

Ten Lessons from Secular Publishers



On a visit to a large bookstore, here is what I learned from the devotional books offered by secular and non-Christian publishers.

by Kim Pettit

Some think devotional literature is an exclusively Christian genre, but non-Christian publishers also produce and profit from similar books. The variety of the products offered speaks to the potential other publishers see in this genre. We may not agree with their theology, but we can learn from non-Christian publishers. Here are ten lessons:

1. Maximize bestseller success. Once Harper's *Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much* was successful, Simon & Schuster came up with *Meditations for Men Who Do Too Much*. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* led to *Daily Reflections for Highly Effective People*. *Meditation for Dummies* is obviously riding on the success of the "For Dummies" series. Look at your publishing list. How can you maximize your best seller success?

2. Capitalize on big-name authors. Thorson's *The Dalai Lama's Book of Transformation* not only has the author's name on the cover twice, but also features an attractive photograph of his face. Lesson: a well-known pastor's name on a devotional cover could help sell books.

3. Go beyond the 365-day format. My first exposure to devotionals did not require a year-long commitment. When I accepted Christ, I was given a booklet with meditations for each day of my first week as a believer. Your publishing company can use different formats. Consider these subtitles: *60 Seconds to Serenity*, *40 Days and 40 Nights Towards Spiritual Growth*, *77 Stories*, *52 Ways To ...*, and so on.

4. Specify the benefits. One non-Christian series I saw had books with short meditations. Each page featured a short story followed by a thought or moral for reflection. The series had books on love, protection and prosperity. Readers purchasing this type of devotional title can easily define what they expect to gain from the book. Can the same be said of the readers of Christian devotionals in your market?

5. Use intriguing titles. Some products catch reader's interest by juxtaposing unexpected words. Read about *The Zen of Oz* (Renaissance Books) or *The Tao of Pooh* (E.P. Dutton). Ponder *Drumming the Spirit to Life* (Llewellyn) or *Living Juicy: Daily Morsels for Your Creative Soul* (Celestial Arts). Review your cover titles. Are they intriguing?

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6. Stay current. Harper published *Prayers for 1,000 Years: Inspiration from Leaders and Visionaries Around the World*. Likewise, you can tie-in your books to upcoming and current events. After Charles W. Schultz's death, Westminster/John Knox Press reissued *The Gospel According to Peanuts*. Though it had been out-of-print for some time, renewed interest in Schultz sparked new sales.

7. Identify a target audience. Some titles appealed directly to a particular group of buyers. For instance, Andrews McMeel publishes *Jump at the Sun: Daily Inspirations for People of Color* (a calendar). The cover of the calendar features African art, and the product is clearly marketed to its intended audience. In the same way, Christian publishers can work to ensure that the devotional products they publish demonstrate a clear editorial focus.

8. Carve out a niche. Hazelden, one of the largest secular publishers of devotionals in the United States, focuses on people in twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Because they are of particular use to people in recovery, their devotional products are often recommended by mental health professionals.

9. Produce attractive books. Non-Christian devotionals have beautiful covers. They include lots of white space. They use illustrations (either for the cover art and/or the interior). However, they generally do not include the more expensive elements of Christian devotionals. Few have hardcover bindings, lots of lavish art, or built-in bookmarks. Secular and non-Christian products demonstrate that quality devotional books need not be expensive.

10. Reach diverse audiences. Because there is no devotional section in secular stores, these products appeared under several categories. Some were on the religion shelves. A few were with the bestsellers and new releases. Others were in the self-help section or with the calendars and journals. Use every tactic you can to obtain the best placement for your devotional products and bring diverse audiences closer to our Heavenly Father. ♦