

# IT IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH!

by Kevin Engel

Many Christian publishers, distributors, and booksellers produce their books, sell them and provide service on a “90 percent” basis. Their work is ‘almost’ good enough. Some aim at excellence but settle for less. Even if they were performing at 99 percent efficiency and quality, it is not good enough!

I knew an old man who used to erect fences on farms in Australia. He relied on his eyesight to line up the posts. When asked whether he was exactly following the boundary line over long distances, he would reply, “Near enough is good enough”. Sadly, I find this same attitude in many of our Christian publishing houses.

Improperly aligned type, page breaks that make it difficult to read the text, unclear illustrations and poor binding are some obvious results of accepting a “near enough” standard. Add to these production defects and inefficient service in marketing and delivery, and we have a low level of achievement. However, Christian publishers should aim at zero defects in all their books and service.

Some will say, “Surely a margin of one percent to ten percent is not bad.” African publishers tell me about their great difficulties because of insufficient capital, poor printing facilities, partly trained staff, power failures and out-of-date technology. “We are working in the developing nations. Standards are different here,” they say. Though these are very real problems, they often serve as excuses for avoidable inefficiencies.

Think of what a “defects margin” of only one percent means in some other every day activities. If only one percent of the babies born each year in Hong Kong are dropped by the midwife at the time of birth, this would affect 2,000 babies every year! Or, if one percent of the new motor vehicles registered in Australia in the last 12 months has defective steering, this could result in 10,000 crashes and possible deaths each year. We are grateful that neither of these situations occurs.

Many industrial companies in the Western nations now apply a theory called “Sigma Six” to their standards. It is too complicated to detail here, but it means they aim at only 3.4 defects in every million products or an efficiency rate of 99.9996 percent! Impossible? No, companies such as Kodak and Motorola (to name just two, which are known worldwide) are achieving it.

How can “poor” Christian publishers hope to match such performance standards? Not only is it possible to achieve them, it should be even easier for us in our smaller firms. We are producing fewer products. We are closer to our consumers, the readers. Our product is life changing, not a luxury. We have such resources as prayer and divine guidance, which are probably not even considered by secular organizations.

What steps can be taken in Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia and the Pacific region to achieve a higher performance rate?

- ♦ Ensure there is an identified target audience for every book planned for production.
- ♦ Edit and design the title for that specific readership.
- ♦ Define the publishing steps and process down to the last detail.
- ♦ Make the process mistake-proof. Eliminate wasted energy and staff time.
- ♦ Set standard procedures, with training, to eliminate specific errors such as poor page layout, unsuitable type faces, illustrations not related to the appropriate text and other errors as identified above.
- ♦ Remember new technology can improve products, but quality and readability are still necessary.
- ♦ Work at continuous improvement.
- ♦ Evaluate performance.
- ♦ Identify points where errors or failures occurred in the past.

How long will it take to achieve a “99 percent plus” standard? We will never get there if we do not tackle the problem. Leadership must commit to reviewing past performance and setting goals for their individual publishing houses and staff.

Service will improve. Publishers will be better Christian stewards of the limited resources and their readers will benefit. We will communicate the message of the Gospel more effectively.

What is the prevailing attitude in your publishing house? “Near enough is good enough,” or are you aiming at a 99 percent plus performance?❖

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