

Christian Books Still Center Stage at Expolit

While films and music had a higher profile at Expolit 2011 in Miami May 19-24 than in previous years, a recurrent theme among attendees was that Christian literature—the “lit” in Expolit—remained central at the 19th annual event.

Expolit 2011 was held at the newly renovated Miami Airport Convention Center.

“Books are still at the heart of Expolit,” said Cathy Vila, director of marketing at Editorial Portavoz (Kregel). “As a publisher we’re continuing to do well. It’s been a constant, steady increase for the last 10 years,” she said, pointing to the quality of the company’s titles, book covers and editing.

Tito Mantilla, publisher of Portavoz and president of the Spanish Evangelical Publishers Association (SEPA) which represents exhibitors at Expolit, said the success being experienced at his company has been reflected industry wide, both in the U.S. and in Latin America, despite today’s challenging economy.

“From our own experience and talking to other publishers, we’re all doing fine,” he explained. “Most publishers and distributors reported that sales have increased or they’ve maintained what they have. Distribution also continues to increase, and the number of books published in Spanish keeps growing.”

Steve Strang, founder and owner of Florida-based Charisma Media (formerly Strang Communications), said the company’s Spanish imprint, Casa Creación, saw a 15-percent growth in the last year, increasing “slightly faster” than other aspects of the company. The publisher also relaunched a paper version of its magazine, *Vida Cristiana*.

“When I come to Expolit I’m always impressed by people’s passion and excitement,” he said. “There seems to be a lot of optimism. On the English side of the industry there tends to be more apprehension and concern. At Expolit a lot of people seem to be hungry—for ministry reasons, not just business reasons.”

Strang attributes the continued growth of Casa Creación to “reaping the rewards of hard years of toil.”

Tessie DeVore, executive vice president of Charisma Media’s book group Charisma House, has built a great team. “We’ve had a vision to publish original Spanish manuscripts which a lot of the other publishers haven’t done—at least not to the same degree—instead, translating mostly best-selling English books into Spanish. I’m proud of our team. We’re optimistic about the future!”

Lydia Morales, executive director of Casa Creación, said the imprint is committed to publishing about eight original Spanish titles per year—20 percent of its output—despite the risk of lower sales since many of the authors are not well known.

The future of Expolit appears to be on a solid footing with an enthusiastic response from exhibitors as well as the general public. “There was a 13-percent increase in overall Expolit registrations and all 450 booth spaces were sold,” said Marie Tamayo, vice president of Expolit programming and promotions. “It was also good to see a number of new exhibitors at Expolit again this year.”

The presence of Christian films and music at Expolit 2011 was enhanced by the introduction of ExpoCinema with daily screenings of mostly original, Spanish-language films, and by hosting the eighth-annual ARPA Music Awards for the first time.

There was a packed house at the newly renovated Miami Airport

Conference Center the night of Monday, May 23, for a prescreening of *Courageous (Valientes)*, generating cheers and many tears from the audience throughout the film even though it was shown in English without Spanish subtitles. Produced by the makers of *Fireproof (Prueba de fuego)* and *Facing the Giants (Enfrentando a los gigantes)*, the film is set to release in the U.S. on Sept. 30. The DVD in eight major languages, including Spanish, will release in February 2012.

Jim Cook, vice president of international sales at B&H Publishing Group and vice president of SEPA, said his company will publish various books and materials related to *Valientes*. He expects this will continue to boost sales of the company's Spanish-language products. B&H has seen its Spanish sales double in the last three years.

Vidas valientes (Courageous Living), a book from B&H that contains a series of sermons on fatherhood, is being distributed to churches to promote the film. A kit with a student book and clips of the movie will be available when the movie releases in September.

"The books that are the equivalent of *Love Dare (El desafío del amor)*, *La resolución para hombres (The Resolution for Men)* and *La resolución para mujeres (The Resolution for Women)*, will also release in September," added Cook.

The ARPA Awards had the feel of a secular awards ceremony with black limousines and SUVs dropping off musicians for a red-carpet entrance to the Miami Airport Conference Center on Saturday, May 21. The top winner was Jesús Adrián Romero who captured awards for Best Masculine Vocal Album, Best Album by a Singer/Songwriter and Best Song with Participating Artists. Danilo Montero garnered awards for Album of the Year and Producer of the Year, and Tercer Cielo had Song of the Year. [Click here](#) for a complete list of winners.

Despite the presence of the ARPA awards, Expolit Executive

Director David Ecklebarger said the reduced number of music representatives at Expolit was “noticeable” as the industry continues to face challenges such as illegal downloading and copying, distribution problems and increasing costs.

Rosalia Najri, a SEPA board member who owns the Emmanuel chain of Christian bookstores in the Dominican Republic, said sales have been down, forcing her to close one of the stores. “But the sales of CDs has dropped the most—75 percent,” she said, pointing to downloading as having the biggest impact on this aspect of the industry. “We’ve decided to limit the sales of music CDs to 20 different singers.”

E-books are also changing the publishing scene, but in a deal offered to all SEPA members by Editorial Unilit, her stores are selling e-books from the publisher online, receiving a commission for each sale. “Unilit is the only publisher doing that,” she said.

Meanwhile, Ecklebarger said retail sales at Unilit, where he serves as president, have been “very good,” he explained. “There’s a renewed optimism among the distributors. Sales are up and doing well, although we’re not back up to our peak of a few years ago.”

He added that the Spanish Christian book industry was “never hit as hard in Latin America as it was in the U.S. Yes, we lost sales and had to adjust, but most of the losses for many of us were in the U.S. Sales have held steady or increased in Latin America. For those of us who saw a significant reduction of sales, it’s been mostly in the U.S., especially in the general (secular) market.”

Expolit also offered a cornucopia of concerts and training opportunities, ranging from a women’s conference with speakers such as Holly Wagner and Shannon Ethridge to seminars on a variety of topics designed for booksellers, communicators, distributors and many others.

Overall, Mantilla said Expolit was “great as usual,” giving publishers an opportunity to display their new products and meet one-on-one with distributors from across Latin America. However, he said the industry continues to face numerous challenges.

“The book industry these days is in a process of change and transformation,” he said at the SEPA awards banquet Sunday, May 22. “Perhaps the electronic book is the most immediate challenge in the coming years. We can see this as a problem, or we can view it as an opportunity to help the industry reach its full potential. Only those organizations that desire to seize these opportunities will be successful in making an impact on the industry in the future.”