



The jeepney story has at least five practical lessons for international publishers.

by Isaac Phiri

Publish *Jeepney* Style

The jeepney stopped abruptly in front of us, dropped passengers, puffed out dark smoke, and forced its way back into traffic. My Filipino colleague driving us avoided the jeepney without a wince. I, on the other hand, was still adjusting painfully to the blaring Manila traffic.

Before the jeepney “interruption,” we talked about the business of publishing in the Philippines. But now, the topic changed. I wanted to learn about jeepneys.

My colleague responded that Jeeps were introduced to the Philippines by the American military. Local people began converting older or abandoned jeeps into colorful and affordable vehicles. Today, engines are imported but local artisans build the bodies. Besides bright colors, many jeepneys sport bold religious statements such as “Jesus is Lord.” Jeepneys are now the most popular means of transportation.

As my colleague told the story, more jeepneys sped past, stopping whenever someone needed a ride. They did not observe official “bus stops” but picked up people as needed. How did these flowery contraptions—that appear to have a monopoly on public transportation—come to be such a popular part of Filipino life?

Jeepney lessons for indigenous publishers

Does the jeepney story have any lessons for indigenous publishing? There are at least five practical “jeepney” lessons.

Make “foreign” products part of the culture. Jeepney engines are still imported, but by the time local artisans and artists finish working on a vehicle, passengers hardly sense its foreign origin. Jeepneys have become Filipino. The same needs be done in publishing products of foreign origin. Local editors and designers should make the product fit and blend into the culture. Re-edit, rewrite, redesign in such a way that when readers interact with the product, they do not feel its foreignness anymore.

Make products match the physical environment. Jeepneys are colorful, but not fancy. They generally have no windows, allowing for ventilation without costly air conditioning. They also have no doors—passengers can jump on and off quickly in busy traffic. In some cases, these vehicles are fitted with iron bars in the front and back to protect them from the scrapes and scratches common on busy streets.

Keep readers’ physical environment in mind. Avoid bells and whistles. A “talking” children’s book is nice, but not if it needs expensive batteries. On the other hand, a children’s book printed on inexpensive paper may tear very quickly in tropical weather. Look at the environment of your readers and create products that match.

Make prices competitive. There are other means of transportation in Manila—large luxury buses that proudly say they are “air conditioned,” and convenient taxis—but jeepneys are the most affordable. During economic crises, Filipinos ride jeepneys. Lesson: be competitive in pricing. It is good that locally published books in Asia and Latin America are often cheaper than imports. In contrast, in parts of Africa remaindered titles from abroad are practically given away. This hurts local Christian publishers, but they still strive to compete.

Meet customers at their point of need. There is a jeepney at every corner to meet customers at their point of need. If you need to go somewhere, a jeepney is there for you. This is another critical lesson for publishers. Do your products meet your readers’ needs? Can they find your books easily, or do they have to make special trips to find them?

Work hard. Jeepneys hit the streets at dawn and run till late. Driving a jeepney is not work for those Proverbs describes as sluggards. In the same way, building indigenous publishing organizations demands hard work.

Publish jeepney style. ♦