

PUBLISHING TRENDS AND THEIR EFFECT ON PUBLISHERS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The fact that the world is becoming a global village is perhaps best visible in the area of publishing, secular and Christian alike.

Watching the developments in the Christian publishing industry locally and overseas, I have noted trends that have - and are sure to continue having significant impact on old and budding publishers in the developing countries.

I. Focus on international sales as an avenue for growth

Every publisher desires to grow his or her annual sales. I am yet to find a publisher whose budget forecasts a dip in their annual sales. The pressure for continuous growth requires new strategies every year. The challenge to continuous growth has pushed publishers in the developed world to focus on the developing world (Otherwise known as the international market) as avenue for sales growth. This has led to mergers and sometimes buyouts in the hope of taking advantage of core competencies that each partner brings to the negotiation table, in the hope of expanding market share.

Among other strategies, publishers have been trying to expand distribution networks through appointment of distributors either regionally or internationally with the aim of reaching a wider market. This approach has not been without its challenges, some logistical and others emanating from diverse trade policies for different countries. For instance in Africa, you would be positioning yourself for failure if you appointed a distributor in Nigeria and expected them to serve South Africa or vice versa. Logistical challenges and differences in international trade policies even for countries in the same region would certainly impact negatively on your efforts. Sometimes, these factors have been either assumed or ignored in the process of decision making.

Also, the initiative adopted by some publishers of printing an international trade Paper Edition or a Global trade paper edition has its own challenges. The idea of providing a high quality, low priced and highly discounted book is noble. However, what may appear as a reasonably priced book in one part of the world could prove expensive elsewhere. The regional economic differences explain this further. A good example is the pricing of books in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. What may appear a good price in Kenya will be deemed very expensive in Tanzania and Uganda yet all these countries are in East Africa.

At the same time, as the publishers focus on selling the English versions internationally, what they fail to understand is that they are stifling the

local publisher's ability to provide translated versions of these materials. Normally, publishers in the developing countries get most of their income to finance translations from sales proceeds of the English versions. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of publishing in Africa, - and I believe the developing world is aware - that the section of the population that reads English is also the one that has a high buying power. And so when publishers in the developed world insist on selling English versions of their books internationally rather than through rights to local publishers, the latter run out of resources and cannot afford to produce local translations. Moreover, experience has shown that the population that reads books translated into local languages is not big enough for large print runs that afford low unit prices. Worse still, this audience comprises people who are generally poor and cannot afford books that are priced normally. Literature intended for them must always be priced low or, better still, subsidized. What has happened in the past is that publishers in the developing world would invest the little income they make from the English edition to produce a translation of the book in the local language. With the publishers from the developing world distributing globally, the publishers in developing nations will not get English rights and hence they will not afford to invest in a translated version either.

II. Celebrity Publishing

It is often said that the Church in Africa is growing a mile long but only an inch deep. This echoes a valid concern that cannot be addressed without the input of the Christian publisher.

With the recent leaps in technological development, books published in the developed world are reaching third world markets as soon as they are released. This is good enough for the reader but it's not without negative consequences for the local publisher. The fundamentals that guide in determining the book to publish - like the number of copies it is likely to sell, which mainly depends on the popularity of the author often disqualify would be helpful books from being published. This leaves the publisher from the developing world with no option but to seek for licenses to publish popular books, if only to remain afloat, whether those books meet the local needs or not. It is really a case of faith versus fundamentals.

III. Business and Ministry Balance

Christian publishers have found themselves walking a tight rope as they struggle to maintain a balance between publishing for business and ministry work. On the one hand, a publisher must make enough money for operational costs and to power growth. Yet the end should not always justify the mean. For the Christian Publisher, there is the other need for putting into the market books that will serve the need of reaching souls for Christ and grounding others in the faith. The Christian publishers should not fail to notice their role in the global harvest.

Lately, the establishment of Christian divisions among general and trade publishers cannot go unnoticed. In my opinion, this is an indication that even secular publishers are beginning to sense the existence of a viable market of Christian literature that is big enough to justify tapping into.

At the same time, there is the development of what I may refer to as economic ecumenism where Christian publishers choose to use or work with secular publishers in the area of distribution even when there are fellow Christian publishers in those regions who can work with them. This is in spite of the fact that the secular publisher or distributor has a different motivation to that of the Christian publisher. All this happens in the backdrop of fellow Christian publishers whose vision and mission may agree with their fellow Christian publishers even though they operate in different regions. I believe that anyone who is genuinely involved in Christian publishing is concerned with the message in the same way they are with the bottom line. The secular publisher may look at the bottom line more than the message. I am not in any way suggesting that we should not use general publishers if they provide an avenue for our publishing efforts.

IV. Emerging Technologies

Ignoring the developing technology would be to the publisher's detriment. More and more publishers are moving into digital publishing through e-books, downloadable digital or audio books. This technology is not without its limitations in the developing world. The infrastructure necessary to exploit it is mainly confined to cities and big towns.

In some cases, it is possible to download only a chapter or section of a book and not the entire book. Whereas authors build up their message as they write a book. Downloading part of a book raises the chances of misunderstanding the author's message and this predisposes the reader to error.

The bigger challenge however is the cost of providing these services in the developing world.

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