# How Many Flavors of Coke Does this World Need?

*Publisher Kent Wilson, of NavPress in Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States, applies marketing principles to line extensions.*

Manufacturers all around the world are in love with line extensions. In 1994 alone, of the over 20,000 new products introduced in the United States, more than 90 percent were line extensions. The Coca Cola bottling company started back in 1886 with one soda drink and only one flavor. Today, consumers can choose between eight different flavors of Cola (Coca Cola, Coke Classic, Diet, Caffeine Free, Caffeine Free Classic, Diet Caffeine Free, Cherry and Diet Cherry), not to mention hundreds of other flavors and regional brands unique to different countries.

Publishers are also enamored with line extensions. There are now over 250 versions of the popular *Chicken Soup* books first introduced only eight years ago (Have you read *Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover's Soul?*). InterVarsity Press still offers 82 different versions of its popular *LifeGuides Bible Study* series. Bible publishers, however, win the top award for line extensions. Potential Bible purchasers must select from a dizzying array of over 10,000 versions of the Bible in English with a selection of binding styles, colors, sizes, paper types, notes, references, pictures, target audiences, etc.

Line extensions are products that are variations or versions of an initial core product. Coke started with one flavor. The Bible began with only three languages and in only one binding form. Most popular Bible study and commentary series began with a single prototype book. Yet today, roughly 40 to 50 percent of all published books are line extensions. Publishing line extensions include multiple books in a series, companion study guides, calendars, gifts, toys, software, etc. Almost every publisher has a line of books by the same author, or a line of books written by different authors with the same format and features, or various versions of the same content. Why such a love affair with line extensions?

## Advantages

Publishers like line extensions as a cost-effective way to build their back-list for a number of reasons. Line extensions promise publishers a low-risk way of creating new product because of the assumption that the new product will perform similar to the core product. Line extensions also allow publishers to add more product to their line without the high acquisition costs associated with finding new authors and ideas. Additionally, marketing costs are considerably less per book when marketing a line or series of books versus marketing the same number of individual titles. And when new titles are added to the

line, publishers can introduce the titles at less cost because consumers and retailers are already familiar with the line.

Consumers like the familiarity that line extensions provide. If they enjoyed one book within a series, consumers assume the next book in the series will be just as enjoyable and helpful. If line extensions are produced correctly following the same format and intent as the core product, consumers are generally not disappointed. Retailers know the sales history of products within a line and are willing to stock other products from successful lines and extensions.

### Cautions

Line extensions are not all a publisher's dream. In fact, line extensions and series sometimes drag publishers into poor publishing decisions before they realize what they are doing. A successful first book in a series does not guarantee the second, third or even the fifth book in the same series will be as successful. A publisher could use the same format in producing subsequent line extensions and yet the product could still fail.

There seem to be few given rules to producing successful extensions; mostly it is important to use similar artwork. When lines are extended with additional product, publishers often contract for multiple editions at the same time to build the line quicker. But if the line turns out not to be successful, the publisher may be left with expensive books in development that cannot be canceled and that will not sell.

Line extensions can also divert publishers attention from seeking new product that is creative and fresh. It is a known fact that adding to proven formulas is easier and less costly.

### Line extensions and Bibles

Nowhere is line extension more attractive, and potentially more risky, than with Bible publishing. The Bible is the most successful book ever published in human history, not only because of its power to change lives, but also because it can very easily be extended, modified and annotated.

Think about the variations available to the typical English Bible purchaser today:

*Versions*: NIV, NIRV, KJV, NKJV, NLT, NASB, CEV, NRSV, etc.

*Books of the Bible:* entire Bible, New Testament, New Testament plus Psalms, Psalms only, etc.

*Sizes:* Full size, wide margin, pocket size, compact, etc.

*Papers:* Bible paper, mass market pulpwood, low-bulk, etc.

*Covers:* paperback, hardback, leather, leatherette, etc.

*Colors:* Black, red, maroon, brown, white, blue, etc.

*Study notes:* Men's study Bible, women's study Bible, prophecy study Bible, etc.

*Print size:* Large print, regular print, small print.

*Columns:* Double column, single column, center column reference.

*Intended audiences:* Men, women, charismatics, youth, leaders, teachers, pastors, etc.

However, simply because the Bible can be line-extended with ease does not necessarily mean that publishers should do so. When NavPress first published the new paraphrase of the Bible by Eugene Peterson called *The Message*, in the first few years it released what was thought to be a farily conservative number of *The Message* products: 16 different binding styles, individual books, and versions of the New Testament. All 16 products seemed to have legitimate markets. However, after several years of sales and customer feedback, it was apparent that *The Message* buyers wanted only six basic versions: two sizes of NT, paperback NT plus Psalms, hardback NT plus Psalms, and two sizes of leather NT plus Psalms. If NavPress had followed the path of most Bible publishers, it would have published numerous additional products that offered variations in color, print size, study notes or audience, most of which would have failed as well.

Publishers still publish hundreds of variations of Bible product and do so quite successfully. Nevertheless, they may be reaching the point of saturation as far as retailers and customers are concerned. In a recent conversation with a prominent Bible publisher, he candidly admitted that they had far more variations of Bible product in stock than customers wanted, and he saw a future in Bible publishing with significantly fewer options and more targeted product.

### Line extensions and product strategy

Although publishing seems to be more of an art than a science, there are a few general principles that publishers can follow when considering line extensions. First of all, simply because a book becomes a success does not imply that it is a candidate for line extension. Some
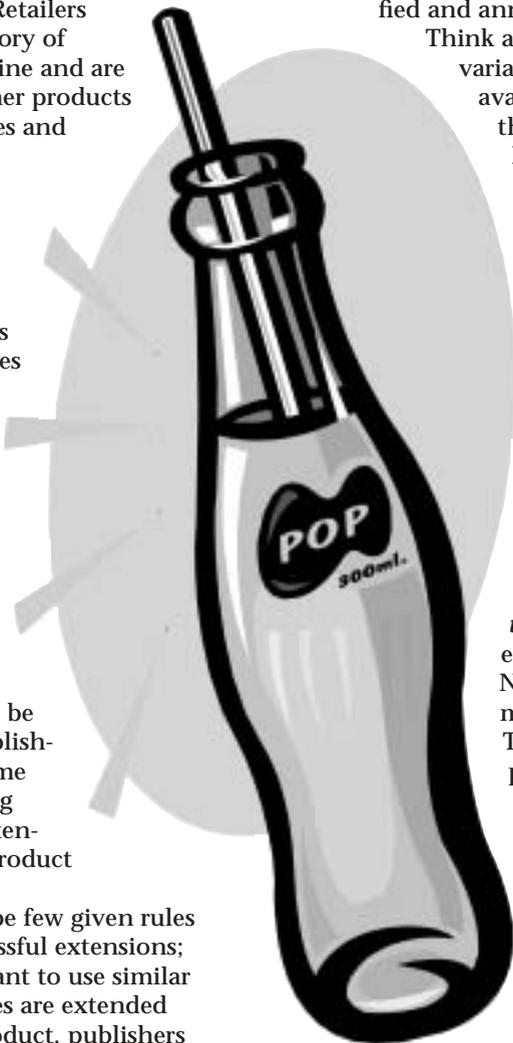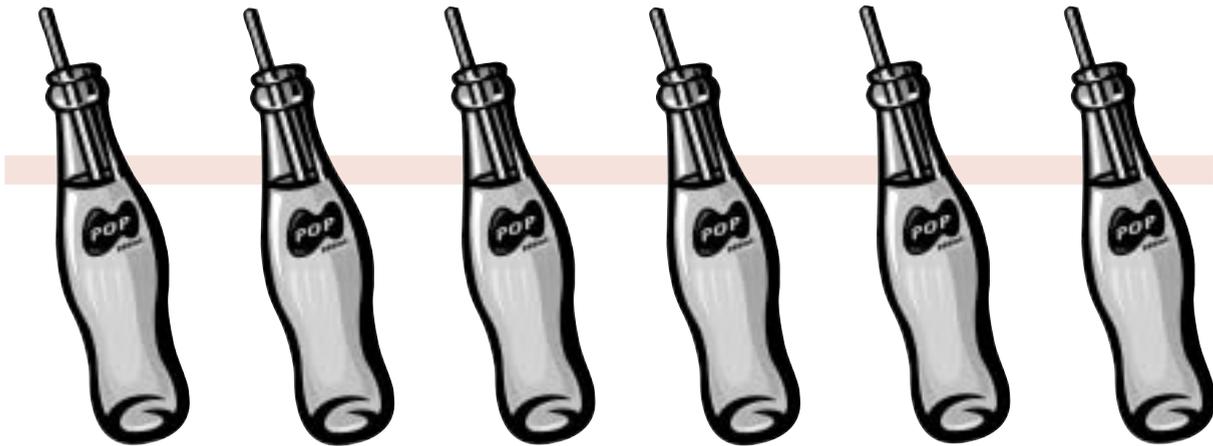
books are successful because they are unique and have a targeted and timely message. A sequel or series could diminish the uniqueness of the original product and possibly confuse potential readers with too many choices. In the book *Positioning* by Al Reis and Jack Trout, research from the beverage industry proved conclusively that in some cases when a core beverage product (in this case beer) was line-extended with additional variations and flavors, overall sales dropped in the long run for the entire line compared to sales on the original product. Too many choices can cause customer confusion and hence lower sales.

Secondly, it is generally wise to add line extensions slowly and often only after the core product has a proven sales history. When NavPress releases a new Bible study that has potential for line extension, it typically releases no more than two or possibly three versions of the Bible study. Sales are mea-

sured over a year or more. Only after the sales history proves the series has potential will Nav-Press then start the process of developing subsequent versions within the same series. This process slows down the introduction of lines, but also significantly lowers the risk.

Publishers should also be cautious about getting involved in line extensions that are not already a part of their core experience. If a company does not publish calendars or gift products regularly, it should not be quick to do so simply because they seem like logical line extensions to a core line of books. Often ancillary products, such as calendars, gifts or software, are so different from books in the way they are produced and marketed that they end up diverting a great deal of the publisher's time, money and attention from the core product. NavPress at one time delved into software that seemed to be a logical extension of its magazines and book product. In the end, the staff found that software publishing required such different production, marketing and customer service compared to book publishing that it became impossible to do both

## Succesful line extensions:

—strengthen one's mission
—concentrate new product acquisition efforts
—increase a publisher's knowledge of a particular market
—create a position for the publishing company in a customer's mind
—concentrate a publishing company's marketing message
—concentrate a publishing company's marketing expenditures
—promote long-term growth                                    Kent Wilson

well. If ancillary products are pursued that are significantly different than one's core line, it often makes sense to find another publishing partner who specializes in producing that type of ancillary product.

Line extensions should be a part of every publisher's strategy and successful back list, but publishers must proceed with caution to make sure they apply the same scrutiny and care to line extensions as they do to their core products.❖