

## Essential Questions for Publishers

By Peter Cunliffe

Since I began in publishing 46 years ago, I have battled challenges common to Christian publishers around the globe. The publisher can easily become so engrossed in the day-to-day pressure and details of work that he or she can miss the bigger picture, God's view of the ministry. As I consult with and encourage publishers around the world, I urge them to consider these critical questions:

### Editorial

In the editorial area, the publisher needs to ask first, "Is the manuscript relevant?" The publisher must think beyond whether the book will make a profit. He must consider, "What are the readers' needs?" He must know his market--his audience. The author is focused on the subject of the manuscript, but both the author and publisher need to ask, "Are there enough readers out there willing to buy the book?"

Second, is it a quality manuscript? It isn't enough to ask whether the topic is relevant. The publisher must consider the book's caliber. The quality of books published will define the firm's reputation--as excellent, average or poor. A publisher should ask, "Does the book's message speak to my heart? Does it move me?" If it doesn't, neither will it speak to readers' hearts.

The publisher's budget is too limited to publish books of only mediocre quality. Meaningful books have tremendous impact. The book *The Master Plan of Evangelism* by Robert Coleman was first published by Editora Mundo Cristao in Brazil in 1966. It is still being reprinted 39 years later alongside a dozen or so other titles from years ago.

### Marketing and Distribution

In the area of marketing and distribution, a vital question is, "What am I doing to reach the secular market? Am I focusing so much on the smaller group of Christians that I'm ignoring the majority of the population?"

Jesus told the parable of the shepherd who left his flock of 99 sheep to seek the lost one. The publisher must ask what kind of titles will reach those readers who enter only secular bookstores.

### Finances

The publisher needs to ask, "Is my principal goal to make money or to help people spiritually?" I believe it is both. If the publishing house is hardly earning a profit, it will lack the necessary funds to publish many books; its impact will be limited. A profitable publishing house, on the other hand, has the funds to publish more new books and thus increase its spiritual influence. Granted, it takes time to become profitable, but it is possible if you are patient and persevere. Manage your publishing ministry as a business, and your business as a ministry.

The publisher may not always decide to publish for a profit. Editions Farel in France published an important book, *The Koran and the Bible*, to be distributed throughout the Middle East. The book won't produce a profit because of limited distribution, but its bearing on the kingdom could be tremendous. A Christian publisher doesn't publish a book just to earn a profit, but he can't forget about earnings either.

Publishing is a "cash-poor" business. The publisher has to pay the printer in advance, but only receives income from the book's sales in later months. Bridging this time gap requires a lot of reserve capital funds. Failing to plan in this area has caused many publishers to flop.

I've made more than my share of mistakes as a publisher. In France my entire staff resigned shortly after I began as director because I had dismissed the sales manager to lower our expenses (the publishing house had run out of money).

*"Don't be afraid for I am with you; don't be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand"* (Isa. 41:10). This promise has encouraged my heart to keep going when I didn't see how we could survive, and when I was afraid. God has reminded me, "It is always too soon to quit."

The joy of seeing God's Word change lives keeps me motivated. Hearing from readers in far-flung places like China, Guadeloupe, Quebec and Angola of how the Holy Spirit used a book to touch their lives, makes it all worthwhile.

*Peter Cunliffe ([cwpublishers@aol.com](mailto:cwpublishers@aol.com)) is president of Christian World Publishers and works as a publishing consultant to Christian publishers around the globe. He has facilitated MAI workshops in Africa, Europe and Latin America.*