Isolezwe shows how it's done in ABC results

By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

6 Sep 2012

What a contrast in reaction I got recently - from Media24 and Independent Newspapers on the one hand and Avusa on the other - to request for more information on titles that showed an increase in single-copy sales in the most recent ABC circulation results.

I was wanting to find out the backstories of the clutch of SA newspapers that rose or held steady in the second quarter of this year.

Single-copy sales figures are viewed by many as the real deal when it comes to gauging the health of a title as trends up or down tend to happen here first - before subscriptions.

While most papers in SA are facing sustained circulation decline, those that rose in single-copy sales in Q2 2012 included:

- The *Sunday Times* (owned by Avusa), now at 253 121 compared with 249 168 in the second quarter of 2011.
- Publishing phenomenon *Isolezwe* (owned by Independent Newspapers) is now at 112 648 single-copy sales compared with 107 143 in 2011. *Isolezwe ngeSonto* (the Sunday edition) is at 89 534 compared with 80 120 in the second quarter of 2011. The Saturday edition, *Isolezwe ngoMgqibelo*, has now reached a remarkable 75 934 single-copy sales after launching in August 2011.
- The *Sowetan* (owned by Avusa) is at 89 282 single-copy sales, up from 88 749 in 2011 while sister paper, *The Herald*, in Port Elizabeth is pretty much holding steady. It was at 15 096 single-copy sales in Q2 2012 compared with 15 516 in 2011.
- Media24's Bloemfontein-based daily, *Volksblad*, is also holding steady at 12 103 single-copy sales compared with 12 755 in Q2 2011.

Single-copy sales

While Media24's Tim du Plessis, former *Beeld* editor who now oversees all Afrikaans titles, and Independent Newspapers' Brian Porter, joint GM of KwaZulu-Natal, were happy to chat, Avusa's GM of newspapers and magazines, Mike Tissong, took issue with focusing on single-copy sales.

In an email, he said: "Concern has been raised at the Audit Bureau of Circulations that media reporting on ABC figures has become selectively inaccurate in that writers quote sales of newspapers at shops and street corners, but leave out subscription sales. There is no logic to leaving out subscriptions as these newspapers are paid for by newspaper readers... So when we look at newspaper ABC figures, we have to look at total sales, namely street sales, retail-outlet sales and

subscription sales to get an accurate picture of how many people buy newspapers daily and weekly."

Tissong makes a good point about subscriptions but he seems to be forgetting that the myth of third-party bulking and what is termed PMIE (Print Media in Education, i.e., papers given to schools to aid literacy and education) has long been exploded. (Click here for more information in a previous column of mine but essentially these papers are counted as total circulation so, for example, the *Sunday Times* recorded 26 000 third-party bulk and 25 000 PMIE in Q2 2012.)

Beside the fact that single-copy sales will provide a clue for future trends, it's impossible to compare apples with apples if you're using total circulation when some newspapers do incentivised sales (such as bulking) and some do not or do very little of it.

Media24 abandoned incentivised sales a couple of years ago and Independent Newspapers seems to be turning off it too, with its Western Cape division dropping incentivised sales in the second quarter of this year.

Response on titles showing increases in single-copy sales

Be that as it may, Tissong's response on the Avusa titles that showed a rise in single-copy sales included (my notes in brackets):

"...*Sowetan* has grown sales in the difficult April to June period despite there being many public holidays which are disruptive to newspaper buying patterns. The (total) sale of 98 156 reflects growth quarter on quarter but is less than last year because *Sowetan* management took the decision to remove the costly bulk and PMIE sales which have good social responsibility investment impact but cost a lot of money.

"*Sunday Times*, which has the financial muscle to continue funding PMIE, does so, because it is good to encourage young people to read and learn about the world around them beyond their school subject matter. Its (total) sale of 452 785 keeps it as a market leader. *Sunday Times* will continue to grow in coming months because of the recent launch of the *Sunday Times Express* edition which is a compact version of the *Sunday Times* at a cover price of R9 versus the full body version of the *Sunday Times*, which costs R16. (The *Sunday Times Express* was launched in May and can, according to ABC rules, be counted as *Sunday Times* sales.)

"*The Herald* is holding steady due to its focus on assisting in addressing the education shambles in the Eastern Cape... *The Herald* has a project called the Matric Survival Kit for senior learners and NaliBali for primary schools which newspaper-buying parents really appreciate."

The *Isolezwe* phenomenon

When it comes to the publishing phenomenon of the isiZulu-language *Isolezwe* (which does almost no bulking - less than 10 papers daily on average - or PMIE), Porter is disarmingly frank.

"You know we'd like to say exactly why (we're so successful). We do know to a certain extent but there's a lot of luck in it as well... But the paper really does have the interests of the readers at heart. There's very little politics for one thing and then there's stories such as the maskandi singer dying (and "coming back to life" in February this year). We sold 160 000 copies on one of those (maskandi-singer) issues. The editorial team doesn't pooh-pooh religious beliefs. They treat them with respect... And they're into the stars and the soapies, especially the feel-good stories such as people who have come from nowhere and made good."

On the publishing side, Porter says that even though *Isolezwe* has pretty much got KwaZulu-Natal covered, Independent Newspapers is still trying to find new outlets. However, this is getting harder as it's really only the deep rural areas that aren't getting the paper - and most of these are too expensive to get to.

The amazing thing about *Isolezwe* is that the Saturday edition - which was launched in August last year - has not

cannibalised the Sunday or daily sales. In fact, both Sunday and the daily are up!

Porter says that the company is investigating ways to reach more of the Zulu market but he doesn't want to give away details. He reckons about 170 000 circulation would be a comfortable top-end circ number, beyond which it would become too expensive unless ad rates were hiked considerably.

The publishing team is, however, mindful of not pushing ad rates up too much because of straightened economic times.

"In the old days if your circulation soared, you'd push your rates up but people don't accept that anymore," says Porter, adding that *Isolezwe*'s rates started low as they never envisaged that the paper would take off to the extent that it has and so quickly.

One would have thought that Gauteng is an area ripe for expansion and Porter says *Isolezwe* sells just under 10 000 in the province at the moment.

"We thought it would be more but I think our push into Gauteng is not big enough. We're not putting enough money behind it so that's something we re-looking at and we're looking at a few other areas," he says.

The team's the thing

Media24's Du Plessis, who is also always a pleasure to chat to, says of the Bloemfontein-based *Volksblad*: "It's a wonderful newspaper. It's been under an acting editor since April (since Ainsley Moos transferred to *Sake24*) and they're doing well. That shows you the mark of the team: it's a fantastic team - a close-knit unit. They work together very well and they know their market well, which is the important thing."

Volksblad (which recorded 359 third-party bulk sales and no PMIE in Q2 2012) was also less affected by Media24's Cycad distribution problems, he says.

Du Plessis points out that for the first time in a long time circulation decline of Afrikaans papers was less than the English ones - suggesting that the company has finally overcome the havoc wreaked by Cycad.

"For us, this is an indication that this thing has bottomed out. It was very hard for us to get the message across that this was not because the editors and the publishers didn't know their stuff but that it was because of external problems.

"The problem is - and I think that this goes for just about every newspaper in the world - is that readers that you lose because of bad service or bad distribution or for whatever reason, are very, very difficult to get back... People go to other sources (of news)."

So a sigh of relief from Media24, it seems, but lots of work still to do on trying to build circulation again. And for Independent Newspapers, it's clear that *Isolezwe* is the jewel in the crown - what a wonderful newspaper success in our otherwise grim times.

For more:

- ABC: Second quarter 2012 presentation by Gordon Patterson
- Bizcommunity: *M&G*, *Argus* and *Cape Times* ABC backstories reveal future trends, August 2012
- Bizcommunity: isiZulu papers, *City Press* are the ABC circ winners, May 2012
- Bizcommunity: Set for more growth after 10 years, says *Isolezwe* editor Mazwi Xaba, May 2012
- Bizcommunity: *Volksblad* turns a crucial corner, arrests sales decline, (interview with *Volksblad* editor Ainsley Moos), September 2010

ABOUT GILL MOODIE: @GRUBSTREETSA

Gill Moodie (@grubstreetSA) is a freelance journalist, media commentator and the publisher of Grubstreet (www.grubstreet.co.za). She worked in the print industry in South Africa for titles such as the *Sunday Times* and *Business Day*, and in the UK for Guinness Publishing, before striking out on her own. Email Gill at gill@grubstreet.co.za and follow her on Twitter at @grubstreetSA.

- Media Awards 2012: Never a dull moment - 10 Dec 2012
- Inevitable that Caxton and I would fall out - Alec Hogg - 6 Dec 2012
- EXCLUSIVE: Media24 to close *Sports Illustrated* - 3 Dec 2012
- If used wisely, Twitter can be very wise - 27 Nov 2012
- ABC Q3 figures forecast tough times - 21 Nov 2012

View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: https://www.bizcommunity.com