



Niche Marketing: a Bright Future for Christian Publishers

By Lawrence Darmani

“Sometimes we find ourselves involved in niche marketing without knowing it. I thought I was only being pragmatic, but in fact I was reaching a specialized market.”

“Brighten the Corner Where You Are,” counsels an old hymn—those who have ears to hear take advantage of this wise advice. At [Step Publishers](#), we have plugged into niches in the wider market to produce, promote, and sell books and magazines on regular basis. Looking out for unconventional marketing opportunities and maximizing their potential has added value to all our efforts.

What is niche marketing?

Susan Ward, a Canadian business consultant, writes: “Establishing a niche market gives you the opportunity to provide products and services to a group that other businesses have overlooked.” She believes that “there are always going to be segments of the population whose needs for particular products and/or services are going unmet, leaving room for the small business to succeed by meeting those needs.” Gordon Burgett, author of *Niche Publishing* and other books related to writing, publishing, and public speaking, defines it concisely and categorically as, “Find a demand, double check it, and create the supply.”

Sometimes recognizing a group of people interested in our books may not require any special skill beyond inclination, which is

why we sometimes find ourselves involved in niche marketing without knowing it. Years ago, when I visited the [St. Paul Theological College](#) near Nairobi, Kenya, to promote special issues of interest to the students, I was only being pragmatic. These future pastors, who would be interacting with the youth our ministry sought to reach, needed to know the value of our literature as a tool for evangelism and discipleship. This method of establishing a niche has been a hallmark of our work down through the years.

The best is what works

No matter how rocky the marketing grounds are—and they can be stone-hard in this part of our world where illiteracy is high and the limited number of readers’ purchasing power is low—a cleft can be found.

In our marketing activities, we have two models open to us: either we reach *the general market* with products we hope will interest people, or we focus our attention on *specific audiences* and give them what they demand. Some people think the future belongs to the latter strategy—but does it really matter? Whichever works best in your own circumstances is the best way.

Education

In Ghana, as in many parts of Africa, publishers have focused on the huge book-hungry education sector as a niche worthy of attention. It is perhaps the most critical market due to its size and unique disposition as the consumer of both general and niche-oriented merchandise. Publishers who have discovered this niche go beyond simply supplying books; they organize seminars and support conferences for teachers and heads of institutions to maximize their market share within this niche.

While the products of Christian publishers may not be considered specific to educational needs, they do have a place in that niche. Is a hymnbook an educational requirement? No, if your definition of *educational requirement* is limited to academics. Students will not face examinations on the content of a hymnbook or a book on prayer. But Asempa Publishers in Accra, Ghana, has carved a niche in this sector and markets their hymnbooks in schools nationwide.

Even at the lower educational levels such as primary and junior high schools, Step Publishers has consistently marketed our Christian youth magazines and children's books. Our presence at Speech and Prize-Giving Days as well as Parent-Teacher Association meetings are effective avenues for marketing our products to this niche. We argue that students need religious and moral education, and that Christian faith and worship should play an important role in their lives, since students are the future leaders of our nations.

Devotional products

The market for devotional books is a niche in Africa. Scripture Union [Scripture Union](#), which is not a mainstream publishing house, is nonetheless a custodian of mass content for that niche. It sells hundreds of thousands of *Daily Guide* and *Daily Power* annually in

different African countries. Ministering to millions of students on the continent through camps, Easter conferences, counseling, youth leadership training, and school groups, they have a strong hold on that niche. [Scripture Union Ghana](#) has become a community leader trusted by youth to provide the much-needed products year after year.

Some Christian publishers produce devotional books in local languages. This is another sustainable niche due to the strong presence of vernacular readers. All this gives credence to finding niches and strongly marketing our products to that niche.

Reaching out to your niche

Sponsoring community events to your niche helps to market your products to that niche. One example is Challenge Enterprises of Ghana [Challenge Enterprises of Ghana](#), which sponsors an annual conference for pastors and other Christian leaders. As part of the program, Challenge packages for each participant a set of books and Bibles. It is a subtle but viable marketing strategy to a niche that patronizes their products. The participants later return to their parishes as ambassadors of the organizers.

At Step, we are developing a church library project that enables us to supply books to churches and community libraries. In addition to opportunities to speak in churches about the need to read Christian literature, we also receive invitation to address community gatherings to promote reading.

There are many conventions in Ghana during festive occasions: Easter, Christmas, evangelistic crusades, durbars (state receptions) of chiefs and their subjects. One bookseller chain has adequately pitched its tent in that niche. Their mobile literature vans move from convention to convention

playing Christian music and attracting the crowds to temporary bookstores pitched against their trucks. People who attend these conventions know that this bookseller will be there to market their literature products, and that creates a path to their chain of bookshops throughout the country. In today's world of networking and partnerships, a person wears many hats, and those hats can provide the niches. A publisher may be a church leader, a member of a board of governors, affiliated with a university, or part of a parents association. These are all open doors for reaching out to market niches. Even where high-tech methods for reaching niches are unavailable, it is possible to advance Christian literature ministry.

The niche in book launches

The use of authors' acquaintances is gaining ground among publishers as a tool for marketing books to niche communities of readers who are interested in the authors' works. Some authors are community leaders, church ministers, and renowned politicians who have a large following. Sub-Saharan Publishers [emailto:saharanp@africaonline.com.gh](mailto:saharanp@africaonline.com.gh), a general publishing house whose titles range widely from biographies and autobiographies to textbooks and literary novels, has harnessed this niche for years. In addition to distributing books to the general market through traditional bookshops, they organize book launches. How are they able to fill a thousand-seat capacity auditorium regularly for a book launch? The authors themselves pull in their own crowds of acquaintances.

The trend is catching on among publishers, who are noticing the reality that niche communities of interested groups such as authors' publics are reliable sources of markets for their products.

The power of focus

The strength of marketing to a niche is *focus*. Ivan Delman, in his article "[Niche Marketing Vs Mass Marketing](#)", says, "It is more effective, less costly, and produces better results to target a smaller segment of your community over the entire community." He therefore advises against putting all of your eggs in one basket and rather recommends "developing several niches rather than having to depend on one." Many gurus of niche publishing and marketing caution against jumping onto the bandwagon—that is, going into one niche whose needs everybody is rushing to meet. Again, Susan Ward believes that, "The smaller and more cohesive the niche, the better." Within a popular niche, one can find a unique one. For example, in our publishing outfit we have found a small but potentially viable niche: non-fiction books based on school mottos and anthems. Every school has a motto and an anthem whose meanings are largely unknown by the teeming populace of students entering and leaving each year. We are marketing this product to meet the need.

For such marketing to be effective, it is advisable that the books we publish for our niche must be unique, marketable, and certainly available. By inference, the niche indicates a small and specialized area, which therefore calls for the need to make the book known.

What modern technology offers

A Ghanaian proverb says, "When the times change, you must also change," which points to the need to be creative and vigilant in adopting better ways of doing things. Today, the big change is the presence of information technology with all its opportunities enabling us to reach our niches more easily.

Recently a private mobile phone company in Ghana announced its two-millionth

customer. That information was a smart marketing strategy—a phenomenon that spreads across major cities and towns of Africa. In partnership with countless FM radio stations now reaching rural communities, the mobile phone companies raise millions of dollars from niche-marketing programs they undertake: soccer, beauty pageants, political campaign, and talk-shows.

The same can be said of e-mail, Web sites, and information and communication technology products. Their presence creates new marketing paths to niches that must not be lost on publishers. Recently, when our publishing house attended a conference of heads of public institutions, we not only spoke to them but solicited their email and mobile phone numbers. Reaching them directly has given us a cutting edge to that niche.

How is the future?

Those who prophesy that the future of books belongs to niches—rather than general populations—may or may not be proven

right. It does not really matter. What matters, in my estimation, is to find your own niches, creatively maintain them, and keep looking for new ones. Even in the wilderness of book markets, we can trust the Lord to open our eyes to unique segments of our populations where we can reach out and minister with Christian literature.

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