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**Developing Authors at Home**

*How to find, develop and retain authors*

*Scott Bolinder, Executive Vice President and Publisher, Zondervan*

**Introduction** – Christian publishing is a high calling and essential to Kingdom work. Christianity is the only religion that is based on a relationship—a very personal relationship with the Creator God.

I believe publishing, in its essence, is about adding value to a relationship between an author and a reader. Simply put, we connect authors (content creators) with readers (the end user) in a relationship via an increasingly wide array of media (print, audio, video, digital, etc.). If that relationship is meaningful and useful, we will find success as publishers. Authors will continue to grant us publishing rights to their content and readers will continue to purchase our resources.

So, whether it is the Bible (connecting the reader with God and his story) or any other book or media, we have this enormous responsibility and opportunity to build and enhance relationships for the sake of the Gospel.

We add value, as publishers, in a host of ways—editorial, design, production, marketing, sales, customer service, supply chain management, fiscal management, legal care, and return on investment—to name a few. Today, we are focusing on the very first step—editorial—which essentially has two key mandates:

- Find great content (authors) - acquisitions
- Make great content better – development

And for purposes of time, we are going to focus more specifically on the first mandate: ***Finding and keeping great authors (content).***

**Six Essential Steps –**

1. **Create constraints** – Constraints define the boundaries.
  - First, need to understand “who” you are as a Christian publisher and define your constraints—those understandings and principles that will serve as guidelines for your pursuit of content and authors.
    - What will you publish and why? What won’t you publish and why?
    - What is your theological position? Philosophical position?

- Conservative? Liberal? Separatist? Engaging culture?
      - What is more important: the author or the content?
      - What will qualify an author to be published by you? What will disqualify them?
      - Develop a publishing philosophy.
    - Second, what do you feel the role of editorial is with an author?
      - What is your “value equation” with them? Demanding? Easy?
      - What will you expect from an author before you acquire them?
2. Listen – Important both with authors and readers. We are “connectors” and therefore we need to understand who and what we are connecting in a relationship and why.
- What kind of voices are you looking for?
    - Established voices that are already known?
    - Fresh voices that haven’t been heard yet and are relatively unknown?
  - What are your “listening posts” – magazines, internet (bloggers), email newsletters, newspapers, websites, conferences, denominations, pastors,
  - Network – seek input from others you trust (stringers)
3. Design your portfolio – As you build a list, you are really building a “mutual fund” of intellectual property that will serve a certain audience. Be strategic about who you are serving and why.
- Define your portfolio and what you want it to look like
    - Highly specialized? More general?
    - What about generational concerns? Broad or limited?
    - What about topical areas? Where will you invest and why?
    - What about quantity? How will you balance the number of titles between the all the areas you are building?
4. Take action – The first three steps are foundational but until you act, nothing will happen. So begin to plow the fields in order to harvest a crop of authors and content that meets your goals.
- Spread the net wide. Seek input and proposals from sources you trust and respect
  - Develop relationships with authors, potential authors and agents (if applicable). Publishing is a *very relational* enterprise and you have to cultivate lots of relationships in order to acquire content.
  - Sell – make no mistake about it. At some point, acquisitions involves selling—making the case to an author/agent that *your* publishing house is the best place for them to entrust their intellectual property for purposes of copyright protection and then value-added exploitation of their content.
  - Negotiate fairly – looking for a win/win agreement with authors will always serve you best at the outset and for the long run.
  - Invest in your authors - Develop authors by adding value and improving their work. Understand the difference between writing and editing and make the investment to add value to their writing by taking it from good to great; or even from great to greater! Nothing will do more to help the book succeed.

- Stay organized and develop an elegant system of administration to track and monitor the journey of each book through the publishing process. Become the “advocate” for the author and their work.
5. *Evaluate* – Nothing helps maintain a vibrant list of authors and their work than ongoing evaluation of how their work is doing. In order to build a robust backlist—titles that have “staying power” and continue to sell for years to come—you have to pay attention to all your titles. This is not an easy task, especially as your list grows.
- Regularly review the results of every title you publish on several levels:
    - Unit sales
    - Sales revenue
    - Profitability (which takes into account real costs)
  - Understand which markets are responding to a particular title.
  - Understand which channels are generating the sales.
  - Review the reader feedback and media reviews to discern what they are saying about the resource and/or author. Look for clues about a “next book?”
  - Look at your various categories within your portfolio and understand which ones are thriving and which ones seem to be struggling. Why? Would you want to adjust your portfolio? Why?
  - Be willing to consider the question of whether you should discontinue a relationship with an author, for the right reasons. Are you clear on what your criteria is for making such a decision?
6. *Nurture and care* – Acquiring an author is an expensive proposition in many, if not most cases. Keeping them, if so desired, is crucial and one of the most effective ways to build a strong, sustainable business. Keeping strong authors is often more challenging than acquiring them, so it must be treated with utmost importance.
- Number one factor in caring for author – *effective communication!* Nothing will discourage an author more than a breakdown in communication with their publisher.
  - Everything matters – Like any service industry, publishers have to remember that our reputations with authors are earned one little “thing” at a time. Furthermore, our reputations can often be ruined with one small mistake or poor judgment.
  - Add value – Nurturing and caring for an author does not simply mean pandering. Rather, it means caring for them in ways that respect and honor the professional value equation we outlined when we signed them up—to protect their intellectual property and then to add significant value in order to exploit their content as wide and far as possible.
  - Reward author loyalty.

**Summary** – *It all starts with content! Authors and readers are the lifeblood of publishing. It’s all about adding value to that relationship. Christian publishing is crucial for the work of the Gospel. Therefore, we must be earnest about a thoughtful approach to how we find, develop and retain authors. May God grant us wisdom.*

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## **AUTHOR DEVELOPMENT**

### **Phoebe Mugo, CEO, Uzima Publishing House, Kenya**

For publishers in African countries our greatest desire is to develop local authors. Many times we think we don't have local authors but they are there, we just need to identify and develop them.

The starting point is to make sure your publishing company can attract the best local authors.

Ask yourself: "Do authors want to associate with the image of my company?" Some publishing houses are notorious for poor production or for nonpayment of royalties and authors do not want to be associated with them at all.

So if you want to attract the best authors:

1. Improve your company's overall image (this includes improving the physical appearance of your offices, moral of your staff, public relations with your customers etc);
2. Improve the quality of your products both in content and packaging;
3. Widen your distribution channels as authors want to know their books have gone as far and wide as possible;
4. Be financially transparent in regard to author accounts and ensure that you pay authors all their advances or royalties;
5. Communicate clearly to authors, the publishing and editorial process of the company; the date when their title will be published and involve them in things like cover designs, launching or promotional events if they are interested.

These are basic requirements to which you can add other incentives to give your company a competitive edge.

### **The next question you need to ask is: "Are authors born or made?"**

In Uzima we believe that whether one is born an author, or not, s/he needs to be developed further to reach his/her maximum potential.

In 1983 we put in place a system of identifying potential writers and bringing them together for a writer training workshop. This has now become an annual event.

In 1983 when we began this programme we were able to acquire 14 titles for children through the workshop. Not all workshops have been that successful but we keep trying.

In workshops we seek to build the following skills:

**Mastery of language.** The average Kenyan needs to learn three languages: English because it's a medium of instruction in schools; Kiswahili because it's the national language generally spoken in the market place and ones own ethnic language. Most people are best in their own ethnic language and in Kiswahili but speak English as a third language.

Most writer-training workshops are therefore geared towards enabling locals write well in English.

**Organising ideas.** Poor organization of ideas is very common. When authors are not helped to organize their ideas they may have their work rejected because it's all mixed up and this creates a lot of discouragement. It is therefore best to help them before they begin writing.

[We do this in a very simple way of helping them divide their ideas into 5 chapters, then identify which ideas fall under each chapter before moving to organizing ideas under major headings and sub headings.]

**Authors also need to be developed in the following areas:**

- How to do research
- How to conceptualize the idea fully before s/he writes
- How to capture readers attention
- How to write, self-edit and re-write
- How to focus on a specific audience (don't try to write for everybody)
- How to identify and develop his/her own literary style.

**Mentoring.** It is also good to encourage an editor to mentor and author. This may be your own editor or a freelance editor. This one on one though time consuming is more effective than dealing with large groups. Here the author writes in small bits, brings to the editor who reads, marks and discusses with the author.

In mentoring the editor must encourage a friendly relationship that allows listening to the author's difficulties and frustrations and being humane in how s/he treats them. The author is not a product but a person.

The editor will need to be sensitive when changing what the author has written as some won't take it well. Authors fear the red biro as it makes their manuscript look like it's bleeding. Don't sound harsh or arrogant in your editorial remarks. Use words like 'maybe', 'perhaps', 'should we' etc. Let them read and agree on changes before you go to print.

### **Seasoned authors also need to be developed**

**Clubs.** Encourage them to join an existing writers' club/association or form one themselves. In these clubs they can carry out various activities that will help them continue writing even for magazines or newsletters. The idea is to keep them writing.

**Libraries.** On your part build a library with books that are excellent in what you want to teach the most. Things like vocabulary, or description, dialogue etc. Let your authors have access to these books. Or refer them to relevant libraries under your membership.

**Retreats.** Seasoned authors will also need retreats from time to time where you can sponsor them to be away from work and home for extensive research and writing.

**An annual event** that brings all your authors together is also excellent in maintaining the relationship you have built. This event can be used to give reports on:

- Financial issues that relate to them
- Sales, advertising and promotional activities for the year
- Other activities for the year that you will want them to do with you
- You may give gifts or awards
- Encourage them to buy the latest publications and
- Let me them know what other topics you want them to write for you.

You are in business or ministry because of your authors, so developing them must have a central part in your publishing programme.

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**AUTHOR DEVELOPMENT**  
**Mark D. Taylor**  
**Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.**

I have been asked to speak on the subject of author development. This, of course, is basic to the entire publishing enterprise. And it is, of course, the most unpredictable aspect of the entire publishing enterprise. And it won't do us much good for me to talk in the abstract, so you'll excuse me if I talk about what we do at Tyndale House. After all, that's where I've worked for the past 34 years.

In our experience, authors fall into two categories: those whose books sell well and those whose books don't sell well. And in our experience, 20% of authors fall into the first category and 80% fall into the second. So it's really quite easy. Determine in advance which authors are in the category called "These authors don't sell well," and don't publish them. Then all of your remaining authors will fall into the "Bestsellers" category, and you will be the smartest and most successful person in the entire industry.

But of course we all know that it isn't that easy. Sometimes an author will catch everyone by surprise—either on the positive side or on the negative side. Sometimes an author will have one book or one series that sells extremely well, and then that same author's next book will fall off the cliff.

So let's try looking at it another way. Authors fall into two categories: those who are successful and are being pursued by multiple publishers, and those who would be delighted to get even one publisher to accept their manuscript. And in our experience, 1% of authors fall into the first category and 99% fall into the second. So that's not very helpful. But even though I make that comparison facetiously, it is a good reminder of a basic reality in publishing. At the same time that publishers are competing with one another for the most successful authors, there are zillions of writers out there who can't find a publisher at all.

So what are the tricks to author development? As it turns out, I don't know of any such tricks. But over the years our staff has developed various methods of identifying and developing successful authors and then maintaining good working relationships with them.

The place to begin, of course, is to determine what kinds of books you want to publish. What is your passion as a publisher? What do you like to read? Publishing is a rewarding business, but it is most rewarding if you and your staff enjoy reading your own books. At Tyndale House, we started out—back in 1962—as a Bible publisher. We had only one product: a paraphrase of the New Testament epistles called *Living Letters*. And even though we soon branched out into many other categories, Bibles are still an important part of our overall publishing program. Today Bible sales represent 35% of our total sales revenue. And we're passionate about making the Bible readable and accessible.

The next category we moved into, when Tyndale House was only one year old, was magazine publishing. For many years my father had had a dream of publishing a Christian magazine like *The Reader's Digest*—a magazine that would bring together in one bimonthly volume the best articles that were being published in dozens of other magazines. So he quickly began publication of a magazine called *The Christian Reader*. This magazine continued with greater or lesser success for the next thirty years. I tell that story because my dad was passionate about that idea.

Early in our history we began publishing trade books. Interestingly, our very first author apart from the “Living” series was Tim LaHaye. We began publishing his book *Spirit Controlled Temperament* back in 1966, and it is still in print today. And of course Tim LaHaye has written a few other bestsellers for us along the way.

For many years we published mostly Bibles and non-fiction books. But in the early 90s we decided to become a major player in the growing field of Christian fiction. It sounds funny to put it that way, but that's exactly the way we looked at it. So we started by thinking through a fiction policy. What makes a novel a Christian novel? What makes it a Tyndale novel? Should a Christian novel look or feel different than a typical novel in the general market? Those are easy questions, but it took us several months to create a policy we were comfortable with.

Then, having decided that we wanted to move into this area that was new for us, we set out to acquire the best Christian novelists in the market. So how did we do that? The answer is that we talked with many of the literary agents who represent authors. We told them we were planning to become a significant player in the world of Christian fiction, and we hoped they would direct their best authors our way—or at least give us a chance to make proposals to their best authors. And it worked. One of our first new contacts in this area was Francine Rivers. Francine had been a very successful writer of romance novels in the general market. Then she became a Christian, and she was embarrassed by the kinds of books she had been writing. The worldview represented in those books was not the worldview she wanted to present in her novels. She wanted to do something brand new, and she was looking for a publisher who would share her worldview. Her agent introduced her to us, and we took a gamble on a series of historical novels about life in the first century after Christ. Those books, called *The Mark of the Lion*, have now sold more than 1.8 million copies. And we have published many other best-selling books with Francine.

And success breeds success. When authors and agents saw that we were having success with authors like Francine, they wanted to get on the train with us. As a result, we believe we are now the leading publisher of Christian fiction, with authors such as Jerry Jenkins, Tim LaHaye, Karen Kingsbury, Joel Rosenburg, Dee Henderson, Randy Alcorn, and Randy Singer.

Ideally, a Tyndale author will have some type of platform that will help bring potential book buyers to us. We constantly remind ourselves that we are publishing into a crowded market, so authors have to help us as we try to get their books noticed.

We are continually looking to see who is publishing successfully, and we identify authors we would love to publish. But many of these authors are already writing for other companies. How does that work? Is it appropriate to steal another publisher's author?

It's a very delicate issue, because at Tyndale House we are committed not to steal authors from other publishers. There are loads of authors we'd love to publish, but if they seem to

be happily situated in their existing relationship, we will not go after them. We might, however, talk to their agent to ask, is this author happy in his or her present publishing relationship? If the answer is, “Yes, we have a wonderful relationship with XYZ Publisher, and we’re not interested in making a move,” we will not pursue it. It’s called the Golden Rule. We don’t want other publishers stealing our authors, so we try not to steal theirs.

But sometimes the agent’s response is, “Interesting that you ask, because we’re unhappy in our present publishing relationship.” So then we feel that it’s entirely fair to pursue that author.

Since our topic this morning is Author Development, let’s move on to the next step in that development process, which is to let the author know who we are and what our values are. So we send the author statistics about the kinds of books we publish, the successes we’ve had, and mostly importantly, we talk about why we would love to publish that particular author.

Interestingly, we usually don’t know the specifics of what the author wants to write about, but that’s okay. If the author has the kind of heart we’re looking for, and we like his or her writing style, we’re prepared to take a risk—especially if they have a successful track record elsewhere.

And of course there’s the issue of negotiating the contract. I have gone on record publicly as saying that I think our industry has allowed advance royalty offers to get out of control. In a competitive situation we need to be willing to take a risk with the size of the advance, but we also need to be careful not to let our emotions run away from us. You never want to wake up the next morning and say, “What did I just do?!”

But it’s one thing to sign a contract with an author, and it’s a very different thing to nurture and maintain a dynamic working relationship with that author. We take this very seriously. Our editors try to get to know the authors, even if the relationship is mostly by telephone and email. We respect the author and what he or she has written, but we also know that the writing of even the best authors can be improved by a good editor—and we have excellent editors! We have a reputation for making our authors work very hard. It’s not unusual for us to ask for substantial rewrites. After all, we want the best possible product.

We also have excellent author relations managers—people whose entire job is to nurture the relationship between Tyndale and our authors. These people often become close friends of our authors, and that relationship is an important element in our ability to retain successful authors. If the author has a question in any area whatsoever, or needs assistance from anyone at Tyndale House, the Author Relations Department is there to help them.

We also work hard at marketing our books and finding multiple sales channels that will help us succeed in getting our books to the final consumer. Good marketing and creative selling are two huge elements in a publisher’s successful relationship with authors. And we try to reach the broadest possible audience for our authors. This means we will sell our books in general markets as well as Christian bookstores. Our authors want their books distributed as widely as possible, and that’s part of our responsibility.

One last item I’ll touch on is the ratio of new authors to repeat authors in our line-up of new books. We are always on the lookout for authors who will be able to write multiple books over time. It’s helpful to build on an existing relationship with an author.

For 2007, we brought out 35 books by authors who were brand new to Tyndale House. Of those, seven were actually first-time authors. And that year we also brought out 35 books by authors we had published previously. This was not orchestrated, but it's interesting to see that we had equal numbers of new authors and repeat authors. I think this bodes well for the future, because we're committed to working with our existing authors at the same time that we're committed to finding new authors.

I hope these comments are helpful. As I said at the outset, there are no magic answers or tricks to author development. In the final analysis, it's a process of treating our authors—and our friendly competitors—just as we want them to treat us.