

# PRWEEK

## Media Gets Comfortable With Faith

David Ward - 6 Sep 2004

**Because of the recent success of faith-based books and films, many media outlets have increased the scope of their coverage of religious topics and issues.**

From cover stories by national newsweeklies on best-selling faith-based authors, to the foreign policy debate on whether the struggle in the Middle East is really a holy war, religion, once a taboo subject, is seemingly everywhere in the media these days. "Media interest in religion and specifically Christian products, authors, and artists has increased profoundly in the past three years," says Jana Muntsinger, president of McClure/Muntsinger Public Relations. "The authors that used to be only in the religion section are now getting in the entertainment section or the books page." Some of this may be attributable to a post-9/11 search for spirituality among many Americans, but it also may be an acknowledgement by the media of the economic clout of people living faith-based lives. According to the CBA, formerly the Christian Booksellers Association, evangelical Christians alone spend \$4.2 billion annually on faith-based products and services. "People who've identified themselves as Christian have a lot of money and buy a lot of books," says Andy Butcher, editor of trade title *Christian Retailing*. Because of this, Butcher adds, many traditional retailers have moved into Christian products, saying one of the bigger stories he's following is the number of Christian-themed stores struggling as a result of Wal-Mart and other mass merchants selling faith-based books and DVDs. This faith-based buying power is impacting overall media coverage in a good way, says Muntsinger, adding, "Many papers have long had strong religion and values sections, and now those sections are getting more advertising and larger page counts."

### Pop culture's impact

The Rev. John Molyneaux, editor of *US Catholic*, also cites the influence of popular culture, saying, "Thanks to *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code*, I think religion is being discussed more in the media, and that's not really bad." It's important to note this isn't strictly a Christian phenomenon. Singer Madonna's very public embrace of Kabbalah has triggered a flood of interest in that spiritual movement, says Andy Behrman, PR director at the California-based Kabbalah Centre. Behrman says the nonprofit center has done little media outreach, though he quickly adds, "We do have to do quite a bit of media education. People come to Kabbalah, and they know very little about it - and what they do know is that Madonna wears a red string." But at the very least, the general-interest media seem to be growing more comfortable with at least exploring religious angles to many stories. Molyneaux says that in addition to aggressively looking into the sexual-abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, religious-themed publications and the general press are studying how faith will impact the

positions taken by politicians and voters in the upcoming election. Laura McGowan, principal of Chicago-based Laura McGowan Communications, says she had success pitching faith-based leadership and integrity stories to the business press, as well as the Christian-themed Mothers of Preschoolers to parenting and family writers. "Faith-based' is a very widely used term, and it covers a lot of subjects," she says. That's not to say that mainstream media are writing up every religious trend. Anita Crawford, founder of **Springboard Entertainment**, which handles publicity and marketing for Christian recording acts, says music critics will write about her clients, but adds, "I believe that it's harder for a Christian artist to get coverage. They're the only ones in the entertainment industry who are categorized based on the content of their lyrics and not the style of their music."

## **Faith-based lifestyle titles**

Perhaps the most encouraging long-term trend for religious media can be seen in lifestyle titles, such as *Today's Christian Woman* and *Jewish Woman*. *Jewish Woman* editor Susan Tomchin says while her magazine focuses on Jewish culture, the emphasis is more on news you can use and features than on theological discussions. "We try to show how you can use aspects of the Jewish tradition to add meaning to your own life, but without being doctrinaire," she explains. Muntsinger notes that most traditional PR tools can be used when pitching a faith-based story, but says there are the occasional subtle differences, such as in media training. "Most of the authors we represent are pastors, so they're very well-spoken but sometimes they don't know how to speak in brevity, so that's what we work on a lot," she explains. **Pitching... religion**

- Faith-based books, such as 'The Purpose Driven Life,' are mega-best sellers, so point out that economic clout when pitching general-interest reporters
- When pitching a faith-based story, don't just pitch the religion and ethics section. Many media outlets are far more willing to have a religious angle in their coverage of lifestyle and other categories
- Many faith-based authors and speakers are used to public appearances, but still may need media training to help them deliver a concise message