



Do not focus on bestsellers if you want a viable publishing business.

by Isaac Phiri

Good Sellers Make Good Business

Many publishers dream of releasing bestsellers. They visit international book fairs to obtain rights to bestsellers. Since we work with many publishers around the world, I am sometimes in the awkward situation of “celebrating” with a publisher who just got the rights to a bestseller, and then a mere half an hour later “commiserating” with a crushed publisher whose house could not compete.

Bestsellers touch many lives, sell in large numbers and bring in good revenue. They help companies gain a good position in the market. They help backlist titles sell. Therefore, it is not hard to celebrate with our friends whose titles make the bestseller lists in their markets, or who are able to acquire titles that are already bestsellers in bigger markets such as the United States.

Perils of bestsellers

Our work at Cook Communications Ministries International is to help Christian publishers build viable organizations. What, then, do we say to the publishers who are crushed when the titles they so desired went to a competing house?

My answer: *Bestsellers do not build viable publishing companies.* Often, this is a surprise to these publishers. They reason that bestsellers are money-makers. The more money a business can bring in, the better.

I beg to differ. In the U.S., the U.K. and Germany, publishers of bestsellers often have financial trouble and can even be bought out by lesser-known companies. In emerging markets, we have also seen many “successful” publishers go out of business. One company in Eastern Europe published a bestselling title. Despite this, the company was in the doldrums not long afterwards.

Two strategic lessons

Strategic Lesson One: *Do not build your business on bestsellers.* Here is why: bestsellers are elusive. No one knows what

makes a book a bestseller. The author’s fame or the book’s timing may suggest it will sell in large numbers, but this is not a given. In the U.S., large advances have been given for titles that the publishers assumed would be bestsellers. Some were disasters, leaving the publishers in a worse situation than before.

Strategic Lesson Two: *Build a business on finding and promoting good sellers.* These are titles that fit your mission and market, are well-crafted, well-designed, and offered at an appropriate price. They may sell slowly, but they bring in revenue year after year. Over time, a good backlist creates a steady business and an enduring ministry. A viable publishing business is made up of a backlist of steady sellers and a promising frontlist of good sellers. This model of publishing is more attainable and is more conducive to balancing business with ministry.

Occasionally, a good title sells quickly in large numbers. It is bestseller material. Then, strategic decisions must be made to take full advantage of the opportunity. The bestseller should be handled so that it does not stop the publishing house from focusing on the acquisition and promotion of good sellers. Some publishers create a separate department to handle the bestsellers; others actually sell the rights to publishers better situated to handle such books.

Smart publishers realize bestsellers can be a blessing or a curse. Good sellers, in contrast, are always a blessing. They are the building blocks on which enduring publishing houses stand.

This *InterLit* issue is about promotion—getting people to know about and buy books. Our authors provide practical actions publishers can take to communicate with their markets and generate on-going sales. None of our authors claim that doing what they propose will create bestsellers. But, these strategies and tactics will make good books become good sellers. Go for good sellers. They make good business. ♦