

# HOW THEN SHALL WE COMPETE

**An industry veteran challenges the Christian retail industry to make books the central product at the core of its mission.**

By Dick Malone

Christian products have become big business, and Christian retailers are increasingly aware of the fact that they no longer have a corner on the market.

A recent *Forbes* magazine article detailed how much of the mainstream business world has taken notice and is working to get a piece of the action. Price Clubs and Wal-Mart sell best sellers at close to most CBA store costs, or even below. Books-a-Million stores have Christian book & Bible sections that rival or exceed many CBA stores (4,600 adult book titles by a recent count in one store). Barnes & Noble, Borders and Hastings all have Christian book sections that carry between 1,500 and 3,000 adult titles.

Internet stores like Amazon, Barnes & Noble.com and Christianbook.com set the ultimate standard for selection and

convenience, making it possible to order any book from any location if you have access to a computer, and have it show up at your door 2-4 days later--with free freight if you order more than \$25.

Publishers are making their bestsellers available to any kind of retail establishment that is willing to carry them. *Publisher's Weekly* recently reported that one bookseller in Indiana shut down saying that when he saw bestselling books for sale in gas stations, he knew it was time to get out of the business.

Surely, similar thoughts are going through the minds of many Christian retailers these days. But most of us are still committed to the mission, and therefore, want the business to succeed. So how then do we compete?

From talking with sales reps and retailers alike, I'm convinced that one of the primary reasons many Christian stores are struggling to compete now is that they are not being competitive in their book selection. It's a serious problem that seems to have four main factors.

## **Books have lost their central place in the mission.**

While "lifestyle" products are necessary, they should be seen as more peripheral, not central. Books need to be brought back to

the central place of the mission of the stores. That only 7 out of the top 20 selling items for one of the catalog groups last year were books is not a good trend. As an industry we need to vigorously work to change it. Books should be at the core of our mission.

In becoming “Christian retailers” too many people have quit being serious Christian booksellers. Case in point: Zondervan research recently revealed that Borders stores typically have 50% of their core titles in stock, while many CBA stores have only about 35%. How can we be seen as decent booksellers or retailers for that matter, if we aren’t doing a good job of stocking the most important books of one of the biggest publishers?

We also have an added ministry motivation to promote the reading and study of Christian books. Reading Christian books is nothing short of a key element in growing one’s faith and the process of spiritual formation. We should be doing all we can with walk-in customers and churches to promote spiritual growth through the reading of Christian books. Customers who are growing spiritually will be our best book customers.

Stores should also be taking a lead in helping to identify and support authors like Francis Schaeffer, who in the 1970s had a

profound affect on how many of us thought about the surrounding culture. But we haven’t worked hard enough at being ambassadors and evangelists for books. We’ve let the dumbing down world squeeze us into its fluff mold.

The Christian message contained in the books we sell is one of hope and joy. Christian books have answers to the biggest problems we face. We should see ourselves as having a cultural and spiritual mandate to get people reading books. We should be helping to shape the culture rather than just reflecting it.

Oprah has made an enormous impact getting people to read with her book club. Her selections normally sell over 1.5M. Collectively several hundred committed stores should be able to impact the Christian community as well.

### **Stores have lost sight of the breadth of their customers.**

Many book buyers seem to only want tried-and-true authors that they can be absolutely confident will sell. Some are largely limiting their new title book buying decisions to those titles that are being supported in different catalogs.

Stores seem to be losing the ability to tailor their inventory to their potential customers; they aren’t buying for their own individual

book markets. Ironically, this trend means they are giving away one of the biggest advantages they should have over the trade chains. The chains buy from a central office with little or no regard for the make up of a given community.

Frankly this “safe” buying pattern has meant many Christian stores have become rather bland and uninteresting to many Christian book readers. These book people just don’t expect to find much that is interesting books in Christian bookstores. So they have switched to Barnes & Noble, Borders, or Books-A-Million.

Many of these customers used to be or could have been CBA store customers. Others have also made the switch to the Internet where they can get it all—choice with discounted prices. One example that demonstrates this problem is in the sale of books on the “emergent” church movement. Publishers are finding a great audience on the Internet, while they have generally found those books difficult to sell to many stores.

The downside of only concentrating on the catalog titles is that most of the competition will have those books too. Identifying those titles that fit your specific market is one of the best ways to distinguish yourself competitively.

### **Christian Retailers have not committed to the broad selection of books necessary to be good specialty retailers**

Borders, Books-A-Million & Barnes & Noble have had tremendous growth in Christian book sales at the same time that many CBA stores have been flat in their sales. To a large extent we have let it happen because of our lack of commitment to a broad selection of books.

People want selection. Consumer research analyst Britt Beamer’s report to CBA laid that out clearly in his 1998 CBA Marketing Strategies Report. The 2002 CBA Future Trends Report made essentially the same argument. Christian retailing is specialty retailing. That means we should be the experts and specialists in Christian books in a way that general trade bookstores can’t be. We should know and stock the best selection of books on a wide variety of topics that are of interest to Christians.

We should have the best selection of Christian books the same way a camping or outfitters store will always have a better selection of tents and sleeping bags than a K-mart or Target in its camping department. It doesn’t do us a whole lot of good to be the experts if the books aren’t on our shelves and the Barnes & Noble down the street has more Christian books

than we do. If we don't make use of the advantage that should be ours by having a superior selection, we shouldn't be surprised that our foot traffic is down.

Beemer says in his report, "Small niche players only survive when their product selection is not brought into question. Any doubt as to the superior selection available from the specialty retailer spells certain retail death."

**Retailers are scared of upsetting a small minority of their customers.**

It seems easy just to carry the "safe" product. Who would ever object to a Max Lucado book or a Chuck Swindoll title? Too often stores are afraid of losing a customer because he or she might see something in the store that doesn't match their expectations for one reason or another.

The problem with stocking the books only these people want is that many Christians have a growing expectation for more variety now. This is particularly true for Christians who grew up in typical evangelical churches and have lately gotten more interested in reading in areas that are more commonly associated with the liturgical traditions of the church. This "Canterbury Trail" phenomenon has been

well documented, yet stores have not adjusted their buying and stocking strategies to account for it.

Many authors who made the list of favorite authors in a recent *Christianity Today* survey are not even stocked by many Christian bookstores. Henri Nouwen, for instance, demonstrated a freshness and clarity of thought and a passion for the faith for a whole generation, yet his books are hardly stocked in CBA stores according to recent STATS data.

Why? Probably because he was a Roman Catholic, even though most of his writing is on more general topics of ministry and spirituality.

Too many Christian bookstores seem to have decided that they are comfortable serving only a part of the church market. Some may have decided that their personal statement of faith or their particular church's statement of faith should form the operating selection grid for what they are willing to carry.

Some stores are unwilling to carry books from mainline denominational publishers or Catholic publishers, even though their communities may be dominated by both kinds of churches. Others are reluctant to carry books for the African American market, even though the black churches in

an area may be some of the strongest.

And there is still a negative attitude on the part of some towards the whole charismatic market--even though charismatics, statistically, are some of the best book buyers and many charismatically oriented authors—such as Jack Hayford--have proven themselves to be very solid theologically over the years.

Managers and owners operating these under these kinds of policies are limiting their ability to reach out to significant portions of the church market in their own communities. Consequently, they are losing what should be their competitive advantage over the big trade stores.

Fortunately there are also good examples of stores who do stock more broadly--and consequently have succeeded in serving more of their whole Christian market. Jo Panter in Traverse City, Michigan; Ron Evans in Philadelphia; Parables in Omaha, the Berean stores; the Mardel stores, and the Logos stores are all successfully serving a broader spectrum of the Christian market.

Most of us in this business got into it at least at some point with a sense of mission. I believe it's time to renew that purpose with a vision for serving the whole church, not just a part of it. After all, we're part of

the Christian Booksellers Association--not the Baptist or the Presbyterian Booksellers Association.

The fact that God uses the written word to communicate His revelation to mankind should make us place the highest value on books next to Bibles as the most important products we sell. If we are at all ministry oriented or business minded, we cannot continue to neglect their significance.

We will compete most effectively by being the best booksellers we can be.

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**About the Author—Dick Malone** is a book lover and V-P Product Purchasing for Riverside Distributors. Before that he did the same job for Spring Arbor for over 20years. He has an M-Div from Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL and has spent his whole career spent in Christian retailing and wholesaling .

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**Sidebar 1:**


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How to be a better bookseller:

- Get involved in the receiving process, so you are acquainted with the new titles as they come in.
- Take books home at night.
- Read a lot of table of contents, first chapters, dust jackets, and covers.
- Buy not just for your interests or from your perspective –take into account your own local market.
- Get acquainted with a percentage of pastors in your community.
- Make use of tools like core lists and 80/20 reports
- Hire people from church traditions other than your own.

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**Sidebar #2:**


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Dealing with the doubtful

If some of your customers question your policy in stocking titles they might not agree with, you could explain your policy by sharing with them a mission statement like this:

“We seek to represent historic orthodox

Christianity, within whose framework there is much diversity. We believe that no single tradition within the Christian faith has stated all the answers perfectly. Good Christians have disagreed on many secondary issues and will probably continue to do so. We want to be known as a Christian store that represents the many streams of orthodox Christianity.

Here are some well-established principles that we believe in and practice:

- Beliefs matter, but not all beliefs matter equally.
- In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity.
- It is most important that Christians lead with love during disagreements.
- The church is like a big family. There are probably some members who are a little strange, but they are still family, and as such, have a place at the table of ideas.”

With these principles in mind, we carry a wide variety of books written by Christians that represent several points of view on many subjects that are of interest to believers.

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**Sidebar # 3**

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**Essential books for booksellers to read:**

- Richard Foster – Streams of Living Water, Harper Collins
- Frank Mead, Handbook to Denominations, Abingdon
- Roger Olsen, Mosaic of Christian Belief, IV Press
- Alan Schreck, Catholic & Christian, Servant Publications
- Al Kresta, Why Do Catholics Genuflect, Servant Publications