

## Catch me if you can

Communicating to the mass market is becoming increasingly complex with greater fragmentation of the mass media.

By [John Bradfield](#) <sup>20 Apr 2004</sup>

Many businesses seek large groups, which traditionally have been targeted through mass circulation newspapers, consumer and business publications, television and radio. These groups have become increasingly dispersed and with digital communications we now have the audience of one. For communications and publications professionals this provides new opportunities, as practitioners have always had to target specific groups of opinion leaders, influencers, decision makers, and buyers.

In this month's column I take a look at some of the challenges facing communicators in the digital age.

The London-based Financial Times recently produced a four-part feature on the "Media's Digital Age" which highlighted many of the changes and challenges facing companies using today's media. In response to media fragmentation, the FT pointed out that the industry's responses have fallen into three main groups: "horizontal integration, vertical integration, and the search for new sources of revenue." The authors of the series say that "in a fragmenting market, media companies can no longer reach a mass audience with a single flagship programme or publication. Instead, reach comes from a portfolio of media properties, each targeted at a different group, across a range of platforms."

In South Africa we have seen media in search of more closely defined audiences. Our city or regional newspapers have responded with supplements targeted at the business person, youth, women and a host of other specific groups. The content and range of radio shows have mushroomed to cater to different tastes. Television is challenged to find programming that targets different groups. Pay television such as DSTV has come up with a variety of channels for a multitude of preferences. Consumer and business magazines are positioning themselves to appeal to a more narrowly defined readership.

For the communications person, whether promoting messages via corporate advertising, press releases or feature articles, knowing which media are reaching his/her company's target group is increasingly difficult. Take your average business daily - will your message reach your target audience or merely be lost in a mass of other stories competing for attention? Is one of the trade or specialist publications any better? In most industries there are at least two of these publications and choosing which one to use is often quite confusing. Many have overlapping readership and often the easy choice is to merely go for both.

The trade or professional publications in this country are a special case. Have you ever seen their mailing lists or part thereof? You would be shocked to see how out of date their addresses are and the large number of duplications. But quite often you are forced to play the zero-sum game; if your main competitor advertises or places a story in one of these publications, you are often involuntarily forced to participate.

With greater market segmentation, communicators and marketers wish to know with more certainty that they are reaching their audience. Direct mail is an option and so is using your own mailing list. But it is difficult to maintain your own mailing list. Just ask any company how up-to-date their mailing list is and the answer will probably be along the lines of "we have a mailing list but keeping it up to date is a mission". Companies that believe in branding and marketing will devote the right resources to having an excellent mailing list,

recognising that such lists are part of the competitive assets of a company.

The internet provides an opportunity for companies to target messages to specific groups. However, although the internet holds much promise take a look at many company websites and you may feel disappointed when you realise how up to date, interesting and relevant their content is. Major announcements are made and when you visit the company's website in search of more information, there's quite often not a word about what has been released to the press. Worse still, the information contained on the site is of such a commercial nature that it hardly inspires further exploration.

E-mail is an obvious, more direct, communication media for companies wanting to personalise their message. But in this medium we often find that messages are depersonalised as a message is merely forwarded to a large group of people. Perhaps it would be more effective to write a good old-fashioned letter (which is much more personal) and send it to your customer or prospect. Picking up the phone and saying hello may seem archaic but it is still effective in certain circumstances. Good old shoe leather is another more effective medium in today's overcrowded and impersonal marketing message environment. Call up the person you wish to do business with, get in your car, drive to their premises and walk with them to their office. Building relationships face-to-face is best.

There is no doubt that digital communications are effective from an immediacy and cost point of view. Take the area of web blogs, for example. Blogs are fast becoming a very useful personal way to communicate with an audience. If you wish to see a web blog being used effectively to communicate with a conference audience, and amongst the delegates, visit <http://www.marketingsherpa.com/sample.cfm?contentID=2665> (Open access until April 24th) and read about Red Hat's Blog for its World Tour <http://www.redhat.com/worldtour> to see the enormous potential and opportunity of using blogs effectively.

With the media often not reaching the specific audience a company wishes to target, companies have resorted to creating their own publications to communicate with audiences. A growing medium is the customer magazine, which in professional hands is becoming a high quality product that delivers value to the audience. There are now some companies in the country who are beginning to create top quality corporate publications that are hardly candidates for flipping into the waste paper basket (most such publications are still fated to land up there as their content is over commercialised, uninteresting, and without value). Both consumer and business-to-business custom publications are growing in packaging and content quality in the country. Take a look at some being developed in the US, UK or Europe and you will be delighted, perhaps even inspired, by what is being produced.

Targeting stakeholders effectively starts with analysis aimed at identifying the importance and influence of each stakeholder group. If you require assistance with this process, communications consultancy Bell&Cray has developed a proprietary product called StakeholderMatrix<sup>®</sup> which maps the strength of relationships with key stakeholder groups to direct communications and marketing budgets. Should you wish to find out more contact Bell&Cray at [bellcray@worldonline.co.za](mailto:bellcray@worldonline.co.za).

Communications and public relations professionals will continue to face the challenge of using and developing media to target audiences more closely. Each medium has its own pitfalls and challenges. But reaching audiences in interesting and novel ways will undoubtedly remain of fundamental importance to effectively communicating with increasingly fragmented audiences. Knowing where target audiences can be found and which media they prefer is more important to communications practitioners than ever before.

**ABOUT JOHN BRADFIELD**

John Bradfield works in corporate communications, reputation management and marketing communications. Industry focus includes branded consumer products, capital goods, industrial products and financial services. For further information contact [johnbradfield@tiscali.co.za](mailto:johnbradfield@tiscali.co.za).  
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