

10 reader turnoffs

1 Stale, dull and boring news.

It's guaranteed to persuade even the most benevolent readers that newspapers have no place on their kitchen table. Stories, especially those on the front page, should be interesting, relevant and exciting. And if they're not, you have a serious problem. If you find your own newspaper too boring to read, you're in the wrong business.

2 Meaningless heads, subheads and pullquotes.

This is often the result of boring news. If a story is so dull that the editor can't find a decent headline or pullquote, it's a fair assumption that it should be rewritten or thrown into the reject bin, not placed at the top of one of the few open inside pages in your paper.

3 Page 1 promos for boring stories.

It's the "excuse-me-while-I-shoot-myself-in-the-foot" syndrome. So you've got a blank space in the Page

Find space for new content by chucking out the stuff that doesn't work. This will have as great an impact on your readers as all the trendy new things you've decided to add.

There's a continual drone from the newspaper industry's chattering classes about ways to improve newspapers to make them more relevant to their long-suffering readers. I got involved in the subject a few weeks ago when I was invited to talk to a bunch of managing editors on the subject.

As you probably know, my first response when asked to do these sessions is to head with much haste in the opposite direction. But it's amazing what an airline ticket, rubber chicken, and with luck a cheque will do to convince me of my duty to contribute to the debate.

Part of my apprehension stems from the fact that most editors and managers don't want to face the reality that remaking newspapers takes hard work and costs money. They expect trendy, easy-to-implement solutions to deep-rooted problems that have often

developed over decades of editorial neglect.

I'm not against the idea of acknowledging and adapting trends, but I believe that before we start looking at all the new and exciting things we can give readers, we ought to cast a glance over our shoulders and fix some of the old and boring things that we're giving them right now.

Where to start? Make space for new content by chucking out the stuff that doesn't work. That single action will have as great an impact on your readers as all the trendy new things you decided to add.

Then, when you've done that, look at all the things you do badly – and fix 'em. If you can't fix 'em, kill 'em.

So, what should you remove?

The list of "10 reader turnoffs" will tell you.

Those are just a few of the things that should be addressed before you even start thinking of introducing new elements to your newspaper.

Once you've done, it's time to consider the list of "10 ways to improve your newspaper".

There are NO easy fixes

says Tony Sutton

1 skybox. What do you do? Draw attention to that long, badly written council report on Page 5. Then you wonder why churn is heading for 100%.

4 Briefs that aren't brief, indices that aren't indices.

A seven-inch story is not a brief, no matter how little copy you've got or how close you are to deadline. If you can't find enough snippets for your Page 3 column of briefs, take the head off and run two stories in the space instead.

5 New York Times editorial pages in cramped hometown newspapers.

Devoting a full page to columnists, cartoonists and editorials from national wire services doesn't make a lot of sense, especially if the local newshole has been gradually eaten away by a corporate demand for exorbitant profit margins.

6 Charts and graphics that are impossible to comprehend.

Simple is always better, especially in charts and graphics. Why would anyone try to read complicated detail in a badly drawn graphic that is awash in colour?

7 Appalling use of colour.

Here's a good rule: If you can print colour well, do it. If you can't, print everything in black ink.

8 Photographs jammed into pre-determined holes.

News pages, especially the front page, ought to be flexible enough to change to accommodate great photographs. Pre-determined formats are an aid to consistency (and lower staffing quotas), but they should never be a straitjacket that prevents exciting presentation of stimulating stories or photographs.

9 A redesign that doesn't look any different from the original.

If you're telling readers that their newspaper is going to be reborn in a brand-new, much-improved style tomorrow, make sure that reality matches the hype.

10 Bland, pointless – but very colourful – section fronts.

If a feature's pointless, pedantic or old hat, a full-colour illustration, lots of white space and a big headline won't make it better.

10 ways to improve your newspaper

1 Get more news into the A section.

Most advertisers demand space here because it's the most important section, the one that everyone looks at. But if there's no space for editorial, it gives customers the impression that there's nothing to read in the newspaper. What's the solution?

Simple. Kill one of the other subsidiary sections, make the A section twice as big, and distribute the ads through those pages.

Losing a section front won't upset readers, and the pressures on editors and photo and art staffs will be eased if they have one less full-colour section front to pull out of their magician's hat every day.

2 Read stories before you place them on the page.

So, a reporter sat through a dull meeting and then wrote 28 boring inches about it. That doesn't mean it's worth 28 inches of precious space. Edit for readability and interest.

3 Cover stories that are relevant to the lives of your readers and seek their involvement.

If someone is being ripped off or threatened by a soulless corporation, public utility, government or private business, report the story. And ask readers if they have been similarly abused. Let them know you're on their side: that's called leadership.

4 Encourage photographers to look for different, off-beat shots.

Then give those pictures the display they deserve. Our customers read pictures before they read stories, so grab their attention. Encourage photographers to produce at least one off-beat shot with every assignment; if the picture has impact, give it precedence over a static image.

5 Display each day's front page in the newsroom under a sign saying, "Would (or did)

you read this?" Ask members of other departments the same question. If they answer, "No," you've got a problem.

6 Develop a great letters page. It's your lifeline to your readers.

A good, interactive letters page will be a must-read, and you'll pick up plenty of story leads from it.

7 Make your newspaper look good.

Design is not the most important part of the newspaper – content is. But a good-looking, cheerful, bright and entertaining design will enhance the quality of the newspaper.

8 Improve a different part of the newspaper each week.

It's often hard to make a lot of improvements all at once, so why not tackle one aspect of your newspaper each week? Start, for example, by asking editors and photographers to concentrate on outline writing, analyse them at each morning's news conference, and make an effort to improve them. Then move onto headlines and so on. After a few weeks, the overall quality of every aspect of the newspaper will start to improve.

9 Continually seek ways to improve your newspaper.

Change is natural and desirable. Add new elements to the newspaper, and don't be afraid to throw them out if they don't have the desired effect. Don't be afraid to experiment, but don't repeat the same mistake twice.

10 Have fun. Give the readers something to smile about. Perhaps you should write that phrase at the top of your editorial mission statement.