

The Promotional EDGE



James Ogolla, a Kenyan writer with publishing experience, prays that Christian publishers will be challenged to invest in promoting their titles. "Promotion makes the difference," he says, "Do not light your candle and keep it under a bushel!"

The African market is quite complex. Functional literacy levels, on the average, are 65 to 70 percent. However, reading is a lifetime joy for only 30 percent. The good news is that both literacy and readership are growing tremendously fast, despite competition from electronic media and social and educational activities. Even so, in many an African publisher's warehouse, the records in each book bin indicate only two or three copies of a title were sold in the first year. The books were published but not promoted, and consequently, few copies sold.

How can publishers promote their titles? How can they make titles succeed in Africa's complex markets?

The beginning point

First, recognize the value of promoting titles strategically. In Africa, many publishers run to promotion when they sense the danger of what seemed to be a promising book turning into a financial disaster. To avoid the panic that accompanies such a situation, promotion needs to be viewed as the heartbeat that begins when the author comes up with an idea or concept. As they imagine how beautiful and useful the book will be, they should ask,

"Who am I writing for?" With that critically thought out, promotional and sales challenges will be halved.

Unfortunately, many writers and publishers fall prey to untested fantasies. It is critical for both the author and the editor to convince the sales force that the manuscript has value, that there is a potential market for the book, and that it is worth pursuing.

Once the potential market is well understood by all parties, the technical writing, editing, design and production matters can be handled so as to correctly position the title for promotion. Issues of size, font, leading, tracking, illustrations, style and the cover must be decided so the book can be user-friendly, distinctive, and attractive to potential buyers. Promotion planning can begin at the pre-publication stage. It is not necessary for a bad book to occupy warehouse space for useful promotion to start.

Resounding entry

Having worked out the initial market preparation, the courageous publisher will want to make a resounding entry to the marketplace. Many titles in Africa "sneak" on to bookshop shelves. Potential readers stumble upon them by chance. The risks in allowing this to

happen are too high! A publisher has already invested money in the title; good market entry strategies are necessary.

To date, established publishers have been the most likely to use new book announcements, such as leaflets, posters, and letters. These promotional items are costly and need to hit the right market at the right time. They cannot be too early, of course, or the book they advertise will be forgotten. They cannot be too late or they will not help bookstore buyers to prepare to stock copies of the title. They need to be attractively designed and strategically placed. They should precede the release date by at least a month.

Book launching ceremonies have been the domain of the aggressive publishers. Most titles on the market have not benefited from a book launch. Costly as it may sound, a book launching can be very beneficial; it is a time to create a lasting impression on potential buyers. Launch ceremonies need to be controlled based on the potential value of the guest list. It is critical that the invitations reach the target audience in good time. The most essential guests are ones who will propel a title on to bookshop shelves and into other readers'



Rev. Mutava Musyimi (left), General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, was the guest of honor at Cana Publishing's first launch ceremony, September 2001. Also pictured, left to right, are Rev. Dr. Manasses Kuria, Dr. Jeremiah Nyagah, and publisher David Waweru.

hands, such as booksellers. The media are also important guests; their accolades for a book can reach hundreds of thousands of trusting readers. Opinion leaders in the book's subject matter can give their recommendations—and these sell books. An effective book launching ceremony motivates guests to become enthusiastic non-commission sales representatives for the new releases.

After the launch

Special functions at strategic venues are useful both in the introductory phase and when a title must be revitalized in the market. Publishers need to think of creative and unusual ways to attract the public at book fairs, author signings and other special functions.

One Kenyan company issued three new children's titles at a time when others in the industry thought it unreasonable to publish high quality, full-color books. With a good understanding of its potential market, the publishing staff set up attractive special promotional and sales displays in non-book environments—the walkways of major shopping malls in Nairobi. Despite the books' slightly higher prices, they instantly became a hit. Booksellers who had been reluctant to stock them started calling for

copies of the titles. The company set new trends for the entire marketplace; other companies quickly followed suit and reaped good benefits.

Book reviews have been the common effort of all publishers in Africa.

Whether in print or in electronic media,

reviews cost little and are especially attractive to publishers on a shoe-string budget.

However, just obtaining one or two favorable reviews is not enough. Good relations with strategic media houses must be established so a publisher's books can remain in the limelight. This helps the publishing house's press releases reach the audience to bring long-term results.

Often, television and newspaper advertising is dreaded by publishers in Africa as a costly shot in the dark

that can take a company into the red. However, smart dealing and properly positioned advertisements can bring windfall profits. A fairly young bookseller in Nairobi took advantage of 10-second prime-time spots on a Christian TV station. His patronage rapidly grew and so did his stock turn over. An educational publisher dared the unusual and advertised a new Primary mathematics series using 10-second spots with one slide and a voice-over. The cost of the spots was a mere 15,000 Kenyan shillings [approximately U.S.\$200], production included, for a week of advertising. Suddenly, the series was recognized throughout the country, beat the competition and the corporate image of this firm was greatly boosted. Now other publishers are doing the same. Dare to be creative and smart. Make a difference and earn a profit.

Mixing different strategies at different stages of a title's life can keep a title going strong and make it profitable.

The most important strategy

Book incidence in the market far outweighs all other promotional strategies. Books that are promoted aggressively but which lack appropriate incidence in the market are non-starters. A book must be immediately available at the closest point of purchase for potential buyers. For maximum synergy, remember the market should be able to get to know, readily view, and conveniently purchase a publishing house's books. ❖



At the 2002 Cairo International Book Fair, the stand for The Bible Society of Egypt, pictured on the second floor, is crowded with interested buyers.