

## Have special features, surveys had their day?

Every day I am inundated with requests from print media owners to advertise in a host of special features and surveys. So much so that I collected and collated all requests received in a random one-week period. The exercise was illuminating and worse than I anticipated!

By [Richard Lord](#) 17 Jan 2008

In that single week I received 25 different requests. That's five per day during a quiet week. I work in the financial category and so I am spared, thankfully, from receiving all the requests that bombard the agency daily.

The 25 features covered various topics including debit cards, the National Credit Act, housing delivery, a science expo review, several requests to support other advertisers' corporate profiles, vehicle financing solutions, private banking and a review on unit trusts. Also received were requests to support a feature on one of the public holidays, and something about retailing that had no bearing on banking so I didn't bother read the synopsis.

### Excessive number

This got me thinking. First that there are an excessive number of features and secondly that the majority of them are extremely limited in terms of consumer interest. Let's be honest, how many readers of any given newspaper are interested in finding out more about housing delivery, franchising or debit cards?

On further investigation, I reviewed AMPS and compared the readership of the main body sections of various daily newspapers with that of their business sections. I chose business because it's measured by AMPS and because business has a fairly broad interest base. I found that on average, only 45% of main body readers also read the business supplements.

If the business section is attracting less than half the readership, what percentage are special features drawing in? Perhaps 25%? 10%? None? Most features are charged using the main body advertising rates. So why do advertisers pay 100% of the cost for arguably less than 25% of the readership? It doesn't make media sense.

### Too tightly niched

In the case of magazines certain supplements may indeed increase audiences. This is unlikely with press the majority of surveys are not promoted on the front page and so would not provide a reason to purchase on that specific day. The topics covered are also usually too tightly niched to be of massive interest in the first place. Exceptions to this are those surveys that publish the results of established research, such as the *Sunday Times* Top Brands survey.

Arguments in favour of supplement advertising centre primarily around the environment created and publishers will contend that consumers interested in unit trusts, for example, would gravitate towards content focusing on that topic. They would therefore be more receptive to the advertising. However, having read and evaluated many surveys over the years, I do not believe that they add value to consumers. This is because few surveys carry new information on the topic in question and instead the content often reads like a press

release, with little information about the topic itself but a lot about the advertisers who supplied the information. Anyone who has ever had any dealings with folk preparing surveys knows that they frequently encourage advertising with free editorial as the carrot. Surely readers are smart enough to perceive the difference between objective editorial and advertorial?

Certain supplements will argue that an advertiser “has” to be there, as they have a product or service that is dominant in the area of focus. Hands up those who haven't heard the famous “You will be noticeable by your absence”? Give me a break! Tell me, how many times have you read a feature and said “Hell! Look, so-and-so didn't place an ad!”?

## **Everything in moderation**

It is amazing how often I am approached to advertise in a feature that coincidentally covers the same topic as a TV commercial I've just placed on air. It makes one wonder if consumer-need is driving the development of stories or potential added revenue a newspaper can generate from advertisers?

Yes, features do have their place, but everything in moderation. The sheer number of features detracts from the value that they are able to offer. Advertisers would be more inclined to support a respected, well-researched and well-written annual feature than the hundreds of glorified press releases that are published every month. Then perhaps consumers would read them as well!

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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