

Worlds Apart, Same Problem



Strategies vary, but the fundamental problem is the same: publishers must sell their books.

by David Mehlis

What do publishers in India, the U.S., Africa, Eastern Europe, and Brazil have in common? The culture, economic conditions, infrastructure, available resources—all are different, yet the publishers share a common problem: they must sell their product to succeed. For their books to sell, booksellers must stock them, and consumers must buy them.

In a world of scarcity

“In Africa, people will go long distances to obtain the only copy of a book,” one might say. “There is no shortage of demand. The problem is not that they have to choose one book in 10,000, like in America, but that there is only one book available, and it is too expensive.”

In places of scarcity, books compete against basic necessities. In India, a book might sell for just 10 cents, but if the average worker makes only a dollar a day, that is 10 percent of that worker’s wages. The same title might cost 100 times more in the U.S., but the price is not as high relative to income. There, \$10 may represent less than an hour’s wage.

If consumers in your market must choose between buying books or food, you cannot assume that if your books are fancier, people will buy them. Make books affordable.

In a world of flux

Before the Berlin Wall fell, people in Eastern Europe would accept any Christian book. The quality did not matter; they sought as many as possible because they did not know if they’d ever see it again. They hoarded what little Christian literature was available.

But, when the Wall fell, publishers could not sell 10,000 books, nor even 1,000. Suddenly, the books had to compete with all kinds of non-Christian books and goods.

What is the lesson for publishers? When an economy is changing, focus on your audience. What titles meet readers’ felt needs—and will compete effectively for disposable income? The shift in Eastern Europe happened overnight, but economies are constantly in flux. Brazil is a good illustration of a country where competition increased perhaps 50 to 70 percent in the past decade. China is on the brink of change. As your economy changes, change your focus.

In a world of plenty

In the West, competition means there are plenty of choices. A consumer can obtain a single book in a variety of formats: hardback, trade paperback, mass market edition, or an audio version. A buyer can obtain not just a Bible with a blue cover—but one in the right *shade* of blue.

Honor Books, a Cook imprint, began when the publisher was able to differentiate the product by developing a new category: inspirational gift books suitable for sale in general markets. As soon as the category was established, other publishers joined in. Honor had to shift from having no competitors to being one of many.

When one publishing house reissued the Alvin Toffler bestseller, *Future Shock*, it published two versions. One had black letters on a white background; the other, white on black. In a saturated market, differentiation counts.

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How can you encourage consumers to seek your titles first? How many accounts can you call on, that will buy enough books to justify a sales program? What will help you succeed as a Christian publisher? Whether you are in a world of scarcity, one of plenty, or somewhere in between, the problem is the same—you must sell your product. ❖

David Mehlis is president of Cook Communications Ministries International.

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Cook Communications
Ministries International
4050 Lee Vance View
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80918

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