

Zulu *Sunday Times* makes sense but will it make money?

The only question I have about an isiZulu edition of the *Sunday Times* is why Avusa took so long to think about it. The move was logical: the huge Zulu population in KwaZulu-Natal is well-known for wanting things in its own language and by far the biggest radio station in South Africa is the SABC's Ukhozi FM.

 By Chris Mberdyk: @chrismoerdyk 8 Nov 2010

And while the two existing daily/weekly isiZulu papers, *Ilanga* and *Isolezwe*, have been around for a long time, the launch of the *Sunday Times* in KZN's vernacular is not so much as another newspaper coming into the Zulu community but rather a unique kind of content.

Of course, one has to be careful of comparing radio and print because of literacy problems but UKhozi FM has proved that there is an enormous demand for information from isiZulu-speaking people.

Heritage and tradition

Sunday Times editor Ray Hartley has said the isiZulu edition would be a condensed, single-section version of the English paper and would be translated by isiZulu-speaking sub-editors. Another smart move in my opinion, because with the *Sunday Times* being sustained right now by its heritage and tradition for specifically Sunday content, it would not have made sense to try and second-guess what Zulu readers would want from the newspaper.

So, everything seems logical. A no-brainer.

Trouble is, newspaper success and failure is never really based on logic. It relies rather on a variety of complex consumer mindsets that are extremely difficult to fathom because, most times, the consumer doesn't quite know what does and does not appeal in terms of newspaper content.

Forget focus groups

Which is why readership research is more of a vague guide than completely reliable. And why focus groups are of no value whatsoever. Marketers and advertisers tend to look at ABC figures rather than anything else.

I believe that every new newspaper is potentially sustainable if certain straightforward criteria are met.

The first and most important is that deep-enough pockets are required. Newspapers are no different to most new products that need time to build up a following. Which is why *The Times* daily version of the *Sunday Times* is still going and why *ThisDay* isn't.

The second is that, like most great companies, countries, sporting teams, brands and products, leadership instincts are absolutely vital. All of these are only as good as the people who drive them.

Judgement

Newspaper editors today need to be given autonomy and, most of all, need to use their experience, instincts and judgement when it comes to content, rather than simply rely entirely on what readership research is telling them.

While a solid marketing imperative might well be "it's not what I want to say but what the consumer wants to hear"

in terms of newspapers, the consumer actually does not have the foggiest idea of what they want to hear until they hear it. Only then will they tell you whether they like it or not.

Like successful moviemakers, TV producers, stand-up comedians and mass-media evangelists, newspaper editors need to be energetic visionaries who are prepared to take risks.

Good portent

So, my bet is that the isiZulu version of the *Sunday Times* will be successful if Avusa gives it enough time, marketing resources and editorial autonomy. It has certainly done this with *The Times*, which is a good portent.

Quite apart from which, it is a niche newspaper that is aimed at a specific community. And while big mainstream newspapers the world over are struggling to survive, those that are making money, often hand over fist, are community titles.

And isiZulu speakers just happen to be the biggest community in the country.

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