

COMPETITIONS: Has the means become the end?

Competitions of one sort or another are a normal part of newspaper promotions today. In the last few years many of these have taken the form of lucky numbers games and scratch cards. When these were first launched, very few newspapers were involved. Today, almost all South African newspapers run these types of games frequently, so that at any given moment, at least one such competition is being run. Originally, the purpose of these competitions was to act as some sort of "hook" to attract people to buy the newspaper, in order to encourage trial. It was hoped that once these people had bought the newspaper and played the game, they might find something else interesting in the paper, and hopefully convert to readers.

If my memory serves me correctly, *City Press* launched the first Lucky Card Game around 1991. The little plastic credit-type card created something of a sensation at the time, by producing an additional 30 000 or so sales to *City Press*' ABC certificate at the time. The competition was the hottest topic of conversation in newspaper management circles. Here seemed to be the perfect tool for boosting those critical circulation numbers. Half the newspapers in the country clamoured

to board this new bandwagon.

But something seems to have been lost on the way. The original purpose behind the competitions seems to have been replaced by the need to have an improved ABC. Fullstop. There's nothing wrong with wanting to have a healthy circulation. What is problematic though, is that certain types of games do not do the job of drawing people into the newspaper to read.

Newspaper sales soar at the start of the game, but when it's over, most of those sales fall off. That doesn't seem to phase the newspapers which run these games, because similar types of games continue to be run, one after the other. It would seem then, that the most sought after thing in a competition nowadays, is an improved ABC rather than more readers.

There is a difference between the two. A sale is not necessarily the same thing as a reader, because certain types of competitions only attract buyers. In the case of most scratch-card and lucky number games, literacy is scarcely a requirement. I have personally witnessed buyers of newspapers (during such a competition) that could not read or write, being assisted with a game. Forgive me if I seem stupid, but

surely literacy is the most basic requirement in order to read a newspaper? I have also spoken to hundreds of scratch-card entrants and asked them what they thought of the newspaper and its contents. Most of them said that they didn't read it and only bought the paper for the competition. Yes I'm aware that this is "depth-of-one-research", but the sales figures for the newspapers speak for themselves. The temporary sales boost and subsequent drop-off of sales, after these competitions have ended, seems to support this argument.

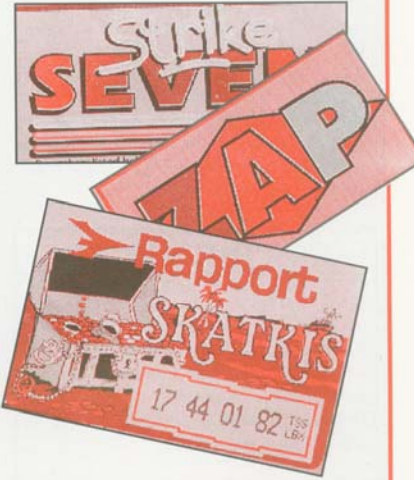
At the end of the day, such boosts to circulation are essentially artificial. If we are not converting these people to readers, how on earth do we sell these figures to our advertisers? They are not going to be impressed with a sales figure if they cannot be assured that there are readers behind this figure, who will at least go through the newspaper and see their adverts. In addition, if we do not care that people are buying the newspaper for something totally unrelated to its contents, then we have a serious dilemma about which business we are in.

Competitions need to be well thought through in terms of the people they attract. Those which are

likely to attract people who are similar to the existing reader profile, whatever that may be, are also likely to become the necessary "hooks" to convert buyers to readers.

Newspapers which allow games or competitions to become the end themselves, would do better to shut down their editorial departments and open a games business.

Cleo Ehlers, Marketing Analyst and Consultant: Synergistic Solutions



By Thomas Fairbairn

Ever thought about the number of awards there are for enterprising journalism in South Africa? Of course not, you're too busy just getting on with the job of writing or scripting, right? Well, Fairbairn in yet another idle moment started a list — there are literally dozens. Shocked, he contacted the venerable Syd Pote at what used to be the NPU (now the PMA) to see if they had any line on them. They don't. Nor, it seems, does the Conference of Editors, who have apparently washed

their hands of the lot. The way matters stand any company with a few thousand to spare can set up an award (named after the company naturally) and buy themselves some publicity. The problem these days, is to find an area of journalism not yet recognised as "award worthy". All the obvious beats such as health, business, finance, environment, computers, consumerism have been taken up. Still, there are few left over. Any takers for best court reporter, an area sadly neglected these days?

Fairbairn figured, naively as it turned out, that all these awards might mean good advertising for *Review*. After all, what better way to inform all those hacks out there of conditions of entry and so forth? Strange to tell, only one of the dozens approached was interested. Why bother, seemed to be the average response. The awards achieve their purpose — which is to generate publicity for the company. Silly of me really. I thought they were about journalism.

M-Net's Playmates of the Year programme is a bit of South Africa's post-censorship media history by now. But who, as I, wondered at the incongruous soft-serve commentary to what was essentially a soft-porn interlude? Well, wonder no more. Fairbairn has it on good authority the text was

penned by a woman — who fell about laughing every time she came up with another "ships of the desert" metaphor.

Tired of all those earnest texts on how to write well? Here, especially for all those hard-worked newsdesk persons out there, is one that does the opposite. It comes courtesy of the Internet and one Gerald Grow who teaches journalism in Tallahassee, Florida.

1. Start with a simple statement: "We quit because nobody knew how to programme the computer."
2. Put it in the passive voice, to dilute the responsibility: "It was decided to quit."
3. Expand with terminology that does not add meaning: "It was decided to terminate."
4. Build in noun strings: "It was decided to terminate project processes."
5. Add a qualifier of uncertain relation to the original statement: "On account of the status of the computer, it was decided to terminate project processes."
6. Add noun strings and terminology to the qualifier: "On account of the status of the computer programme assessment planning development effort, it was decided to terminate project processes."
7. Separate related words: "On account of the status of the computer

programme assessment planning development effort, it was decided to terminate until a later date project processes."

8. Equivocate: "On account of the uncertain status of the computer programme assessment planning development effort, it was proposed and tentatively accepted to terminate until a later date project processes."

9. Obfuscate: "Due to uncertainties in the status of the computer programme assessment planning development effort, proposals were carefully considered and tentatively adopted to suspend temporarily until a later date project processes."

10. Cover your tracks to make yourself look good: "Due to unavoidable uncertainties in the status of the computer programme assessment planning development effort, a number of contingency proposals were carefully considered and one was tentatively adopted to suspend on a temporary basis until a later date those project processes deemed unessential to the expeditious fulfillment of contract requirements."

Trouble is, many of those brand-new media spokespersons out there representing the ministry of something-or-other, seem to take Grow seriously. But, what's worse, journalists are often reporting their gobbledygook word-for-word.

thumbsuck