



The Lifespan of Publications

By Joseph Lopez

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A book is bought, read, treasured, reread at a later date, passed on, or sadly thrown away. Ultimately, the lifespan or life service of a publication depends on the patron. Some books never die; the best example is the Bible, which has been printed more than six billion times. Why do some books “live” longer?

Physical characteristics

Publications with sturdy spines, such as hardcovers, will get a second look before being discarded. If a book has amazing artwork, it will be more likely to get passed down through generations. Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* has been a children’s bestseller since 1902.

But in this age where books are available in a variety of formats—from hardcovers and mass market paperbacks to audiobooks, ebooks and more—publishers need to pay attention to other factors.

A timeless message

Books about life, applicable to all, with God’s voice inspiring the human heart, will always be sought after. A prime example is John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, first published in 1678. This Christian allegory, translated into more than a 100 languages,

was made into a film in 1912, and again in 1977. A computer animation was released in 2006.

Brother Lawrence’s simply titled *The Practice of the Presence of God*, written in the 17th century, even now appeals to a global audience.

Charles Spurgeon’s sermons, delivered in the 19th century, are in print in many languages, and can be downloaded online [<http://www.spurgeongems.org/>]. Oswald’s Chamber’s timeless devotional *My Utmost for His Highest*, originally published in 1927, can be found in many personal libraries and bookstores.

The AC Media Company reports that children’s books that talk about timeless subject matter—such as friendship and parental love—have a longer lifespan than other titles.

Usefulness

Nonfiction, so long as it is updated, never goes out of style. This is especially true of reference titles. Noah Webster’s *American Spelling Book*, first published in 1783, is now sold online. *The World Almanac* has been popular for more than a century since 1876. *The Guinness Book of Records*, first published in 1955, itself holds a world record as the best-selling copyrighted series. Of particular interest to Christian publishers is the life service of Sunday school materials. Author Lynda Freeman recommends that Sunday schools:

- Determine whether the curriculum appeals to a wide or narrow range of age bands (preschool/ kindergarten, primary and intermediate).
- Look for creativity, suggested activities, good pictures or visual aids, and a good teacher's guide.
- Ascertain whether the curriculum engages children, small group relationships, live-it application projects, sorts out memory versus application, offers optional second lessons, and contains family flyers and teacher devotions.
- Review biblical interpretation, theology, accessibility, pricing, reusability, and reproducibility.

All of the factors mentioned by Freeman affect repurchase and, eventually, the life service of a product.

Broad appeal

A recent survey from the U.S. Department of Education indicates a growing percentile of children ages 3-5 are read to every day by a family member, up from 53 percent in 1993 to 58 percent in 2001. This is reassuring for children's books publishers. Because of nostalgia, parents read books they were read as children. Sometimes, they are reluctant to buy new titles. Therefore, publishers must target parents through book reviews and parenting publications in order to overcome the sentiment factor.

For similar reasons, series books tend to last longer than single titles. Series and new or revised editions sustain or reinvigorate interest. *The Babysitter's Club* series books are very popular all over the world though very American in concept (presenting babysitting as a business).

The larger the targeted age groups the longer the book life. Books written for toddlers will have a shorter lifespan than those written from ages 9 to 15.

Books for adults can often be targeted to a limited audience, a niche or a particular interest group. Books that appeal to both men and women, or to multiple audiences, have a greater chance of success.

Marketing

Current events, media coverage, a movie version, crossover appeal (men and women, adults and kids) or fashion (as to what is "hip" to read) can alter the duration of product life, adding years, if not decades. A bestseller then becomes a perennial seller. Most adult fiction books sustain their popularity for just a couple of years, unless the book has been turned into a film. The world's top 14 bestselling fiction titles, including *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Gone With The Wind*, and *Animal Farm*, have all been adapted for the screen. The only exception is J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

According to Didier Sornette (dsornette@ethz.ch), a physicist turned geophysicist and also professor of finance at ETH Zurich (the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology):

"There are two types of mechanisms to sell books—word-of-mouth and advertising campaigns. Word-of-mouth is known to produce a slow growth in sales, which eventually peak and then decline slowly, whereas advertising or a good review gives sales an instant but short-lived boost."

Sornette and a team of researchers graphed estimated sales data for bestselling books on Amazon.com. The team found that the shape of the peaks could predict future sales. A sharp apex in sales may indicate fleeting interest, so further marketing will probably not encourage purchase. On the other hand, a measured decline can mean that the publication could benefit from more advertising. Sornette's model may help publishers use initial sales data to decide whether publications have a better chance

for longer lifespans with promotional
campaigns.

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