BOOK SELLING THRIVES ON AFRICA'S STREETS

Lawrence Darmani, of Step Publishers in Accra, Ghana, describes the strategies that freelance booksellers are employing to sell books in Africa.

Some people term it "aggressive marketing." Others call it "assertive selling." Whatever the terminology, the meaning is the same: determined freelance booksellers are taking books off the traditional book shelves (where most of them gather dust) and are pushing them along busy streets of African cities like other general goods.

"Why not?" asks Kwame Bonsu, an active street bookseller in Accra, Ghana's capital. "Footballs, sports shoes, dog-chains, clothes, even furniture is sold on the street. Why not books?"

Location is everything

"If you want to do good business, you must choose your spot carefully," says Bonsu. Booksellers on Africa's streets choose their places of business strategically. Bonsu's is adjacent to a Barclays Bank at the city center. He hardly lacks customers. Bonsu confirms that he does a good business every day, but refrains from quoting his daily sales. "At least I get my daily bread," is all he says.

In Uganda's capital, Kampala, one "aggressive" street seller positioned his table near a major book shop to grab spill-over shoppers from the book shop.

In Zimbabwe's second largest city, Bulawayo, street sellers pitched their "tent" near a busy supermarket. Many supermarkets do not carry books. Shoppers who are also fans of books stop by the displays just outside the door. These booksellers have little trouble with the shopkeepers because they are not viewed as competitors.

For many of these street booksellers, a small table or kiosk is enough. Kwasi Mensah, operating a book table in Accra's Opera Square in Ghana, boasts he "can fit into any available space." He has no need for a huge structure with electricity bills or staff. Over a month's time, Mensah talks with hundreds of prospective buyers. He reports "daily sales are not bad."

In Accra and other African cities, however, pedestrian walkways are taken over by street hawkers. Every so often, the officials, backed sometimes by police force, conduct inspections. To prepare for such times, Bonsu admonishes that proper permission be sought and the necessary tolls paid before selling books on the streets.

Variety counts

Bonsu's book table is full of a variety of books. "That way you capture a variety of people's needs," he says. His best-selling titles are those written by local charismatic speakers on subjects such as deliverance from the powers of darkness and the blessings of God.

The Bible, however, is street vendors' all-time best-selling book. Most of them receive their supplies from Bible societies. "But this is never enough," said one itinerant seller. "You have to have a big capital to make a deposit, which I don't have." So, she purchases only a few at a time.

Books are not the only wares carried by the street booksellers. It is typical to find plaques, posters, leather bags for carrying Bibles, key-holders, and other gift items.

Used books

"Rare books are like gems when you find them," said a University of Ghana graduate student whose search for a textbook led him to an aggressive street used-books dealer. Beaming, he seemed smitten by the street vendor's competence in finding him a book he could not find in regular book shops.

On a busy street in Nairobi, Kenya, one seller carried a wide array of fiction, science textbooks, novels, children's books, tattered Bibles, and even a concordance. Used books are good for selling on the streets. People stop to peruse them and often go home with a title and a



Women at the market may be good prospects for some African booksellers.

smile. Sellers of used books rely on excellent location, a variety of printed materials, low price, and a bell. The bell attracts the attention of passersby as the seller shouts out a competitive pricelist.

Competition

Nelson Clemens, an ardent bookseller with Christian Literature Crusade (CLC) in Sierra Leone, says street selling definitely moves books faster than one would normally expect from a book shop. "One aggressive bookseller," he says, "sometimes pitches his tent right in front of our book shop." Before customers enter the book shop, they first stop by the book table outside; and when customers leave the shop empty handed, they stop by the book table outside to make purchases. CLC now frequently sets up its own book tables to combat this problem.

To attract customers, streetsellers also cut prices. Why not? They have little or no overhead. This has motivated the biggest Christian chain bookseller in Ghana, Challenge Enterprises, to regularly move out of their book shops and set up "bonanzas sales" of their products on the streets.

Risk on hazardous streets

African cities are infamous for bumper-to-bumper traffic jams that often bring traffic to a virtual standstill. For street sellers, this is an opportunity to practice "vehicle-to-vehicle" selling. They position themselves near traffic lights and on parts of the streets where traffic jams are common and pitch their merchandise.

Although some drivers and passengers find this a public nuisance, the booksellers make no apologies. "All kinds of wares are sold to passengers in vehicles on heavy traffic roads," says Kojo, a Ghanaian vendor, "Why not books?" According to Kojo, the effort is worthwhile. "Some busy shoppers who never enter a book shop buy books from us while in their cars."

Selling books on the streets is dangerous. Drivers frustrated by traffic jams or operating faulty vehicles could easily injure booksellers as they attempt to sell to as many cars as possible. But for many such sellers the hazards of selling books on the streets is part of the game. "There is risk in every business," says Kojo, unconcerned.

Itinerant booksellers

Itinerant booksellers move from shop to shop, office to office, house to house, and street to street. They even go to the beach.

"Your success as an itinerant bookseller depends on your convincing prowess," says one itinerant bookseller in Accra. He is not concerned about intruding on people's privacy. "When I am selling a good product," he says, "I am not afraid. Even if I compel a person to buy a Christian book, I know he will never feel sorry later."

Can you trust the vendor?

Probably the biggest risk from the booksellers' point of view is how far one can trust a street or itinerant bookseller to pay for books sold on credit.

"Those who trust these itinerant booksellers must be extremely careful," admonished a book shop manager who prefers to use his own staff. Too often, business transactions with street sellers end when neither money nor books are returned for proper accounting.

The Bible Society of Ghana solved this problem by selling Bibles strictly on cash basis to street vendors. Nat Nunoo, a marketing personnel at the Society, states incidents of unfaithfulness on the part of many street-sellers led them to take such strict measures.

Consider the bottom-line

Whatever precautions publisher or booksellers must take to ensure good business deals with street vendors, the point is to sell product. Books can be sold anywhere—in the market place, office-to-office, house-to-house. Again, if other wares are sold that way, why not books? The future of progressive bookselling might well be on the streets.❖

International PUBLISHING EVENTS

June 2-4, 2001
Book Expo America, Chicago, IL, USA;
bookexpo.reedexpo.com

June 4-15, 2001
"International Curriculum Development," CCMI/Biola University course, La Mirada, CA USA
www.ccmi.org

June 11-15, 2001
"Publishing for Central and Eastern Europe," CCMI and OM Greater Europe Conference, Budapest, Hungary
www.ccmi.org

June 14-20, 2001
American Library Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA USA
www.ala.org

June 16-20, 2001
Canadian Booksellers Association Convention, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
www.cbabook.org

July 7-12, 2001
Christian Booksellers Association Convention, Atlanta, GA USA
www.cbaonline.org

August 3-11, 2001
Zimbabwe International Book Fair, Harare, Zimbabwe
zibf@samara.co.zw

September 9-20, 2001
Leading Publishing Organizations, International Christian Publishing Institute, Colorado Springs, CO USA
www.ccmi.org.

September 12-14, 2001
CBA Asia Regional Convention, Seoul, Korea
www.cbaonline.org

September 24-27, 2001
"Distribution," CCMI Regional Workshop with CSSA, Taipei, Taiwan
www.ccmi.org

October 10-15, 2001
Frankfurt Book Fair, Frankfurt, Germany
www.frankfurt-book-fair.com