

Go for the core

by Cleo Ehlers

LOOKING BACK over this column since 1993 it seems as though I have been bogged down on one theme. Even now I can't resist one last word on the same subject—that of understanding newspaper readers and consequently non-newspaper readers.

Really understanding them, who they are, what motivates them to read or not read and then tailoring our effort from all points of the newspaper business, in order to best reach those whom we can and satisfy them. Without this crucial aspect, we are fooling ourselves if we believe that we can maintain a presence in their lives. I have harped on the need to get to grips with this vital and primary market of ours. The issue goes way past the numbers. Successful marketing demands a deep knowledge of people and then acting on that knowledge with sincerity and commitment.

I would like to concentrate on that elusive element of non-readers which beckons and confounds circulation managers and editors. All too often the pressure is on to attract the attention of those not reading our publications, sometimes to the detriment of our existing and loyal reader base. On the surface it seems simple enough: hundreds of thousands of literate people are not reading newspapers. We look at these people from many angles: How old are they? How much money do they have? What are their education levels? Where do they live? If we find that they are young we may bring a youth-focused supplement or section into the newspaper in order to attract their attention. If they're female, we focus on what females read and so on. But is this enough and what does this do to our core?

I would like to argue that we need to look beyond the numbers and rather make use of qualitative information on non-readers in order to understand what motivates their behaviour. What are their values, their attitudes, their beliefs? What are the triggers that kick-start their responses? How do we communicate with them? Can we?

I approached Market Research Africa (MRA) who conduct the most widely used psychographic survey on urban South Africa, Sociomotor, in order to get at some of this qualitative data. The value of this study cannot be understated in that it allows us invaluable insight into what motivates consumer behaviour. It goes a long way towards answering some of the more intangible questions we have on those amorphous markets out there. The possibilities are vast—there are implications for editorial, advertising, marketing, circulation, to name just a few.

Looking at the psychographic profile of non-newspaper readers, we begin to understand why they are so different to our readers and perhaps why they are so difficult to attract. In many respects they do not want

to know what goes on around them. They do not seem to have a thirst for information or the necessary empathy to understand the rest of society. We should also not forget that they are often at loggerheads with our regular readers, so that we would be creating or allowing a severe polarisation which would be extremely difficult to manage in terms of content, design and even pricing and distribution. Judge for yourselves:

NON NEWSPAPER READERS: URBAN BLACK ADULTS

- These are people who are aimless and given to feelings of hopelessness and boredom. They have neither the financial nor the educational resources to change their circumstances and tend to view any efforts to improve themselves as pointless. As such, they are not concerned with the future in any way.
- They tend to adhere to cultural customs, at the same time shying away from modernity, technology and liberal attitudes. Theirs is a backwards looking view of the world.
- With little to look forward to, these people live by an ingrained caution and with a great sense of economy-mindedness.
- They do not accept modern ideas such as the blurring of gender roles. Such stereotypes are to be upheld and not questioned. In the same vein, racial integration is not something with which these people are happy, nor is anything that challenges their old world view and which demands revitalised thinking.
- They tend to have rather rigid views on life and would not be open to change or to novelty. They prefer being indoors and are not at all interested in taking steps towards being healthy, either physically or in terms of diet. Essentially these are people who feel defeated and cheated by life and will not do anything for themselves, in order to change their sense of hopelessness.

NON NEWSPAPER READERS: URBAN WHITE ADULTS

- These are people who need constant reassurance as regards products or brands, as they tend to be suspicious of the motives of manufacturers and advertisers. As such, they tend to prefer mass-consumed items or even items they've made themselves.
- As with their black counterparts, these non-readers are very economy-minded, choosing items based on price rather than on quality. Whatever is cheapest is usually best, intrinsic value of products or services are irrelevant.
- Family obligations tend to be uppermost for these

people who would be inclined to spend their time with their families rather than with friends. Their life view then is also centred around family life and they are relatively insular.

- They are also orientated towards the past believing the "good old days" to be better than anything the present has to offer. This view goes with an inflexibility and with discomfort if things change. Rules and order are paramount. Modern society is a mess.
- They have a strong need for approval from others, manifested in a tendency to behave in a perceived socially desirable manner. They would never dream of questioning norms.
- As with their black counterparts, modern and liberal thinking is not part of their credo, neither is any thinking which would involve being flexible, open to risk or to questioning. Ideas which challenge social norms or structures have no place with these conservative people.

My view of the above profiles is that "news" has no real value for these people. They are not interested in information which can enhance their lives or shape their judgement. Theirs is a view which is rooted in the past and in a refusal to find anything good about today. Newspapers are often the vanguard for change and for stimulating new ideas. These non-readers are afraid of change and insecure about operating in a world which is individual and tenuous. We are poles apart from each other.

So then where do we turn our attention, if these people do not constitute our potential markets? I would argue that we study our existing readership bases from "qualitative" angles, explore what makes them tick and investigate the degree of our penetration into these groups.

In most cases we have a long way to go before we saturate the various markets in which our readers can be found. It makes marketing sense to focus our efforts on relatively homogenous groups, where it is not difficult to produce newspapers which fit within their lifestyles. Where we find groups, which may well form potential markets and which are not currently part of the loyal core, we would do better to investigate line extensions or even new products which will appeal to these groups, without confusing or alienating our loyal readership bases.

It is only when we begin to understand markets in qualitative terms, begin to feel their texture and gain some insight into their thinking and motivational triggers that we are in a position to address our own responses to these markets.

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