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The Strategic Role of the Publisher
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First I wish to thank the organizers for the invitation to participate in this conference which is billed as one for “Mission-driven Non-profit Book publishers”. I suppose my qualification to speak is because I had the opportunity to head an organization which probably fell into the category of being mission-driven and non-profit.

The organization I know best is a health organization, and it was not only mission driven, but results driven as well and my attention to publishing in such an organization derives from much of my own personal credo and belief system as much as from a perception of the managerial necessities. I had been responsible for sections of public organizations all my professional life, but some ten years ago I assumed the responsibility as head of the entire organization, and I speak this evening with the humility of believing that my experience there might be of some interest to a group that is already committed to publishing. But I have found that there is not always identity of appreciation of the role of publishers and publishing even in organizations that on the face of it have similar missions.

I have said often that one of my guiding principles in management stems from a statement attributed to one of the greatest entrepreneurs of all time –Alfred P. Sloan who founded General electric and who is alleged to have said that the secret of success in any enterprise is to “know your public and know your product”.

What was the public with which I was concerned? Or in more modern parlance, who were the primary stake holders. I could put them into various categories depending on the nearness of their contact with us, but in a real sense, the public was all the people of the Americas as almost by definition, everyone has an interest in health and it is not an overstatement to say that health and personal autonomy are the most basic of human desiderata.

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What is the product that was needed to satisfy or influence our publics? I came to the conclusion that in our organization, it was our technical cooperation that was that product, and I would submit that that is the case with most non-profit organizations. But technical cooperation needs to be defined with more precision, and in defining it I was emphatic that the dissemination of information had to be one of the critical elements or tools of that cooperation.

I have always been seized of the power of information to change the world and in my first address on the day I was elected director of PAHO, I said the following

“We will traffic in information and I described information as the only tool that would relieve the burden of the poor who paid for their ignorance with the coin of suffering”.

I have also always believed that information represents the end product of transmuting data almost in the sense that the ancient alchemists used the word.

But if our information fell in the forest of words and did not make a sound, this would defeat the whole purpose of the exercise and bring our alchemists into disrepute. Thus I envisaged various loci with responsibility for making our information public. There are many possible loci for making information public, but there is only one for publishing and in any organization there has to be a locus for publishing, whose function goes beyond the notion of simply disseminating information. In this day and age with such facility for generating data and with so many methods available for having such data spread around often wantonly and unadvisedly, it is critical to identify and specify the publishing function. It is critical to identify a locus that is responsible if not exclusively, but definitely primarily for establishing a brand for certain of the information generated and ensuring its publication, and make it understood that publishing is a very special aspect of the dissemination of information.

I had the concept that that locus, that office of publishing had to discharge certain peculiar functions. It had to be more than a collector of data or even information produced by others. It had to have the capacity to identify, verify, mold and then disseminate the product after and only after that process had been completed. No locus or office of publication, no publisher is worthy of the name if there is not value added after the primary material is received. I know that in this audience I do not have to emphasize the importance of this process, but in organizations such as some of the ones I know, it has to be made clear by the publisher and perhaps more importantly by the chief executive officer that there is a fundamental difference between the collection, printing and dissemination of material and publishing.

In organizations such as ours that prided themselves on being professional, there is an additional responsibility on the part of the publisher to ensure the technical accuracy of the material published. It is not that the commercial publishers do not have that responsibility as well, but it is doubly important in organization in which publishing is not the principal focus. This is not a paradox. Commercial publishers may have other

lines of products in which technical accuracy is not of such fundamental importance and whose reputation may not be so severely damaged by the production of material whose technical validity is in question. This does not mean that the publisher has to dominate the whole technical scope of the organization's work, but has to have in place a mechanism for assuring its validity.

The view may be taken that because publishing is not the principal business of the organization or profit is not the main function of the publishing enterprise, there need not be the same rigor in terms of the functions of identifying, verifying, molding and dissemination that I mention above. I would posit the reverse. I would suggest that the professional publisher committed to the mission of the non-profit organization has a great responsibility to demonstrate to the other parts of the organization that this function is a critical one that must be in place for the organization to achieve the results needed to satisfy its publics. This is important not only to satisfy the professional pride of the publisher, but also because that work does truly bring value to the organization's other lines of action.

Marketing is one of the essential functions of publishing and this is often conceived as being strictly related to the published products. It is true that publishing is not complete without the kind of market research and marketing that ensures the widest possible reach of products and particularly that such products reach to appropriate niche. But in the non-profit organizations, the branding and marketing take on another dimension. There is need for branding and marketing of publishing as a critical entity within the organization itself. On occasion I have observed in other places an almost narcissistic approach with so much complacency about the beauty of the product that there is not the aggressive marketing beyond and within the organization. The profitability and survival of the organization does not depend on it, so the publisher does not have to raise the gaze above the umbilicus. That does damage to the organization and to the profession of publishing.

One is often asked whether the growth of electronic dissemination of information will diminish the importance of the publisher. I see that opposite, and my appreciation is based on my very limited knowledge of the history of publishing and having more than a suspicion that publishing is often confused with printing. Publishing antedated printing. The dissemination of Luther's theses and the wide use of Ratdolt's Euclid were facilitated by Gutenberg, and indeed up until the eighteenth century publishing incorporated printing and book selling, but as a discipline it has always been seen as *primus* if not *primus inter pares*. The expansion of printing and bookselling made the function of publishing even more important. And so it will be with the growth of new methods of disseminating information. The role of the assurer of quality will be even greater. The role of adding some value to information will be even more valued. The role of cropping and packaging presentation in an attractive form will be even more widely appreciated.

Ladies and gentlemen, I do not know if I have outlined a strategic role for the publisher, and this may be because I am often uncertain what strategic means. However I

will be rash enough to suggest certain attributes that the publisher in these non-profit organizations might have and what roles might be played internally as well as externally. Internally, the publisher must articulate clearly and frequently the value added by the process of publishing and disabuse many of the notion that publishing and printing are synonymous. The publisher must demonstrate the value of the branding of the transmuted information to the organization. The organization's mission will be facilitated and its desired results more achievable to the extent that its publics see the organization from time to time through the lens of its published material. Of course, even in a non-profit organization, the possibility of profit from a well run publishing enterprise will always be welcome. These will ensure the presence of and respect for the publisher in the organization.

Externally, the principal role has to be one of aggressively marketing products of quality-products that bear the stamp of professionalism through all the phases of the publishing process.

I wish you a successful conference.

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