



Keep A Spiritual Edge

Ian Thompson, general manager of Christian Focus Publications, prescribes strategies for publishers who want to keep ministry at the forefront of their work.

History shows that mature publishing organizations often produce books their founders would not have done. This is not to say that the founders were correct and their successors were wrong—but any publisher who sets out with a particular mission knows that it will be dissipated or diverted over time. This state of affairs is known as “mission creep.” How can Christian publishers prevent it? How can a publisher ensure a company *with a spiritual mission* does not turn into one *with just a mission statement*?

There is a simple answer, and a more complex one. The simple one is to continue to walk and grow in Christlikeness; this brings discernment (Psalm 111:10). The complex answer involves the question “What does keeping a spiritual edge mean when there is no consensus among Christian publishers?”

All in the industry claim to be involved in “ministry.” However, the Apostle Paul says that those who receive ministry [the readers and users of the product] will at some stage only want to hear “what their itching ears want to hear.” (2 Tim. 4:3). This appears to rule out a market-led philosophy for Christian publishers, yet today’s commercial pressures and culture require attention to market demands.

Not balance but tension

Most people would agree that it is not good for a minister’s income

to be tied to the level of giving from church members. Such an arrangement might well affect the way that minister sets priorities in meeting the needs of the congregation.

However, publishing is set up with just such a system, for if a company does not sell books, it cannot survive. A major reason why Christian publishers are susceptible to “mission creep” is that they are constantly under pressure to compromise their mission to ensure commercial viability.

Some publishers rationalize their compromises by saying, “We will print these titles so that we can still produce the good ones.” But, surely “ministry” means that a Christian publisher is committed to promoting only good titles. A minister does not show videos in church and slip the odd sermon in. Such behavior would undermine the preaching ministry. A similar approach to publishing will only undermine good books.

There is no balance of marketing and ministry in Christian publishing, but rather tension. To counter commercial pressures, a publisher must push for at least equal commitment to the spiritual mission. Minimizing mission creep is only possible when this tension is acknowledged and recognized.

The focus should be on Christ, not on the mission statement. A mission statement, however, expresses devotion for a corporate entity. Business books emphasize

the importance of communicating a company’s mission to every employee, customer and supplier—so the importance of how Christian publishers handle a God-given mandate is far greater. It is their responsibility to be convinced about what they are doing and why. A lack of conviction is often the biggest problem in mission creep—losing the spiritual edge.

Ministry objectives always fail in a spiritual vacuum

In any spiritual vacuum, commercial considerations will win out because publishers have to deal with them every day. It is necessary to build-in spiritual considerations to balance the business ones. If the mission is not fundamental to the structure and everyday operation of a company, then the mission will inevitably be ignored. Publishers must see how the mission affects their company’s administration, finance, editorial, production, sales and distribution departments.

Win-win solutions are not always possible. There may be conflicts between a publishing mission and commercial success. Some say success is a sign of God’s blessing. Historically, though, great blessing has come from the “unsuccessful.” David Livingstone and William Carey would fail to get missionary funding today because their achievements do not fit modern definitions of success. (“What, only three converts?!!”) Publishers, too

often, lose the ability to look for long-term benefits.

Short term gain, long term loss

A market-led strategy (rather than a mission-led strategy) leads to long-term decline and loss of respect for the product. Consider two examples. The Ford Motor Company (in the United Kingdom) and The British Labour Party became dependent upon focus groups in making decisions on products and policies. Customers, however, can only state what they already like, they cannot innovate. A focus on the past always involves a downward spiral of diminishing returns in creativity. A company cannot claim to be a leader if all it does is follow market trends.

Ford's conservatism initially took them to an all-time high of a 30 percent plus market share in the United Kingdom. Their market-led strategy increased their popularity immensely in the short-term. After a time, though, the customer perceived their products as boring. They now hold less than 20 percent of the market and have had to shut down a factory. Ford's subsequent revival is based on emphasizing the content of what they produce.

The British Labour Party focus groups led politicians to only say things they thought would be most popular. The lack of a political "cause" led people to believe that politicians no longer represented them. Now, election turnouts are low. People respect the institutions of government less. The public no longer votes, it shops. Removing the attention from the content in the message makes voting a poor choice in the world of leisure activity.

Projections based on historical data have become the business version of horoscopes. But, just as a market-led strategy fails, so too does a strategy that focuses on the competition. Far too many Christian publishers chase the market with more "me too" products. Just as preaching someone else's sermon never seems to work for ministers, so issuing books like those that have worked for other publishers

cannot be regarded as ministry. Copying others will only produce poor facsimiles and will not make a publishing company stand out.

Keep a spiritual edge

There are two ways to motivate people. The first is having a common enemy, the second, uniting people towards a common goal. The former is far easier, but is the company prepared to do the latter?

What strategies can Christian publishers put in place to define a unique position for their companies and to prevent mission creep?

1. Give a copy of every new book to every staff member. If the staff do not read the company's books then the defining factors used to assess how good they are will not be the content of the books, but their sales performance. If the company is too large to do this, then at least give the book to those who produced it.

2. Review the mission statement. Is it concise? Does it clearly communicate the company's priorities? Christian Focus Publications has reduced its mission statement to just four words: "Staying Faithful—Reaching Out." This statement defines the publisher's dedication to the Word of God, to reaching out to other Christians in fellowship and reaching out to a lost world with the Gospel.

3. Revise the measures of success. What is most frequently used to judge book performance in the company: sales figures or impact on the lives of individuals? These measures are not necessarily the same. Does the staff circulate the letters received from readers whose lives have been changed?

4. Assess department interaction. Who holds the power in meetings—editorial or marketing? It is as important for the marketing people to see the quality of the content as it is for the editorial people to see the effect of the books they are producing. At Christian Focus, all of the editorial staff are involved in marketing roles to a greater or lesser degree according to ability. Similarly, marketing staff are encouraged

to have a say in editorial decisions. The company is thus united in promoting the content of the book rather than the sales of a product.

5. Study how books are sold to the company's representatives.

Does their training only focus on marketing expenses, the sales of previous books, famous endorsers and pricing structures—or does it begin with content and the impact the book has had and may have on readers?

6. Look at meeting agendas. Are meetings solely about financial goals? Or, do they also involve discussion of other achievements? Are all functions in the company undergirded by prayer? Do prayers reflect concern for the need to make wise decisions about product and distribution, or do they only ask for sales success?

7. Look at content sources. How many of the publishing house's products are copies of another's product? How many are market-driven rather than mission-driven? Concentrate on innovative ways of fulfilling the publishing house's mission.

8. Pay attention to content evaluation systems. Does the publishing house seek only positive feedback, or does it seek input on controversial books from potential critics? If editorial staff are not open to correction, they may be more interested in self-justification than they are in ministry. However, iron sharpens iron (Prov. 27:17). A vibrant and healthy Christian publishing industry will welcome opportunities to sharpen its focus.

Purpose of the edge

The goal of the Church is not to feed as many as it can without regard to the food distributed (1 Cor. 3:2) but rather to encourage the growth of each member of the congregation. A church does not set out to ensure its members continue attending services, but rather that they mature in Christ. Keeping a spiritual edge means pursuing a spiritual mission—not just operating a company that happens to have a mission statement. ♦