

# How to create the easy read

**N**EIL POSTMAN, professor of Media Ecology at New York University, wrote a book in 1985 called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. His thesis is that American society is losing the ability for abstract thought through the inordinate time people spend mindlessly in front of the TV (where even your eyeballs don't have to move).

But we are also in danger of boring ourselves to death through old-fashioned newspapering. We depress the reader through vast tracts of doom and gloom. We pay no attention to the "Oprah syndrome" – the need for warm fuzzies. We often make it hard work for people to read us.

In South Africa we have a substantial proportion of educated people who are still functionally illiterate and a growing proportion of "aliterates" (people who can read and choose not to). A study for the Print Media Association, Project Mind, in 1996 revealed that 1 in 5 people in senior positions in metropolitan areas are "aliterate".

This creates a market development challenge for newspapers. We must create an appetite for newspapers among those still acquiring literacy. And we must create intellectually astute populations without boring them to death.

Mondli Makhanya recently wrote in *The Star*: "Neither the peasantry, the urban proletariat nor the middle classes have a culture of wanting to know and understand issues that affect them directly. The absence of an informed public will, in the long run, impact on the quality of democracy and the strength of our political system." He also said that regular newspaper readers not only have the best grasp of past and contemporary history, but are also the best informed about future scenarios.

At Independent Newspapers we are involved in multi-faceted investigations into market development. We do qualitative and quantitative research, excavating the underlying reasons for reading and buying newspapers. With Dr Jackie Galpin of Wits University, we are developing a statistical buyer behaviour model to identify the variables influencing newspaper purchasing.

It is also very important to know, for each newspaper title in the group, what stories to go for, how the stories should be used – with what prominence and projection, and when wear-out is happening. We have recently been using a daily reader panel to give instantaneous day-by-day feedback to *The Star* journalists (see box). This research is based on ongoing research conducted by the *O'Globo* newspaper in Brazil, which has a major impact on its content and targeting.

One of the most interesting findings from the

PMA's Project Mind is that involvement with a medium has a particular effect on the consumer. Those people who are more involved with newspapers access a variety of media, and then make up their own minds about what to think. At the other end of the spectrum those more involved with TV tend to need to be told what to think. The outside world, rather than their own inner resources, tends to dictate to them.

Our Stickman research, based on exposing respondents to a number of scenarios using stick figures, shows that there are basically two kinds of people. Those more inclined to read newspapers like to motivate their minds, to be optimistic and not be affected by negativity. They will read the newspaper no matter what. With this group-exposure to negativity (crime, violence, corruption, war etc.) can have a positive effect. Exposure implies knowledge, and knowledge is the origin of control and resolution.

Those less inclined to read newspapers are seen to have an ostrich mentality. They don't want to read about politics or crime out of fear, or simply have no interest in what's going on in the world. They may be unable to use or manipulate information constructively. Yet they are in fact more vulnerable to the very things they fear.

Our Stickman research shows that newspapers are seen to have a broader functional element than TV. More comprehensive content is required and expected than is the case for the electronic media, probably because viewers trade off its entertainment value against comprehensive coverage. Newspaper readers' ostensible needs are very information-based versus entertainment or escapist-based. But the need for entertainment via newspapers should not be underestimated as an added-value component to the whole package.

But of course before we can judge what is relevant and meaningful to our readers and prospective readers, we need to know who they are.

Market segmentation exercises help us to reconcile the disparities in the markets we serve in South Africa. If we use the normal demographic or geographic distillations of the market, we are left with a somewhat sterile view of a title's role and target market.

All segmentation is a little artificial. There are always stragglers who can't be described by the segment. But it does help us to search for and target specific niches, and as Philip Kotler so aptly put it "in niches there are riches". We don't have to focus on one niche, or narrowly define it. We can cater to a variety of niches within a newspaper if we diligently understand and monitor our coverage for various target segments.

To do this we need to understand the unique need profiles of selected segments as well as the commonalities. And because each change affects all segments we must find the right balance in satisfying the needs. The key to success is having an explicit growth goal for each segment to create long term value via investment in the necessary editorial and marketing components.

We should not underestimate the importance of the best use of information through accessibility, ease of entry, content digests, and doing what the electronic mass media cannot do. Newspapers must be seen to be easy to read, beneficial, enjoyable and necessary.

As Michael Porter wrote in *Rethinking the Future* (1997): "The important thing is to try to shape the nature of competition, to take control over your own destiny". There is good news for the future of newspapers – if we create tomorrow's competitive advantages.

Jos Kuper is general manager for Marketing and Media Research (MMR). This is an edited version of a paper presented at the World Forum on Newspaper Strategy in September, Chantilly, France (World Association of Newspapers).

## Facts by phone

**T**he Star Panel consists of 3 000 Star readers that are recruited either by telephone or face-to-face. Each person is phoned about once every three to four weeks. These recruits are demographically representative of *The Star*'s readers.

Each night, Monday to Thursday, the database generates a list of numbers to be called. In order to comment on the particular day's paper, the respondents must have already read the paper. Very often when a person is called they have not read the paper yet. Therefore on any given night the interviewers will have to make, on average, 500 phone calls to get between 60 to 70 completed interviews.

The resulting Star Guide is not only useful to the editorial team for daily feedback, but also enables experimentation with stories or layout.

It provides information on: what stories people find interesting and enjoy reading; what front page photographs are eye-catching; and which sections of the paper are read.

One of the trends that has come out of the research is that people want to read about concrete action being taken against crime and not about vague plans.

However, at this stage it is too soon to back up trends scientifically. Eventually research trends will be used to assist in planning long term strategies.



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