

# *Publishing for Literates* in an **Oral Culture**

by Mark Snowden

In the Philippines, doctors, lawyers and other business professionals often prefer Bible studies told as stories, followed by oral discussion. A missionary in Venezuela reports that the nurses and college professors in his Bible study made him stop reading the Bible and communicate the stories verbally. What was going on? Why were highly-literate Christians preferring a non-literate approach to Bible study? In both cases, Bibles had been purchased and had been opened to the corresponding reference, yet listening and discussion were the preferred learning style for internalizing the information.

Christian publishers know that illiterates and functional illiterates exist, but often consider them outside the concerns of their publishing ministries. However, few Christian publishers take into account that literates living among non-readers might prefer a different learning style. If an oral preference exists, what should a publisher do?



## *Assess the needs*

Look around. What are the actual literacy capabilities of customers, colleagues, and co-workers? At what levels can they read best? Is reading comprehension a problem?

There are numerous reasons that people cannot or will not read. Blindness, dyslexia, cataracts and other eye diseases can force someone to be a non-reader. Other physical handicaps, such as deafness, can have that effect as well. Missionaries among the deaf regularly report non-hearing adults prefer an “oral” approach through signing.

Ability to read is different from preference for reading. Just because someone is literate does not mean he or she has a literate learning preference.



## *Tailor the text*

Help writers address readers who live in oral cultures. How? Here are some ideas:

- Remember that the story IS the message.
- Load your story with a central truth or theme.
- Keep in mind that testimonials work better than advice and that personal experiences work better than lectures.
- Order thoughts chronologically rather than at random; never jump ahead.
- Use timelines as a thread of cohesion.
- Address the cultural bridges and barriers to an idea’s adoption within the culture.
- Use stories to fill-in knowledge gaps to help readers overcome barriers to learning.
- Use a conversational writing style.
- Provide suggestions for personal application of the message.
- Use songs, poems, drama, myths, legends, sayings and proverbs.
- Avoid an analytical breakout of the text (like this!).
- Make word studies the rare exception.
- Never dumb thoughts down; minds can be quick despite literacy issues.
- Think of tips for mentoring, rather than manuals.
- For a series or curriculum, begin the sessions by including a section that allows the teacher and the students to review what was done at the last encounter (Did the students “get it” last time?). Include activities to help the teacher assess student comprehension after the lesson (Did they “get it” this time?).



## *Add visual appeal*

Incorporate attractive visuals. Use design and colors that do not distract, but rather enhance the message. Look for photographs and illustrations to support and augment the text. What role do teaching pictures play in your inventory? When the former Soviet Union opened, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention was bombarded with requests for Russian-language materials. Missionaries were advised to purchase a good set of teaching pictures. Teachers and evangelists had tremendous experiences using pictures with small groups.



## *Heighten auditory appeal*

Publish materials with rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and other literary devices that work well with oral traditions. In East Africa, the Yao people straddle three countries: Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania. In that culture, stories of cultural significance are danced to a chant. Publishers wanting to reach the Yao can ask writers to incorporate poems and chants in their work.

In Sudan, Dinka-Jurmodo people were struggling to memorize Bible stories. An American missionary was very concerned about the situation, yet patiently kept working with the people. After several frustrating weeks, a man in the group timidly asked if he could sing the Bible story. When the missionary encouraged it, Bible stories were put to music. Soon, over 100 Bible stories were being sung throughout the villages.

Experiment with music, books on tape, video and other means to communicate the message. Note, however, that a change from print to audio or electronic media does not automatically mean that a publisher will effectively reach persons with an oral learning preference. Producing television, radio, videotapes or audiocassettes does not mean you can resume a literate approach. If a videotaped speaker gives a sermon with “three points and a poem”, the viewers will not relate,

just as they would not relate if the same sermon were provided in print. Good storytellers do not always make great writers and vice versa. Choose the appropriate delivery vehicle for the message.



## *Promote interaction with the text*

Create opportunities for oral experiences of written material. Organize events where authors can read their works out loud and interact with their readers. Encourage dramatizations of fictional stories. Form groups where readers can retell the stories and discuss the books they just read. Sponsor non-print cultural events. Publishers will likely find the interaction will increase interest and generate additional purchases.

**O**ne brilliant publisher sighed and admitted that he was strictly in the “ink and paper” sales business. That publisher is likely missing untapped market opportunities. Reach out to literates with an oral learning preference. There may be huge numbers of potential customers to whom you can minister more effectively than ever before. ❖

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