

The Middle East Academic Book Market a personal overview

Bill Kennedy is a Director of Avicenna Partnership Ltd that represents academic, professional, reference and scholarly publishers seeking Middle East and North Africa markets. Bill has been doing business in the region for many years and is happy to share his experience with our Al Kitab al Arabi readers:

It's perhaps not entirely surprising that perspectives of the Middle East market for books can often be influenced, governed or prejudiced by media coverage of the 'hot spots' – seldom encouraging news. This has been especially true since the 'Arab Awakening' in January 2011, developed momentum across many countries, was met with brutal repression in some and will ultimately change the geo-politics of the region permanently.

Furthermore, as a regional market which accounts for around only 7% (US\$ 180 Millions 1) of book sales exported from the UK and around 2.5% (US\$ 55Millions 2) of book sales exported from the USA only, attention to developing sales to the Middle East market is arguably de-emphasised in relation to other parts of the global market for books. Unlocking the sales potential in the Middle East market is sometimes viewed as disproportionately problematic to the value of sales generated. In reality, the Middle East like many other regional markets, has features which are uniquely different to other regions, many of which themselves have their own, individual characteristics. The Middle East IS a worthwhile, growing market where books are treated, traded and regarded with respect and as products which possess a significant intrinsic value.

Many different market characteristics – one goal: education!

Whilst the widely held perspective of the Middle East as a market for publishers is as one geographical area sharing a common language, the market characteristics of the countries which it comprises are as diverse as any geographical area on the planet – demographics create this diversity. There are populous but comparatively poor countries and countries blessed with great wealth with comparatively low population numbers. At one end of the spectrum, Egypt is population-rich (in excess of 80 million people) but comparatively poor (per capita income US\$ 1,570/year 3), Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are comparatively cash-rich with relatively low populations. Bounded by these extremes, there are countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria and others, each possessing characteristic differences. All, no matter where on this spectrum they are, value books as instruments to entertain, inform and, most especially - to educate.

Three features common to all countries which comprise the Middle East market and of special interest to the publishing companies selling materials in English to the market are;



1. The dominance of English as THE second language to learn and use.
2. The fact that education has been, is now and is likely to remain a priority.
3. Price sensitivity, especially on textbooks and often acute, is an issue which gives rise to problems protecting intellectual property, predominantly in the populous/poor countries.

Although other languages are spoken in the Middle East and Arabic in written form is common to most and is subject to only to small regional variation in its spoken form, English is unquestionably the second language of both choice and necessity. This is especially true with regard to educational and academic textbooks, professional, reference and scholarly titles and, self-evidently, books and non-print media to help learners up-skill in the English Language. English is the dominant second language not only because it is the most important language within science, technology, and social sciences but also, because it provides a common platform for business.

The higher education landscape

Well-established, mature institutions such as the American Universities of Beirut and Cairo compare favourably with equally prestigious institutions in 'the West'. Newer, well-endowed private and publicly funded institutions throughout the region have enrolments growing both in number and quality. Partnerships with UK, European, and other international institutions have led to the development of a further breed of academic institution, many of which are

located within dedicated academic zones or 'cities'. Partnerships and alliances with foreign institutions not only allows for accreditation of academic qualifications, but it also imposes a much-needed discipline in terms of respect for intellectual property. Well-endowed libraries often find themselves in a paradox having handsome budgets to spend on acquisitions but lack the funding to self-process the book into 'shelf-ready' form. Hence, in the absence of companies locally with the capability to service library acquisitions, libraries use international jobbers who deliver their purchases in shelf-ready form.

Sales opportunities and prospects exist for publishers of text, academic, professional, reference and scholarly books, but so does the need to be acutely aware of inherent and, in some cases, systemic problems. Price sensitivity is a factor in the academic textbook sector caused by students themselves being unable to pay the prices charged in the more mature markets and this creates an environment where photocopying is done beyond the 'fair dealing' allowed under international copyright legislation. It also gives rise to piracy locally and parallel importing of academic textbooks from Asia,. Steps have been taken to reduce this by professional bodies in the USA, UK and in the region but, territorial integrity and copyright infringement are likely to remain significant problems, with the best hope being to reduce rather than eliminate such issues. Steps are being taken to address this more effectively by combining the efforts of Arabic-language publishers and English-language publishers to address copyright infringement and protect intellectual property.



A wide range of distribution channels

Distribution channels in the Middle East vary in nature, substance and scale as much as they vary in Western markets – owner-managed retail bookstores (independents), wholesalers, chain stores, specialist distributors, strong brand franchisees, etc.

The GCC countries are an interesting case in this respect. Jashanmal is a long-established department chain store throughout the GCC countries, has many dedicated bookstores branded under their name with more being opened. Magrudys is an independent chain. Borders have a franchisee with new bookstores rolling out in carefully selected locations. Kinokuniya (Japan) opened a large (68,000 sq ft) new store in October 2008 in the Dubai Mall. Jarir (Saudi Arabia) are a large, professionally-run retail establishment selling large numbers of books alongside varied products they sell. The two regional Virgin Megastores franchises have stores located in many countries throughout the Middle East, all of which have books selling as a healthy and growing proportion of total sales, in Beirut and Dubai (Ciel SARL). Yet, throughout GCC countries and the rest of the region there are many, successful owner-managed, professionally run bookselling companies surviving and thriving on book sales from the markets they serve.

Opportunities for digital content

The appeal of e-books was late to catch on in the Middle East and is evident mostly in the academic, professional and reference markets rather than the trade market. In some countries there is a reluctance to use anything other than print copies. This is due to any one or a combination of the following reasons and perhaps others; (i) the traditional desire for a physical/tangible product keeps print as a preferred medium, (ii) lack of disposable income for e-book readers and e-book acquisitions and (iii) an inadequate, 'clunky' or overly protected electronic infrastructure in some countries.

There are considerable variances from country to country and in some, electronic resources, their use and procurement are considerable but, predominantly as educational resources through academic/professional libraries. As the availability and demand for e-textbooks for students grows in the more mature markets, so does the print-run of academic print textbooks diminish. Consequentially impacting through increased unit costs of production The Middle East market, like many developing markets and publishers seeking to sell to these are exposed to conflicting pressures of increased costs and price-sensitivity which in turn, is likely to increase the level of copyright infringement. Copyright infringement for e-books is already considerable. Although this is a global problem, the combination which exists in the Middle East of a tech-savvy consumer and, either a low



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level of awareness of laws governing intellectual property or a wilful disregard of these, adds further pressure to copyright protection and the sustainability of developing book sales.

Professional local publishing partners are out there

Publishing partnerships with companies which seek to acquire licences and rights are often a productive and profitable way to sell to the market. Projects such as Kalima, bodies such as the Al Maktoum Foundation and the Qatar Foundation help fund and forge the growing synergy between the English and Arabic languages in publishing. The book fairs throughout the region, even those which are predominantly events arranged as selling events, also present opportunities to identify, pursue and develop publishing partnerships. Major book fairs take place annually in Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Kuwait, Sharjah, Tehran and other locations, each possessing their own individual characteristics and potential for realising sales and partnerships.

There are significant cultural, social and religious sensitivities which must be borne in mind when selling to and/or publishing for the Middle East market, arguably more than there are for some other markets. Strategic partnerships with local distribution channels and publishers greatly enhance both an understanding of these and the mutual benefits of sales success.

As with all markets for books, publishers face challenges and difficulties in selling product or transacting rights with Middle East customers. However, the challenges and difficulties faced by Middle East distribution channels and publishers are no less demanding, and need to be understood. Through a shared commercial objective of business to be transacted to mutual benefit, rising to face and overcoming these challenges is realistically achievable and rewarding. Whilst it may also be true in other markets, nowhere on the planet is it more true than in the Middle East that, 'people do business with people'. Amongst the most fruitful partnerships and business relationships are those which are founded in personal

relationships many of which develop into enduring friendships. Of the marketing which is carried out to develop sustainable sales in the Middle East, relationship marketing is as critical as any.

That the challenges in the Middle East are perhaps more demanding than many other markets is up for discussion and influenced by judgement rather than fact. For the Middle East to become a rewarding and remunerative market for book publishers, entry requires either an understanding of the features, complexities and sensitivities of the region or a strategic alliance with partners who possess this understanding. Notwithstanding the challenges of the Middle East, development of sustainable sales growth has been achieved by many publishers, can and will accrue for those yet to explore its possibilities. Communication with the institutions, distribution channels and organisers of local trade events is critical to that understanding, no more than the market deserves and, having defined the differences between the Middle East and other markets. It's not so very different to other markets in one, important ground rule, more true in the Middle East than most other markets ... people do business with people.

1. Source - UK Government DTI, based on HM Customs and Excise tariff and trade data, converted at GB£ 1.00 = US\$ 1.50
2. Source - tariff and trade data from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the U.S. International Trade Commission.
3. Source – Economist Intelligence Unit.

The Top 15 buyers

Mahmoud Fouda is Managing Owner of The Middle East Readers Information Center, MERIC, a specialized distributor of academic books, journals and e-resources. His company is based in Egypt. He shares his list of the top 15 buyers:

- Cairo University, Egypt
- Alexandria University, Egypt
- King Saud University, KSA
- King Abdulaziz University, KSA
- King Fahd University for Petroleum & Mineral Resources, KSA
- Kuwait University, Kuwait
- Qatar University, Qatar
- Al-Fateh University, Libya
- Omar Al-Mokhtar University, Libya
- United Arab Emirates University, UAE
- Qaboos University, Oman
- Nizwa University, Oman
- Bahrain University, Bahrain
- Sudan University for Science & Technology, Sudan
- Al-Neelein University, Sudan

Bill Kennedy is a Director of Avicenna Partnership Ltd, a UK company which provides marketing, promotion and sales solutions through exclusive representation agreements with academic, professional, reference and scholarly publishers seeking to develop sustainable sales growth for print and e-resources in Middle East and North Africa markets, Cyprus, Greece, Iran, Malta, Sudan and Turkey.

