

Brighter alternatives

Some lessons from the alternative press in North America as circulations continue to slither

By TONY SUTTON

Mainstream North American newspaper publishers have spent much of the past decade nervously scratching their heads, wondering what happened to their franchises, as dwindling circulations and aging readers have made advertisers look towards other, more relevant media in which to sell their products.

Their response to the problem has, more often than not, been to dumb down their newspapers with trendy graphics, pastel colours and myriad one-size-fits-all innovations. "Readers don't spend as much time with newspapers, so we'll make them simpler, with little chunks of information and lots of heads, subheads and pull-outs to

catch their attention" seems to be the extent of their thinking.

It's hardly surprising that that simplistic solution hasn't worked. Circulations continue to slither as newspapers become more colourful, more reader-friendly, more balanced – but less relevant to the day-to-day existence of their increasingly blasé readers.

Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz takes off on a more promising route, suggesting a need for fewer frills but stronger journalism in his essay, "Yesterday's News: Why Newspapers Are Losing their Franchise" (published by The 20th Century Fund Press of New York).

"Make people mad," he says. "Write about outrages and injustices. Don't be afraid to get folks riled up; it is better to be controversial than ignored. Tell us things the authorities do not want us to know. We have become so obsessed with the latest middle-class comforts that we have drifted from our original mission of afflicting the comfortable.

"Touch readers in their daily lives. Let's sink our teeth into subjects that people care about in ways that get the juices flowing. We need to spend less time at city hall and more time in the neighbourhoods."

"Turn the writers loose. Serve up one magazine-quality piece each day that soars above the pedestrian. Let individual voices emerge from the bland chorus of daily journalism. Set the agenda. With few exceptions, the press remains a reactive instrument with an infant's attention span. It is time to

stop prospecting for official leaks and start digging up more news off the beaten path."



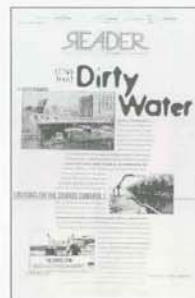
ages of 18 to 35 – are aimed at a market that is increasingly alienated by the mass media, believing TV is inane and newspapers are irrelevant.

The softening of mainstream media has left a huge gap that the alternatives are exploiting, becoming one of the few areas of consistent growth, capturing readers who are young, educated and under the age of 35 – the very people daily newspapers would dearly love to have.

How do the alternatives attract and retain these readers? A single word will suffice – ATTITUDE!

Most of these publications know their market intimately and instinctively. And so they ought, for the editors, writers and publishers are pretty much the same people, politically, socially and economically, as their readers. That's, perhaps, the biggest advantage of local ownership.

Their journalistic commitment is to what former Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee once described as "Holy Shit!" stories that go beyond the dry, cursory and usually uncritical reporting found in most major dailies. "In a sense, we're the rebirth of a great old tradition in American journalism," Tim Richmond, executive editor of San Francisco's Bay Guardian told



Advertising Age magazine recently, "We don't hide behind words like 'objective.' We call it the way we see it; readers appreciate that."

Do those ingredients work? Kurtz doesn't say, but readers of the 100-plus free weeklies belonging to the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies know the answer: Yes. Yes. Yes!

These newspapers – weekly tabloids targeted primarily at young people between the



"Liberated from the confines of daily journalism, we defy the truncated norm ('Credit life premiums spur suit'). Neither do we fuss with heads that tell a story, however inventively that may be done ('Headless body in topless bar').

This lets us focus on tone. A marriage of word and pictures works well. Humour works better."

The design of the alternatives reflects that same sense of exuberance, energy and urgency with a deftness in design and typography that mainstream newspapers seem unable to match. It's not that the dailies don't try to be as hip and entertaining as their weekly rivals but, as Bay Guardian's publisher Bruce Brugman points out, they have a problem: "They steal our ideas, they steal our writers, but what they can't steal is our position as an alternative voice."

That editorial "voice" is enhanced by covers that are bold and colourful and rude and very smart. Inside pages, though limited by the twin obstacles of articles that are often very, very long and the high advertising ratios necessary for profitable publishing, are noticeable for their magazine-like design, strong use of superb art, and dexterous typography.

Hard, aggressive, in-your-face journalism. Strong, cutting-edge design. Free distribution to an audience that eagerly awaits publication day. It's a combination that's hard to match. And even harder to beat.

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This article originally appeared in *Design*, the journal of the Society of Newspaper Design, of which he is the editor.

does not mean we forego fairness or accuracy. Yet, because style and substance are equal partners on our pages, attitude counts for a lot. A newspaper without personality is just another newspaper. "The hook is the headline," he adds.

