In Pursuit of Readers

By Cossy Rosario

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How can a publisher of books reach more readers and thereby increase his or her sales? That has always been the number one question—and the mystery—in book publishing.

Of course, an adequate knowledge of the market helps the publisher choose—or commission—the books that meet the reader's felt needs. Without that knowledge a publisher might go on for a while, believing that he or she is meeting the needs of his or her "constituency." By constituency, however, the publisher means not the readers or market, but the board of directors, supporting missions, churches or donors of their own publishing house. The publisher is putting out the kinds of books that this constituency expects, rather than the books the readers want. As a consequence, editorial and reader needs are sacrificed, and the publisher becomes preoccupied with how to get rid of excess inventory to make room on the shelves for new books.

But in this case, the best solution to the problem of slow-moving stock is not exclusive attention to new and better marketing and sales techniques, as valid as these may be. Rather, marketing must be balanced with renewed focus on the publishing program and renewed study of the market.

Think in terms of felt needs

One traditional approach to a publishing audience is to divide it into market segments according to age or condition. For example, we may speak of the children's market, the young married's market, the student market, and so on.

This approach, however, does not guarantee that the publisher will select books that sell. But planning in terms of felt needs will help the publisher produce books that are popular because they minister to people at the point of their need. For example, the student market may be interested in books on peer pressure, dating, or future career choices.

Have a target audience in mind

Too often publishers use the "shotgun" approach to publishing—aiming in the general direction and loading the publishing program with a variety of subjects in the hope that some will hit the target somewhere. Despite the occasional hit, that approach simply fills bookshop shelves with more slow-moving stock.

This does not mean that every book needs to be aimed at the same audience. But it does mean that the publisher should have a carefully thought-out philosophy implemented through a goal-oriented strategy that aims the products at specific targets.

Publishers need to set clear goals based not only on a sound evaluation of their publishing strengths and weaknesses, but also on the realities of their marketplace.

The publisher needs to know what types of readers buy what kind of books, and what reasons or felt needs lead them to make their choices. Research is an invaluable tool here, but intuition should not be overlooked.

Intuition and research together

Some publishers rely solely on intuition. And a "feel" for what will sell can be gained by watching sales of existing books, or by observing potential reader interest in certain topics.

For instance, Gospel Literature Service (www.glsindia.com) in Mumbai, India, used "mere intuition" to put out a series of bestsellers. Obvious interest at student camps when the subjects of sex, love, and marriage were discussed led to the publication of Zac Poonen's *Sex, Love and Marriage*, followed by the Indian edition of Walter Trobisch's *I Married You*. In this case, a good personal understanding of the target group aided intuition in the selection of manuscripts with a high interest level for that audience. Intuition should be supplemented as quickly as possible with research on the target groups.

Intuition is never merely guesswork, nor is it a cheap substitute for research. It is bought at a price. It means getting to know and keeping in touch with people, a lot of people, in the various groups an editor might target.

One of the major contributions of intuition to the publishing process can be to generate hypotheses and assumptions about the target group to guide research. The cooperative use of intuition and research (where intuition guides the research and research tests intuition) leads to the most fruitful results from both.

Another important contribution of intuition lies in preliminary screening of manuscripts before deciding what (or whether) to research. Naturally, there is no substitute for intuition in editing and polishing the manuscript prior to publication.

A good deal of confidence can be placed in intuition if it is backed by the sound knowledge of target readers that research provides: a reader's problem and felt needs, lifestyle, preferences in reading and viewing, taste in art and illustration, and so on.

Formal research takes time

Formal surveys provide a good deal of accurate information, but in addition to taking a lot of time, energy, and money, they can be difficult to interpret properly. If the publisher decides to the formal research, he or she needs to approach it as a manager rather than as a personal investigator.

The publisher should first think through the objectives and target group of the survey, then carefully work out non-threatening questions. These should elicit information without biasing the response. Young people may be enlisted, perhaps college or seminary students on summer vacations, to actually do the interviews.

These interviewers need some basic training. In addition to making sure that they understand the questions and the types of readers they will be interviewing, they need to understand the importance of not biasing the replies, and have some idea of how to avoid this. For example, gestures that prompt a certain response are raising an eyebrow or shaking one's head at certain answers. These nonverbal cues can bias responses and should be avoided in research interviews.

When the investigators have completed their tasks and the publisher finally has the completed questionnaires, others should be engaged to tabulate the responses. Simple forms of entering the results can speed the process and help eliminate mistakes. When this is done—and checked—the data can be analyzed.

Interpretation of the data can be time-consuming and there are many pitfalls along the way, including faulty analysis. It may be best to get professional help.

Informal research is possible

There are many ways to do informal research: the basic point is simply to question readers. This can be done in chance meetings on public transportation, on the street, or in bookstores and libraries. (Don't forget the librarian.)

However, in questioning readers, do not make the mistake of confining yourself to Christian readers. Go to non-Christian bookstores or find readers who are reading secular material. A far more balanced view of felt needs will result.

It also pays to understand why non-readers do not read. Why have they neglected books? What would they read if they had the opportunity? Publishers, particularly in the developing world, need to encourage the habit of reading. Perhaps a felt need is for a series of easy reading books. These may focus on health, childcare, literacy—whatever the local need is.

Ask readers questions that have specific answers: What subjects interest readers and where do readers buy books? How are they selected? What is the price range within which most readers seem to select books?

The difficulty, of course, is to ask questions in such a way that one gets *reliable* information. Also, some issues are more "uncomfortable" than others. For example, answers about prices may be misleading if a person knows or suspects that the questioner is a publisher. Or the person may give a higher price range to impress the interviewer with his or her purchasing power. Always keep in mind such potential "pollution" in answers.

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