



Publishers must use resources strategically to survive in a climate of constant change.

by David Mehlis

Ride the Winds of Change

In *Liquid Modernity*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman insists that every success is only “until further notice.” Every achievement is temporary. Not only is change occurring faster but there are more changes than ever before.

Television commercials reflect this. Where a few years ago advertisers could claim a product was “improved,” now they hype a product’s originality. In fact, a commercial for an automobile manufacturer even claims their product represents “a new paradigm” for car buyers. In a free economy, businesses of all sorts face pressures to lower prices, offer more choices in product, and new and improved products. They compete with one another to respond to the marketplace first.

Christian publishing is not exempt from these changes. Expectations of change in the market at large create similar expectations in Christian consumers. Christian publishers talk of an unchanging Christ but they do so in a context where everything changes very quickly. The life cycle of Christian products is decreasing. In the United States, churches used to stay with a curriculum line for many years. Now, the average length of time a curriculum is used by a church is less than two years.

The time frame available for specific products to turn a profit is shorter. Book prices tend not to increase at the rate of inflation. In the United States, they have not gone up as fast as hotel prices, for example, or salaries. To stay afloat, publishers must lower development costs for new

products and reach the break-even point sooner. They must pay attention to the backlist, to those products that have already proven their contribution to the bottom line. At the same time, publishers must remember that their competitors, Christian and non-Christian, are looking for ways to offer more and newer products faster and cheaper.

Customers expect a variety of choices. A limited line of books is no longer enough. Now customers expect customization, more products, more formats. Publishers have to offer choices for ever-more defined market segments. They must listen to customers. They must find authors with new ideas, translate, and adapt those ideas for the Church. They must look for ways to use content in multiple ways.

At the same time, publishers must recognize that keeping up with customer demands means committing resources for software, hardware, and other infrastructure. It means they must continue to invest in product development, market research, promotion, and sales. Financial administration is critical because new spending must be strategic. It is far easier, and should be less costly, to retain existing customers than to gain new ones.

How, then, should publishers operate? Commit resources to maintain and deepen relationships with your existing customers. Focus on doing the things your customers demand. Build long-term relationships, and remember your success with customers is only “until further notice.” ♦

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