



Books succeed when authors and publishers partner in distribution.

by Marlene LeFever



The Author— An Important Distributor

I write a book. The publisher has stacks of them in the warehouse. As an author, I have no trouble following the process this far. But then comes distribution, that bridge that takes my book from the warehouse into the hands of the reader. Who thinks about distribution? Actually, both the publisher and the author need to take the distribution process at least as seriously as writing, editing and printing, or the book will fail.

Distribution is not just the job of a publisher. Few publishing companies have the money to market the book and distribute it to the readers without significant help from the author. For example, when my books came out, Cook asked me to supply a list of all the influencers I knew who might read the book and talk about it to their friends. When people start telling others, “You should read this book,” you have an important clue that you may have a bestseller on your hands.

My first reaction to making a list was that I didn’t know any influencers, but by the time I had finished my list, I had pages and pages of names and addresses. Since many of those people were college professors and my book was a Christian education textbook, they incorporated it into their syllabuses. This has meant that each year when they teach a Christian education course, all their students are required to buy my book. Every semester, my “influencers” continue to bring Cook hundreds of sales of my book, now a lucrative backlist product. (Publicist Michele Tennesen calls this word-of-mouth process “the buzz.” It was the buzz from pastors who received Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* direct from the publisher that propelled that book toward amazing worldwide sales.)

Many writers are also effective speakers. Publishers encourage them to be mini-distributors, selling their own books wherever they speak, and therefore provide books to their authors at a significant discount. Most of the people who buy books after hearing the author speak would never have gone into a store to buy them. These sales are impulse purchases. Without the author, they’d never happen.

For speaker-authors, radio or even television interviews can expand a book’s distribution. Caution: Publishers must make certain the author can think on his or her feet, and handle difficult or occasionally negative questions. I was being interviewed by an antagonistic British Broadcasting Network reporter. She said, “Now, tell me honestly, is Sunday school



Editors gathered in Colorado Springs this spring to study at the International Christian Publishing Institute. At an on-site evaluation of a Christian bookstore, Charles Ngowi, Tanzania, found books on the shelf by another participant, Rich Brott, from the United States. Grace Chian, Taiwan, and Ella Sonawane, India, took advantage of this great photo opportunity with the author. For more information on our institute, see page 23. Partial scholarships are available.

still as boring as it used to be?” The show was live across Northern Ireland. I had to come up with an instant answer that affirmed the new life many churches were experiencing through their children’s programs and do it without insulting the reporter.

One of my least favorite ways to aid in the distribution of my books is to do a book signing, usually in a bookstore. I’m always afraid that I’ll sit there surrounded by my books and no one will come to get one signed! This has happened! I had exactly the opposite experience at a conference last year. I had just finished a small “work for hire” book. The line of people who wanted me to sign their books stretched on and on. I was thrilled, because every author wants people to love her book. I assumed the bookstore sales were amazing. Then I found out that the store had put a free copy of my book into every conference packet. Deflated ego!

Still, nothing is more exciting for a writer than to go into a bookstore and find his or her book actually on the shelf. I had a friend who managed a Christian bookstore. My first book had just come out, and she had stocked a number of them. She phoned me and excitedly announced, “Marlene, someone neither one of us knows just bought your book!”

Distribution! Your sales will go up if you make certain your authors understand the concept. Educate them. ❖