BIZCOMMUNITY

Catch a wake-up!

By Harry Herber

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The one thing that's certain when talking about anything relating to media is that if you have three people involved in the discussion, you'll get three opinions. Not only three opinions, but, indeed, three opinions that can be objectively rationalised and supported with defined case studies that empirically prove each case.

And it happens worldwide regardless of the size of the economy, technological evolvement, societal make-up or political ideology. So, despite the fact that in last month's column I looked at the *Newsweek* demise and the pretty gloomy outlook for print vehicles, particularly if they are dependent on topical content, there is a silver lining. Or is that a silver lifeline?

With that in mind, it was no surprise when looking at *Ad Age* recently that there were some spectacular performances detailed for a number of big name print brands. What it proves is that nothing is really a foregone conclusion, and that the smarter one works, the sweeter the results.

Just a couple of examples - *Marie Claire* in the US had four record ad-sale months this year. And while magazine sales on the whole are down, *Food Network Magazine* increased sales to a current 1.6 million, with almost 18% growth in the first six months of 2012. Clearly, there is a consumer and advertising demand for print products. Not all of them, I believe, but certainly some. However, it takes hard work, innovation, and 'the smarts' to get there...

Very short life cycles

Every aspect of the publication has to be examined, tortured, assessed, turned on its head, and then changed/retained/re-engineered or discarded. The successful publishers today look really deeply at their product. They innovate and change constantly because 'new', 'hot' and 'fashionable' have very short life cycles these days.

Editorially, supplements are constructed to reader requests and popularity. Not because "we always do it". The internet version is interwoven into the fabric of the publication, adding more content, different aspects and insights. Readers are involved with the magazine and interact with the product. This keeps them reading longer.

Chatting to my mate Chris Botha, we felt that maybe the print media should take a cue from what has happened in the television arena. One may think that reality TV has been dominating for years, and superficially nothing much changes. But indeed it does. I mean, what happened to the shows that pioneered the genre? *Big Brother* is in the old age home. *Survivor* is dying, and the *Amazing Race* has become pretty pedestrian. But they spawned dozens upon dozens of reality shows - game shows, talent shows, and shows on home improvement, gardening, dating, cooking and job search. I know the money is there - even for reality pawnshops, scrapyards and truck drivers. But here's the rub of it: someone had their finger on the

pulse and grabbed that little space in the consumer's mind. And as what's 'hot' changes, so the programming changes to suit the consumer.

New things that amuse

Well perhaps that's a massive magazine opportunity too: short-lived titles catering for whatever turned on the consumer of 2012. Maybe its entire focus shifts as we find new things that amuse readers and consumers in 2013.

But not only content and channel exploitation must be considered. Promotion has to change, or indeed happen, in many cases. If you think about it, here is a medium that should take every opportunity it gets to crow about itself, to harness and encourage innovation, to convince the media planners and the consumers alike that they are still relevant, current, exciting and a necessary part of the communication menu out there. I'm not seeing it, though.

I see no visible, award-winning efforts to attract readers. I see very little self-promotion. I would say that 99% of salespeople believe their sole function is to scuttle around busily once a month dropping off voucher copies. This action is accompanied by a process of: Knock on door, "Sorry...", avoid eye contact and retreat as fast as possible.

Print is indeed a shrinking sector. But it's still a massive one. And there are millions of people who want to read and in whom the habit is established. Publishers have to meet their needs. Change and adapt if necessary. Put a boot in the ass of the so-called sales forces. Understand the dynamics of the environment in which they function and make their plans accordingly. It won't be an easy ride and there will certainly be casualties of mediocrity along the way. In all honesty, it's probably a good thing as products of excellence will result. And it is the forerunner of things to come in media generally. Looking at the pace of the change we are currently experiencing, the TV, radio and out of home media shake-up is surely only a heartbeat behind.

ABOUT HARRY HERBER

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