Anonymity and independence can encourage candor. Reviewers will feel more comfortable in rejecting a manuscript or recommending that the author make changes.

A word of caution: reviewers may be too critical of conclusions that go against their own ideas, or they may be indulgent towards those ideas they support. Editors must take these possibilities into consideration.

Feed the spirit of academia

Give voice to a broad range of views. Discussions can be enriched when authors are given freedom to express the results of their intellectual efforts. As J. Gresham Machen warned in 1913, "The

Church is perishing through the lack of thinking, not through an excess of it." His words are extremely relevant today, when certain segments of the 21st century church are still in intellectual retreat. Without creating an atmosphere of anarchy or giving wings to relativism, editors, like professional waiters, have the opportunity of blessing those they serve with a delightful variety of colors and flavors.

Mouth-watering academic products

The right staff is essential. For instance, consider the translation of a Hebrew grammar originally published in German. Any professional translator of German texts, no matter how experienced, will be in trouble if he or she has never taken a serious course on Hebrew grammar. Typesetters and proofreaders, in turn, will need a basic knowledge of Hebrew. Sales people will also be at a disadvantage if they cannot convince potential buyers of the superiority of their Hebrew grammar over similar products offered by competitors.

The production and marketing of scholarly texts have been greatly boosted by the computer era. Portable libraries, speedy research, and lower costs are undeniable realities in the digital world. New technologies affect scholarly works perhaps more than

most popular books, as they may determine whether or not to publish titles in print or electronic form.

A word of caution may be appropriate at this point: in some areas of the world editors need wisdom as they face the serious problem of software piracy. Additional safeguards will be necessary for them to protect their books against illegal copies.

Offer memorable food

The mentality that says Christian publishers ought to train pastors rather than scholars is shortsighted. It is precisely future pastors who will benefit from today's scholarly publications. They are the ones who must be relevant in this secularized, post-Christian world.

"Our churches are filled with Christians idling in intellectual neutral," writes William Lane Craig. "Their minds are going to waste. One result of this is an immature, superficial faith. People who simply ride the roller coaster of emotional experience are cheating themselves out of a deeper and richer Christian faith by neglecting the intellectual side of that faith."

May God help academic editors to feed His Church as professional, relevant and faithful waiters. ❖