

VITAL SIGNS

Gatekeeper guidelines

How stores keep an eye on the content they offer and what worries them

An industry survey by *Christian Retailing*

» BY JIM SEYBERT

Just as you won't find Snickers bars in health food stores nor lawn chairs for sale in a Men's Warehouse, so Christian retail stores take steps to make sure the products they stock match customer's expectations and needs.

But knowing which items to carry can be a challenge, as we found in our latest Vital Signs survey.

Because opinions of content are frequently seen differently by men and women, or by those in different age groups, we asked participants to identify their gender and age group.

The gender split was nearly even—49% men and 51% women. Women in the survey tended to be slightly older, with 52% aged 51 or more compared to 42% of men.

CONTROLLERS

Content decisions in most stores lie with the owner or manager in for-profit stores and the manager or clerical leader in church stores. Only 5% of respondents had any type of written policy stating exactly what content would get a book pulled. There was a review committee in place at about one in four stores that decides the fate of products thought to be too controversial.

COMPLAINTS

Most retailers make content decisions on a product-by-product basis, but there are some common red flags:

Eight in 10 will not stock fiction that

uses "hard profanity" and four in 10 will not sell Christian novels that contain "mild cursing."

Fictional characters using tobacco products or drinking alcohol will get a book pulled in 25% of stores, while half will not sell novels depicting "vivid descriptions of violence."

"Tolerance of gay and lesbian lifestyles" and "advocacy for Universalism" will keep nonfiction books off the shelves in eight out of 10 stores, as will books that "include Eastern or New Age thought" without criticism.

One in three stores won't carry books that explain biblical miracles in scientific terms (35%), and less than half prohibit sales of books that use "non-canonical writings (without censure)."

CONFLICTS

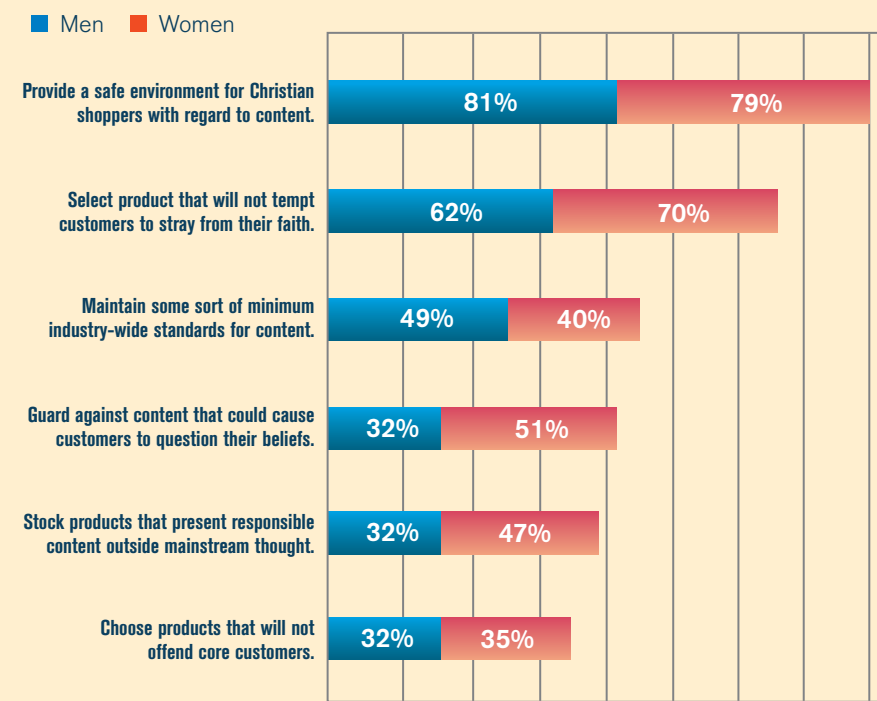
Retailers said that they handle customer complaints about product content in a variety of ways. In a majority of the specific instances reported in the survey, the product remained in inventory after the complaint was filed.

CONCERNS

The majority (80%) of Christian retailers felt that they have a responsibility to operate as "a safe environment for Christian shoppers with regard to content," and two-thirds (66%) saw their role as one that protects customers by selecting "product that will not tempt (Christians) to stray from their faith."

More than half (54%) of respondents told us that they had pulled a product from their shelves with the past 12 months.

Retailers' responsibilities | Christian stores should:



Among the most common grounds were:

- questionable language
- doctrinally unsound
- author or artist who had fallen
- sexual descriptions
- other controversial content

CAUTIONS

Shoppers in 55% of stores in our survey will find stickers attached to certain products—mostly books and music—that the store feels should be handled carefully. Some managers require frontline staff to

point out these "content warning stickers" or other types of content alert attached to certain products when customers reach the checkout counter.

Some stores reported placing selected topics and categories in specially marked sections.

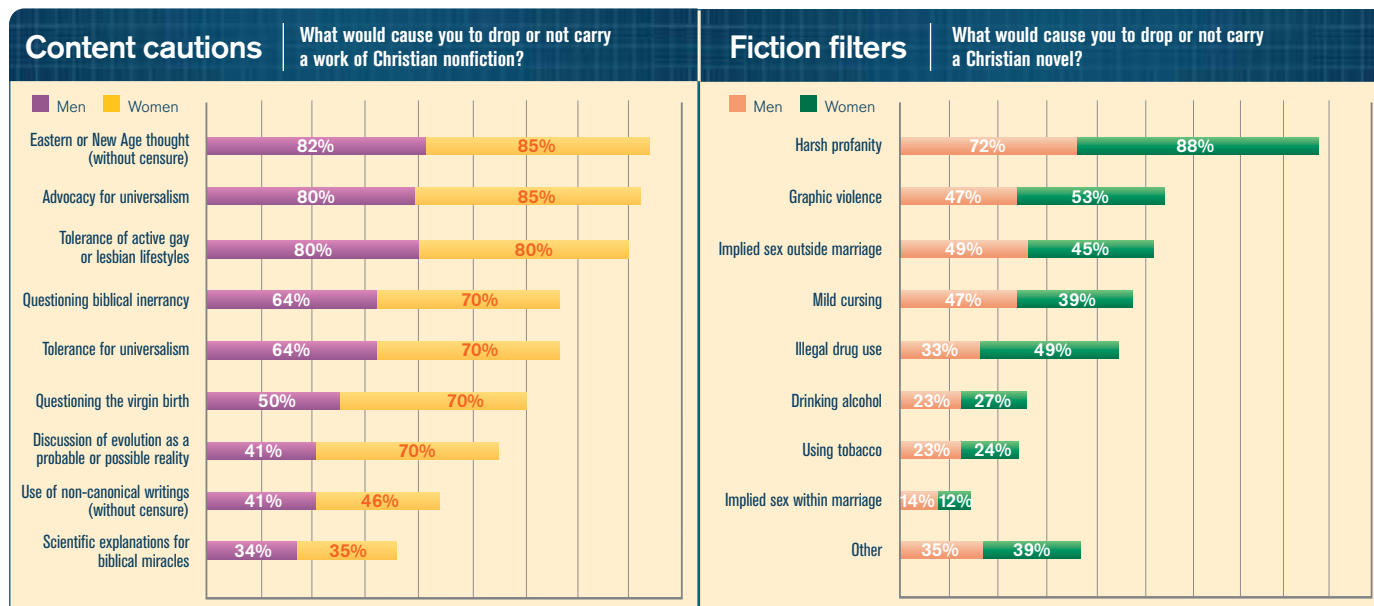
The most notable of these segregations were special "Catholic" and "Charismatic" sections. A few stores also had a "Contemporary Issues" section where books on controversial topics are displayed.

CONVERSATIONS

In light of our findings, here are some questions you can use to start a dialogue with other retailers on issues of content:

- Should stores have written policies regarding content they will not carry?
- How do you train your frontline team to handle controversial products?
- When someone complains about a product and you don't remove it, do they stop shopping at your store?

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This Vital Signs survey was conducted online in April 2011 among readers of Christian Retailing's Christian Retailing Update news service. Of 160 respondents, 103 were retailers. Vital Signs is a joint project of Christian Retailing and Jim Seybert, who are solely responsible for its content.

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WHAT DO YOU THINK?
 ...of the findings and comments?
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