In Search of the Right System

by Carlo Carrenho

When starting a publishing house, or moving into more professional levels of publishing, choosing a management software system is crucial. "The purpose of a system," says Rosemarie Hsu, administrative director of Taiwan-based China Sunday School Association (CSSA), "is not only to bring administrative benefit, but to enhance the competitiveness of an organization." Ian Thompson, general manager of Christian Focus in Scotland, agrees: "A good software package will give a publisher a competitive edge, enabling the company to find new markets faster."

A good management system must meet a firm's basic needs. For Ramon Rocha, chief executive officer of OMF Literature, Philippines, a good software package must have good sales reports and enable good monitoring of inventory, receivables and cash flow. It should also be easy to operate.

The operations mentioned are vital when choosing the management software, but publishing has some unique, industry-specific operations as well. For example, it is a challenge to find a standard software package that performs royalty calculations and that handles consignment sales, in addition to performing all the other basic operations well.

One solution is to hire a computer programmer to develop a custom-designed system. The problem in taking this road is that the programmer may move, die, or become a lemonade vendor in Rio de Janeiro! You are left with no support at all.

Editura Logos, a Romanian publishing house, used to have custom-designed software. The company has since changed, according to publisher Adrian Pastor, to "a popular Romanian accounting software," asking for "some special modules to be added." Pastor says he receives good support from the Romanian software company. This, by the way, is another possible solution: acquire a standard, locally-developed system, and order special modules. The problem? It may be too expensive for publishers. To reduce these costs, Mundo Cristão, a Brazilian publishing house, split the development costs with another interested Brazilian publisher.

A third solution, in the absence of a complete publishing software system, is to acquire a standard system that is flexible enough to export its data, so as to allow specific calculations—such as royalty payments—to be performed in an *Excel* spreadsheet. That is how Editura Logos and OMF Literature calculate their royalties. Hsu also supports the *Excel* solution. "Our experience shows that an organization can combine manual labor and the use of *Excel* as an alternative when tailor-made royalty software is not available," she says.

In the United States, there are several software packages designed specifically for publishers. *PUB123* was developed by the Adams-Blake Company in California. According to Alan Canton, Adams-Blake's vice president, *PUB123* is used by nearly 1,000 publishers and does the principal functions a publisher needs, especially royalty calculations, "in a much user-friendlier way than other systems." *PUB123*, however, does not handle consignment sales well, does not perform currency conversions, and is not yet flexible enough to print custom-designed invoices. Nevertheless, Canton says his company has "a fair number of international customers, mostly in the United Kingdom and Singapore." More information on this software can be found at www.adams-blake.com.

Other software options for publishers available in the U.S. market are *Myrlyn* and *Cat's Pajamas. Myrlyn* was designed by Fat Boys Software in North Carolina and, according to its Web site (www.myrlyn.com), is a flexible program whose databases can be used for a number of purposes. The *Cat's Pajamas* software system for publishers reportedly consists of "a completely integrated package of nearly 200 programs, designed to track orders from entry into the system all the way to calculation of royalties and sales commissions." More information is available at www.tcpj.com.

It may be a good idea to check these and similar programs before deciding on the best system for your business. Even if you are going to purchase local software, or design your own system, it is worthwhile to know what is already available. The most important thing when choosing a software package, however, is

Another option is *Publisher's Assistant.* This system was developed by Upper Access, Inc., in 1989. The company's publisher, Steve Carlson, affirms *Publisher's Assistant* has been in use far longer than most other systems. Though approximately1,200 publishers have purchased *Publisher's Assistant,* they are all American or Canadian. "I suspect publishers in other countries look at the *Publisher's Assistant* demo, see that customization will be needed, and perhaps find that a little intimidating," says Carlson. Carlson says that for all editions of *Publisher's Assistant*, except for the one at lowest cost, it is quite possible to customize reports, invoices, currency and tax calculations using *FoxPro.* "Anybody who is reasonably computer-literate can customize the software," he says, "or can hire somebody locally to do it." *Publisher's Assistant* software handles royalties and consignments. More information can be found at www.upperaccess.com.

Glen Hanket, a Colorado-based publisher and software engineer, used to use spreadsheets to manage his small publishing business. "As I added more books to my catalog, it got very difficult to keep updating the spreadsheets," he recalls. Therefore, he decided to write a "program tailored to the unique needs of the small press," a *C++* system he has been using for the past two years to manage his business. *BookHelper3,* available this month, manages consignment sales and provide royalty calculations. "Most software packages handle only sales, invoicing, and royalties," says Hanket. "They do not do anything about expenses, and thus they cannot handle profit and loss calculations." *BookHelper3* includes cost-of-book or value-of-inventory calculations, enabling publishers to track books sent out for review or promotional purposes. For more information, visit www.bikepaths.com/BookHelper.

to know in advance what you need. Since there are no perfect systems, it is important to know what features are absolute necessities for you, and what procedures you are willing to do manually or on other software. But, as Christian Focus' Thompson puts it, you have to ask: "What value will the system add to the business?" The system must serve the business, not the other way around. "The problem with any management system is that it becomes the defining way you run your business. We start to do things not because this is the best thing to do, but because this is what the software enables us to do. It is very easy to become focused on your management reporting system, rather than on ministry, and so on Christ," warns Thompson.❖

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