



Success for Christian publishers in competitive markets requires attention not just to sales, but also to distribution.

by David Mehlis



Where Books and Buyers Meet

Do you know how many titles were published in the United States just last year? A record 195,000 new titles were published in 2004, according to *Publisher's Weekly*. The number of books available in this country is exploding. In 2003, it was 178,000 new books; five years before, it was 125,000. In just six years, the number of new titles increased by 56 percent, but unit sales are relatively flat. The total sales for the book publishing industry, in constant dollars, have not increased in like proportion.

What does this mean for U.S. publishers? Revenue is now divided among 56 percent more titles than before. And while the proportion of revenue that comes from religious titles has risen—thanks to such blockbusters as *The Purpose-Driven Life*, *The Prayer of Jabez*, and the Left Behind series—the average title, including secular titles, sells fewer than 3,000 copies.

Of approximately 30 million evangelicals and 30 million other strong committed believers in the United States, some 70 percent never visit Christian bookstores. This means only 18 million set foot in this primary distribution channel.

Suppose I ask how many of those 18 million believers are interested in Bible study aids. Christian bookstores sell them, but they also sell Bibles, Christian living books, fiction, videos, music, and so on. Then, some of that population will buy something and the rest will simply browse. Divide the buyers by the 50 new Bible study guides published this year—how many units of each guide will sell?

The United States market is much more segmented than most markets around the world, but with the upsurge in new technologies permitting easier and faster printing for all publishers, Christians and non-Christians alike, our partners in

other countries will soon find that they face increasingly segmented markets. And this is why distribution is key.

Through Christian retail channels, Cook can hope to reach 18 million believers—but we still need to find ways to reach the other 42 million believers. We must get our books to the places frequented by those believers who do not regularly visit Christian stores. We must identify where our books and their target buyers can meet, and make sure our books are there. Assuming our books have quality content, the more ubiquitous they are—the more easily obtained by our target customers—the greater our sales will be. But, to achieve those sales, distribution comes first.

How can we broaden our reach? Where can we place our books for maximum exposure? Cook has sought multiple channels: strategic partnerships with other ministries, Internet sales, sales through secular chains, through big-box retailers such as Wal-Mart or K-Mart, and many more outlets. The venues available to Christian publishers vary according to the countries where we operate, but the end is the same: we want to get our Christian message read.

As Christians we know that the number of units sold does not determine their significance in the Kingdom. We measure success by the change our books bring about in our lives and in the lives of our readers. But if we want our message to be received—if we want to bring the transforming power of God's Word to Christians and non-Christians alike—we have got to focus on distribution. We must get our books to where the people are. That is what the Father did when He sent His Son to earth 2,000 years ago—He sent the Word to us. If we want to be effective, we need to follow His example. ❖

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